

TEACHER IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN REFORM DRIVEN CONTEXTS: A CHILEAN STUDY¹

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On the basis of a recent study on the teaching profession in Chile, the paper reflects on how teachers in different types of school contexts live their profession in relation to their perceived convictions about teaching and the definitions provided by the policy environment. The impact of unsatisfactory working conditions as perceived by teachers (but also recognised by society) and the impact of assessing teacher capacity in terms of productivity (pupil test scores) is set against Chilean teachers' beliefs about their role and mission in a highly inequitable society and school system. The paper considers the results of the study in the light of similar studies in other national contexts.

INTRODUCTION

In the last twenty years around the world teachers have been exposed to a wide range of transformations occurring in their education systems, which in turn have triggered challenges to their professional identities (van den Berg 2002). School populations have widened to embrace a greater cultural and socio-economic diversity of pupils with complex demands that have rendered more difficult the work that teachers do (Bolívar, Gallego, Leçomn. & López 2005; Esteve 2006; Jacinto & Freytes 2007). Pressures to increase educational achievement in the light of standardised examinations, national and international (Day 2002), as well as new forms of teaching based on technology are putting teachers under greater scrutiny and leading to re-definitions of their professional jurisdictions. Chile has not been absent from these changes. Since the beginning of the nineties there has been a continuous wave of reforms, some closer to schools and classrooms and some that affect the system as a whole such as lengthening of

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the school day or major curriculum revamp. Teachers have been part of these changes in various ways, but mostly as implementers of reforms decided with limited teacher participation. While teachers in Chile are often in the public limelight at the time of publication of school examination results, or in political speeches calling for better education, with increasing pressure to make them accountable for the failures of the school system (Avalos 2004), not much is known about how teachers perceive themselves in these reform and accountability environments nor in relation to the new demands that the student population places upon them. The study that underlies this paper is a recent attempt to learn about teachers, about how they view themselves and their work, and, in turn, how they interpret their status in society. In what follows, we discuss results of this study from the perspective of teacher identity. Our purpose is to highlight teacher identity perceptions in particular educational policy environments marked by policy shifts and by requests for changes in the practices of teaching and dealings with students and other actors of the education system. To this end, we look first at the kinds of changes occurring in the 1990s and 2000s in Chile, and then on the basis of a set of key constructs about teacher identity we present and discuss results from the study of 1,993 primary and secondary teachers conducted in Chile in 2009.

THE EDUCATIONAL POLICY CONTEXT OF CHILE IN THE 1990S AND 2000S

In 1990, as the country recovered its democratic form of governance, Chile was faced with the need to reconstruct its social policy environment and institutions, including the education sector. However, as it embarked on a series of improvement programmes that would run through the nineties, the new government did so within the confines of the existing education structure that had been altered in the 1980 by the military government, and of the education law that was passed one day before the new government took office. Also, the new government chose to maintain a standardised system of school assessment known as System for the Measurement of Educational Quality (SIMCE). The key elements of the education structure included a publicly financed system owned by the state but managed by municipalities (municipal schools), a publicly financed system owned and managed by private groups (publicly

subsidised schools) and a small all-private school system. This structure was embedded in the new Law and therefore could not be easily changed. On the other hand, one of the first acts of the new government was to benefit teachers with the passing of a Teachers' Statute (1991) that improved the terms and conditions of municipal teacher employment and set conditions also for the employment of private-subsidised teachers. There was general agreement in the nineties that the key focus of education changes had to be on improving the quality of education provisions with an eye on equity (i.e. the poorer groups of the school population). Thus, two major programmes were put in place to increase pre-school provisions and the quality of basic education (years 1 to 8) and secondary education (years 9 to 12). These programmes encompassed various changes: the curriculum for both levels, free provision of teaching resources (text-books and other materials), school buildings, and introduction of Information Communication Technology (ICT) which benefitted primarily teaching in the municipal schools, although curriculum changes covered the entire school system. A series of focused programmes aimed at poor school populations took place covering first basic education schools (rural and urban poor) and later secondary schools, which involved work with teachers as well as the development of ad hoc materials and teaching strategies. During the entire nineties decade these programmes were running as well as changing in orientation depending on existing assessments of their effectiveness. Teachers were largely called to implement whatever strategies were part of the reform actions, and a number of different types of professional activities were put in place to help them in this role.

In the latter part of the nineties, expectations that learning results might have improved as a result of the various improvement programmes, were not borne out and attention was specifically directed to teachers and teacher preparation. Two key words floated around to justify new policies: incentives and structural reforms. It was considered that providing monetary incentives to well performing schools might entice teachers to improve their performance and raise their students' scores in SIMCE. Sending teachers abroad to learn from other experiences might spread over the system and improve teaching and learning results. Lengthening the school day in schools that operated on a double shift basis would provide more time for learning, and therefore increase the chances of better school results. All these actions were tried out, with the expectation that their efficacy would be evident through increased SIMCE results. While teachers appreciated the rewards offered when their schools fared well or the opportunity to travel abroad and learn from others, the beneficiaries of these opportunities constituted a small segment of the teacher population. The education system as a whole, especially the public sector, was still not performing as expected. Attention turned more strongly to teacher accountability and to demands for evaluation of teacher performance. The new century brought about an agreement with the teachers' union to evaluate teacher performance (Avalos & Assael 2006). It was the best possible agreement in the circumstances as it was based solely on performance in the classroom and not on pupil learning results. But the new century also began to highlight evidence that SIMCE results favoured upper and middle social groups who generally attended private subsidised and wholly private schools while leaving behind the poorer sectors enrolled in municipal schools. It was recognised that the practice of granting an equal subsidy per pupil actually in attendance at schools had a detrimental effect on poorer schools that needed more money if they were to assist all children to move ahead, and not just those who did not need extra support. To redress this inequality a law was passed to increase school subsidies for schools attending populations in need which was tied to showing evidence of improvement and therefore with pressures on teachers to produce results or risk the closure of their schools.

The key role of SIMCE assessments was strengthened by deciding to test children every year in fourth grade, and by introducing a standards-based system to establish not just general scores, but also anchor points referred to what students know and are able to do in each one of the subject areas measured. Despite all these measures, SIMCE results published recently (June 6, 2010) show a high proportion of pupils who do not reach the standard in subjects such as mathematics and language arts. In this context of a system that has tried a number of improvement projects, that has changed the curriculum at least twice

in the two decades, that has offered incentives to teachers who improve learning results of their children, but that also until recently played down the effect of socio-economic differences in learning results — teachers have been dubious key players. Teachers' working conditions require them to teach at least thirty hours per week if they are employed full time, excluding recess time (44 hours), and proportionally less number of hours if they are employed for 30 periods. They may have classes as big as 45, especially in urban low socio-economic sectors, and compared to other professionals with similar training background, teachers earn 40 % less (Valenzuela, Sevilla, Bellei & delos Rios 2010). It is also true, that teachers in private schools earn better salaries, have smaller classes and less teaching time than their counterparts in public subsidised and municipal schools. It is also true that the highest scores in SIMCE tests are found among pupils in private schools. How do teachers view their profession in this context of unsatisfactory learning results and demands for increased teacher accountability, of evaluation of teacher performance and consequent rewards or punishments, of multiple improvement projects that require teacher engagement? Before answering this question, which is central to the paper, we look at how the literature has dealt with topics related to teacher professional identity.

TEACHER IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION – KEY CONCEPTS

Teacher identity refers to how teachers define themselves in relation to their professional tasks and particularly in relation to educational and teaching relationships. From a social perspective, using Castells' words identity may be defined as “a construction of meaning on the basis of a cultural attribute , or related set of cultural attributes, that is/are given priority over other sources of meaning” (1997, p. 6). Teachers are entrusted with the task of educating in social contexts, and on the basis of this essential task they construct and reconstruct their identities over time. To a large extent identity has to do with meanings that individuals make about themselves and with the meanings that others make about them (Beijard , Verloop & Vermunt 2000). Therefore, identity is a co-construction involving one teacher and other significant agents or teachers as well as the broader society to which they belong. In considering how teachers identify as professionals or how teachers define their responsibilities and work, there are four key elements that stand out: (a) the understanding and degree of commitment to a role and a task, or the degree of motivation which keeps them going; (b) the definition of their sphere of work and the degree to which they feel satisfied with it; (c) confidence in their ability to do the work, or the degree of self-efficacy feelings; and (d) the perception of acceptance and respect awarded to teachers by those close to their work as well as by those in the wider society.

Motivation and Commitment

Part of the initial preparation of teachers is centred on developing in them a sense of the importance of the tasks that will be entrusted to them. They are made aware to an extent of their future sphere of work and of the demands that will be placed upon them. At that stage, future teachers may see only a worthwhile task and feel theoretically motivated, depending on the degree to which they are faced with practical situations. As they begin to teach and progress through their career, their motivation and commitment may be strengthened or may be tested in critical situations. It is well known that new teachers are more likely to engage in identity-conflicts while entering the profession since they need to address new and demanding tasks. Instead, experienced teachers may experience identity conflicts as educational reforms request them to modify proven practices and expose their work and expertise to deep scrutiny or examination. Often reform initiatives seek to redefine professional practice, and as such, they represent a threat to the motivation and commitment that teachers have built over time.

Work Demands and Satisfaction

Teachers' identity formation is linked to educational tasks in the broad sense of the word and to teaching tasks in the smaller world of the classroom. It is also linked to the interactions and relationships with parents, colleagues and school authorities. Professional identity emerges from the knowledge and expertise accumulated through teaching and learning, and through integrating individual and collective experiences of what is at the core of the profession (Beijard, Verloop & Vermunt 2004). The degree to

which it is possible to carry out the demands of work as envisioned, affects teachers' sense of responsibility and may call into question identity definitions. For example, if work is intensified through change demands, or there is limited time to do all that was planned, teachers may feel a growing sense of dissatisfaction and frustration with themselves as teachers. But also, they may feel empowered to defy the context and assert themselves as responsible professionals.

Self-efficacy

An important part of teacher identity has to do with capacity feelings or the sense that she or he is competent in the job. The degree to which a teacher feels personally efficacious is also the degree to which she or he becomes a conscious agent in educational contexts, with strength to alter and improve them (Brandt 1996 and Russell 1996, in Day, Sammons, Stobart, Kington & Gu 2007). A heightened sense of efficacy is of help when teachers are faced with demands to implement new methods as these are taken as challenges rather than burdens (van den Berg 2002). A low sense of efficacy, in turn, will affect the mode of responding to new situations, including difficult or unmotivated students. Both self-efficacy and agency operate in interaction with the possibilities offered by social structures such as the school environment, or change demands produced extraneously. If these conditions clash with what teachers believe they can do or believe should be done, they may result in passive submission (lack of motivation) or in reasonable attempts to implement without leaving aside those practices already considered sound (Vandeyar 2005)

Teachers in the Public Eye

Teacher identity is linked to the trust society places in them. Identity is shaped through traditions, social structures and collective norms that provide teachers with different levels of autonomy and jurisdiction. As with other professionals, the recognition of teachers' jurisdiction is a key element in how they view themselves and the degree to which they feel satisfied with their work. Yet the current status and recognition of teachers in many contexts appears to be in jeopardy. Partly this has to do with prevailing redefinitions of teachers' jurisdiction in terms of "consumers" or "clients" demanding results, instead of children and young people demanding education (Hargreaves, Cunningham, Hansen, McIntyre, Oliver & Peel 2007). It also has to do with the paradox involved in entrusting teachers with the responsibility of building a new social and economic order through education, while requiring them to correct the effects of that new social order over the young generation, by engaging in tasks linked to social protection, which are precisely those least recognised in results-based pressure climates (Hargreaves 2003).

THE STUDY

The basis of this paper is a study of the teaching profession being conducted in Chile. The study is broadly aimed at gaining understanding about teachers in primary and secondary schools, about their visions and interpretations of the profession, on how the reform environment of the 1990s and 2000s has affected their working lives in the different school contexts to which they belong, and how they mediate between reform demands and their own teaching convictions and experience. A key concept underlying the study is that of teacher identity. The broader study has three components: (a) a review of existing data bases on teachers in Chile, their working conditions and their salary structure; (b) a national representative survey of teachers; and (c) a set of six case studies of teachers in different school and geographic contexts. The study also gathered information from a set of seven focus groups with teachers in the city of Santiago that centred on the topics of interest to the study. For the purposes of this paper, we draw from the analysis of the national survey, and qualitative data gathered interviews and focus group meetings.

The Population and Sample

The target populations were 122,521 teachers in 5,026 schools in all except two of the 15 geographic regions of the country. Those excluded belong to isolated and sparsely populated geographical locations. Also excluded were small rural (less than 7 teachers) private schools. A stratified random multi-stage

sample of all types of urban and rural schools and a non-proportional sample of teachers in these schools was selected. The achieved sample consisted of 1,929 teachers considered representative of the population with a 95 % of confidence. Selected teachers were delivered the survey questionnaires personally at their schools, which were also collected personally by field workers. To participate, they were asked to sign a form of “informed consent”. The main characteristics of the sampled teachers are shown in table 1.

Table 1
Description of the teachers studied

| | N | % |
|---------------------|------|------|
| Gender | | |
| Male | 700 | 33.0 |
| Female | 1238 | 67.0 |
| Mean Age | 1799 | 44.7 |
| Teaching experience | | |
| 0-3 years | 192 | 10.3 |
| 4-10 years | 436 | 23.4 |
| 11-24 years | 656 | 35.2 |
| 25 or more years | 578 | 31.0 |
| Type of school | | |
| Municipal | 870 | 45.5 |
| Private subsidised | 830 | 43.0 |
| All private | 229 | 11.9 |
| School level | | |
| Primary | 963 | 52.2 |
| Secondary | 881 | 47.8 |

Source: Teacher Survey

The Survey

The survey consisted of a questionnaire with 35 items on personal background information (age, gender, education, parent education, home conditions, monthly average income of all members of the household) and school teaching experience and workload. Teachers were asked questions referring to how they experience their work demands and their degree of satisfaction with these, the effect on their work lives of different reform initiatives, of school conditions, of pupils and of personal conditions such as health or family situations. They were also asked about participation in reform actions and their perception of the effect of these reforms on different aspects related to schooling conditions such as curriculum, teaching methods and infrastructure. Another set of questions, inquired about the effect of their teacher education (initial and continuing) and of experience over a set of teaching competences such as interacting with pupils or managing individual differences. Reasons for choosing the teaching profession, degree of motivation, and degree of agreement with a set of statements describing a teachers’ mission followed, and finally agreement/disagreement scales referring to statements about the current status of the profession and the degree of respect afforded to the profession by a list of stakeholders. The survey was piloted among a group of 78 teachers representing the target population and the scale items were factor analysed to decide on the final form of the survey. Principal component analysis was used after application to settle on a set of indexes that would allow for a more fluid interpretation of the data gathered.

The Focus Group Meetings

Seven meetings were held with teachers from primary and secondary education, from private, private subsidised and municipal schools, of which three groups had experienced teachers and four were composed of teachers with five or less years of experience. Teachers were asked to comment on their

teaching experiences (prior and/or current), how they perceived themselves in coming years, what helped them to improve their practice, whether they had experienced changes or new reform projects in their schools, and how they perceived their students.

MAIN RESULTS

For the analysis of results we follow the key constructs used to assess issues related to teacher identity. How committed are teachers to their profession and what factors affect their current motivation? Teachers rated the degree to which a series of reasons had been important in their decision to enter the profession. The highest degree of importance was given by all teachers to factors having to do with what we might call “pedagogic commitment” or “vocation”. Such reasons included “self-fulfilment”, “work with young people”, “desire to share knowledge”, “passion for education”, “interest in subject-matter” and “teaching capacity”. Most teachers were less inclined to have chosen teaching as a profession because of “satisfactory working conditions” or because of prior experience such as having had a model teacher in school or somebody in the family as a teacher. Teachers did not differ in these assessments by type of school in which they worked. However, teachers with more years of experience were more inclined to rate “pedagogic commitment” as their main reason for entering the profession, compared to teachers with less experience. Clearly, the least important factors for all groups, but especially those with lesser experience were what we call working conditions (stable employment, flexible time-tables, holidays and salary).

Another important factor was the ratings teachers gave to the degree of their current motivation in their work, and how this compared to the situation three years before. Teachers in municipal schools indicated a significantly lower degree of current as well as past motivation ($P < 0.05$) compared to teachers in private schools, but did not differ from those in private subsidised schools. In general, as teachers progress in experience their degree of motivation decreases compared to teachers with less experience:

I am tired, I have taught for 10 years, but this is a profession that wears you out professionally and emotionally. I have postponed my family at times when I have to finish correcting papers and thus, I end up questioning myself about the gratifications of this profession. So sometimes I question myself I my satisfaction with the profession [Interview with teacher in a private subsidized school]

Impact of Policies and Work Environment Conditions and Factors Affecting Teacher Degree of Satisfaction

In line with the assumption that working conditions affect teacher identity, we asked a series of questions relating to teacher perception and degree of satisfaction with these conditions. We grouped the factors that might have an impact or be important either positively or negatively upon their work in the following four areas: educational policies, school conditions, pupils and personal situations.

Educational Policies and Reforms

Educational policies cover those that affect the whole school and those that affect more closely the work that teachers do. Among the first kind of policies is the effect of lengthening the school day, curriculum changes and changes to the SIMCE test. Among the second type are policies such as teacher evaluation that only affects teachers in municipal schools, incentive schemes for good performing teachers in municipal and private subsidised schools, and of course public standardised examinations that push teachers in all types of schools to prepare their students to be successful in these. In general, teachers rated policies affecting the school as a whole as having a more important impact on their work than those affecting them as individual teachers. But teachers in municipal schools and private schools rate both types of policies higher than did teachers in wholly private schools, and the differences were significant. This is not surprising as teachers in private schools are little affected by public policies and reforms.

Interestingly, the only public policy that affects schools and teachers in private schools is the national system of school measurement (SIMCE) and the university entrance examination (PSU) as they compete strongly among each other to be ranked in the first places:

The school system is becoming more and more competitive. Students are coming to some schools because they have good results in standardized tests. In the end, there is a huge effort towards results, call it SIMCE or PSU. [*private teacher comment during focus group meeting*]

One of the issues surrounding teacher perception of reforms is how much they were considered when these were planned and implemented. Surveyed teachers were asked to refer to a reform that had affected them, and then asked what role they had regarding that reform. Most teachers (71 %) said they had no part at all in the planning of the reform; just over half (55 %) of the teachers were involved in some way in its implementation in their schools and 43 % had no part in any evaluation of its effect.

School Conditions

A first group of conditions has to do with the school authorities and school climate, while a second one has to do with other teachers (their effectiveness, degree of commitment, changes of staff, and expectations). In general, teachers rate issues relating to school managers and school owners as well as school climate as having a greater effect on their working conditions, than issues related to other teachers. Teachers in private subsidised and private schools rate these factors as having a greater impact than teachers in municipal schools, but differences are not significant. A possible explanation may be that head-teachers in municipal schools have less authority than they do in private schools, and therefore they offer fewer reasons for conflict.

Pupils

Here again we have two thematic areas: (a) the extent to which pupil socio-economic and cultural background impacts on teachers and teaching, including those that involve communication with parents, and (b) the effect of pupil behaviour and degree of motivation. Teachers in municipal schools and private subsidised schools differ significantly from teachers in private schools in their ratings of the importance of background factors as they consider these to have a greater effect on their teaching strategies and their student learning possibilities. This is in line with the fact that these types of schools get lower socio-economic background pupils, especially the municipal schools. Students' background factors are important to teachers depending on their years of experience. The following example provides an account of the difficulties encountered by a less experienced Municipal schoolteacher in teaching science to low socio-economic students:

It seems to me that students are used to being given everything fully digested. They have difficulty in drawing conclusions. For example, I was teaching science and needed to get them to think about the relationships between atmospheric pressure and height, and it was very difficult for them to understand this. It was difficult for them to provide examples, and I struggled to prevent myself from providing the answers. Because we are told that we have to let them think on their own. And one feels sort of anxious, as these children will become non-thinking adults. One is somewhat concerned, but we have to persevere because in fact they have difficulty in reasoning, thinking analytically even though they are in seventh grade. [*Teacher in focus group meeting with less experienced Municipal school-teachers*]

Compared to the effects of pupil background and cognitive characteristics, pupil behaviour is rated as a factor of greater importance by all three groups of teachers, although more so by teachers in municipal and private subsidised schools.

Apathy has to do with the opportunities they have. Before, education was the only opportunity to improve. You either took it or you were lost. Mothers used to say that what a teacher said was the law and students had to obey. Previously, you needed to perform well. Nowadays, students perform

poorly and they do not care, and parents allow this to happen. Students' rights are overrated or misinterpreted. Students' rights are fine. But students' obligations or responsibilities do not seem to exist and this is quite problematic [*Teacher at the focus group meeting with teachers in subsidized private schools*]

Personal situations such as health problems or unstable work-contracts are quite important factors for teachers in all types of schools, especially among teachers in municipal schools. Differences, however, are not significant.

Degree of Satisfaction

Time is a major factor affecting the surveyed teachers' lives. The table below shows in general municipal teachers are the least satisfied, especially with time for planning, classroom management and classroom teaching. They differ significantly in these areas with teachers in private subsidised and private schools.

Table 2
Teacher Degree of Satisfaction with Available Time

(Mean ratings: 1=very dissatisfied; 2= dissatisfied; 3=satisfied; 4= very satisfied)

Time for:

| | Municipal | | Private Subsidised | | Private | |
|---|-----------|------|--------------------|-------|---------|------|
| | Mean | S.E. | Mean | S.E. | Mean | S.E. |
| Lesson planning | 2.11*** | 0.04 | 2.28 | 0.05. | 2.45 | 0.04 |
| Classroom management | 2.93* | 0.04 | 2.98 | 0.03 | 3.04 | 0.04 |
| Classroom teaching | 2.88* | 0.03 | 2.97 | 0.03 | 2.9 | 0.04 |
| Professional activities outside the classroom | 2.69 | 0.03 | 2.73 | 0.03 | 2.74 | 0.05 |
| Responding to external requests (i.e. Education Ministry) | 2.70 | 0.04 | 2.78 | 0.04 | 2.76 | 0.06 |

*** P<0.001; *P<0.05

Source: Teacher questionnaire

Unlike other jobs, you need to work at home. Otherwise it is impossible because your contract does not include time to plan, to assess exams and correct homework. There just aren't enough hours. One comes to the school and teaches. You finish one class and you start another and then you need to prepare material for the next day or you need to grade a test and you never stop. I have a sister, she is a nurse and I envy her because she goes back home to do nothing. I go home, I rest for a while, but then I need to go to the computer, to prepare material, I need to search on Internet, I am always digging for material that may be useful for the school. [Teacher in private subsidised school focus group meeting]

Self-efficacy

Teachers were asked about their perception of capacity to deal with a set of teaching demands. To what extent did they feel able to stimulate pupil interest in learning, to be creative in their classrooms, to

improve pupil learning results and to influence the learning of all or almost all their pupils. Around 60 % of all teachers surveyed felt satisfied that they were able to do these things. About a third felt very satisfied at being able to achieve such goals. There were no differences among the types of schools where they taught. Interviews with teachers and transcripts from focus groups show that part of teacher satisfaction is intermingled with their interest or should we say “passion” for teaching.

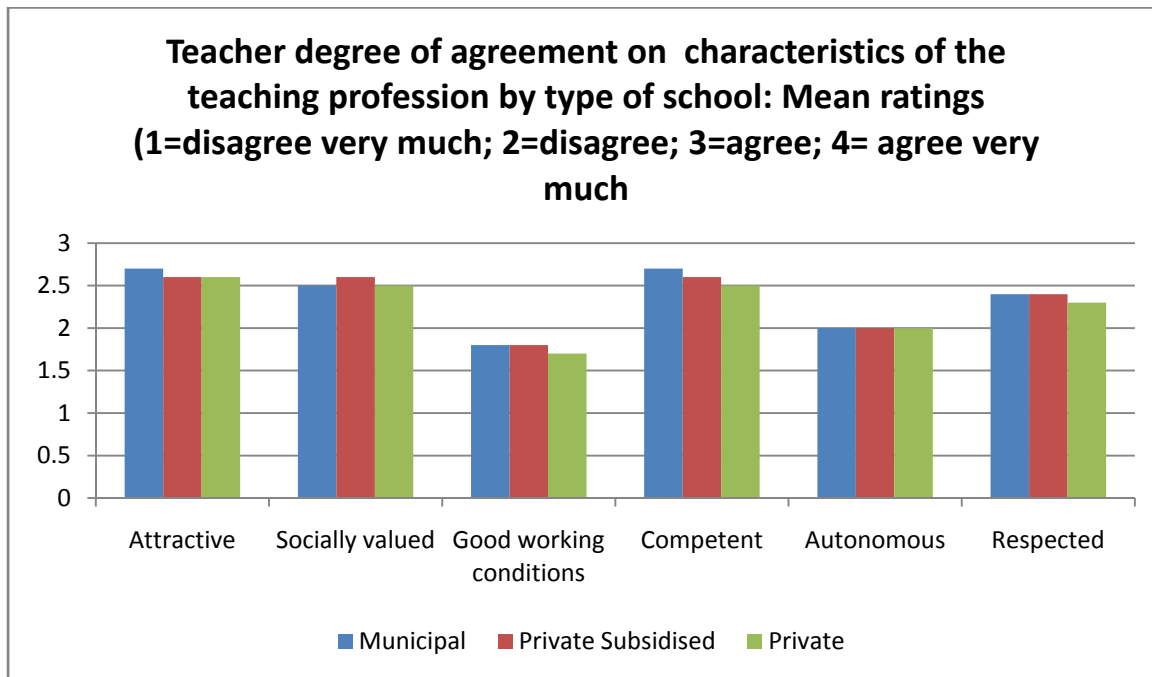
I start from the notion that I love to be a teacher. I love to be a teacher. I love the classroom, not what is out of it. Out of the classroom it is quite different. With parents it is a lot harder. In teacher meetings, I am a little shy, but in the classroom I am happy. Teaching is challenging and beautiful. I did my high school here and worked in another school. Then I came back. I came back with more hours and a lower salary, but I feel that I belong to this place. I came to the school to help, to make a difference, to be in the same classrooms. This is a huge challenge and every day I work to fulfill my goals as a teacher [Municipal school teacher in focus group meeting]

In the light of this positive self-assessment, it is of interest to learn how they rated the influence of initial and continuing teacher education as well as experience on their teaching competencies. Teachers clearly were able to match specific competencies with each one of these influences. Thus, over two thirds of teachers pointed to experience as their main source for developing the capacity to interact with colleagues, manage big classes, classroom routines and discipline problems. Around half of all teachers considered their professional development opportunities as important in helping them to develop assessment skills, understand key concepts in the curriculum, use ICT, and develop new teaching methods. Most of them attributed to experience the capacity to interact with colleagues, to manage large classes, handle discipline crisis, do group work and handle individual differences. There were differences in the assessment of these influences in line with teacher years of experience. Thus younger teacher considered the influence of initial teacher education to be more important than older teachers on skills such as lesson planning, assessment skills or understanding curriculum concepts. On the other hand, older teachers rated more highly the influence of experience over any of the forms of teacher education.

Social Recognition

In considering their profession, teachers are ambiguous about a series of characteristics that we group under the concept of social status. While they show personal commitment as teachers, they feel others do not value the profession and that society generally has teaching in low esteem. Teaching does not appear to be a particularly attractive profession. It is not well represented in the media and not sufficiently valued by government. Teachers have little autonomy and inadequate working conditions. As shown in the Figure 1, teachers differ little, in how they think others view the status of their profession.

Figure I:



Source: Teacher questionnaire

With all these and other indicators referring to status of the teaching profession, Bellei & Valenzuela (2009) developed a “status” index. On that index, teachers in private schools were those who saw the instatus of the teaching profession at its lowest, and differed significantly this from teachers in private subsidised and in municipal schools who were closer to agreeing on the status of the profession. Asked about their perception of the respect others have for them

personally, teachers feel that those closer to them (family, pupils, other colleagues) respect them more than those removed such as government authorities, the union leaders, and school owners or authorities and other professionals. Below are teacher voices from each type of school referring to how they feel others in Chile consider their work and their profession.

One is not recognized as a teacher. Teachers are at the lowest step of the ladder. In this society, you get paid according to the social recognition and that make me a little sad. It has been said that this is an ideal job, especially for women. But it is not true, because you need to work a lot. It is not just a matter of money, because the social recognition goes beyond money” [*Municipal teacher during focus group meeting*]

We have to do all sorts of things. We are like a circus. While we have to do everything that is demanded, society blames us. In some schools, some directors only pay attention to parents’ complaints. Parents come to school to blame us, and school principals make us apologize. I am new here but I have heard and I know that some teachers are put under scrutiny on the basis that the client

is right. School authorities tell you: “you need to talk with the parents and apologize”. And if you do not do that, at the end of the year you will be fired. [*Interview with teacher in private subsidized school*]

Throughout our career other professionals do not recognize us. We develop understanding and knowledge in other others, but a person who constructs buildings is considered more valuable than the teacher who teachers people. Teaching is considered the least prestigious profession. [*Interview with private school teacher*]

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The focus of the paper is centred on the concept of teacher identity which have been defined as a construction of meanings based both on the attributes that culture and society place on teachers and their roles in society, as well as on how teachers define their roles and provide meaning to their work. The highlighted four elements or fields which form part of these meanings are : the meanings and definitions that teachers give to their work and the intensity with which they feel committed to it; the overt or covert definitions embodied in the policies and reforms which affect teachers’ personally and the nature of the work they carry out; the extent to which teachers in the light of their definitions of teaching describe their capacity; and the extent to which there is a contrast between how teachers define their task and mission and how they believe society values and respects what they do. In short, there are two major sources of identity construction: a personal one embodied in teachers’ definitions and an external one embodied in policies, reforms, public messages and stakeholder perceptions (i.e. school authorities, parents, other teachers etc.).

The evidence presented from the study indicates that to large extent teachers in Chile today are marked to some extent by the system of education and the particularity of its three types of schools. Municipal schools are largely schools for the poor; private subsidised schools attend a mixed population (they may charge fees) and wholly private schools are for the elite in terms of power and income of the families who enrol their children in those schools. Municipal teachers are the only ones that are subject to performance evaluation, and have been the principal subjects in the improvement projects of the 1990s. Private subsidised teachers work under very diverse owners and authorities. They do not profit from some of the contract benefits that the teachers’ union secured for the public teacher corps, especially in relation to dismissals. Their work is much more fragile than is the case with municipal teachers. Private school teachers enjoy better working conditions in terms of school environment, and are selected for being very competent. One might assume that given these differences, teachers would also differ in how they view their profession. And in some respects they do. For example, as we have seen, teachers in private schools do not feel so harshly the effect of public policies while they do consider more demanding the effects of school related changes that are closer to their immediate environment. However, the three groups of teachers are joined in their perception that the teaching profession is not sufficiently valued by society and by those stakeholders more removed from the immediacy of their pupils, colleagues, friends and family.

The evidence that has been examined points to a certain clash between the expectations and demands of the removed others (policy-makers, educational authorities) regarding their mission as teachers, and how teachers see it themselves. The overall dominance of the national school assessment system (SIMCE) determines in teachers’ eyes a contradictory view of what is important in teaching. The repeated view of themselves is as educators who care for their pupils not only in terms of their school marks and the school’s position in the SIMCE rankings, but of their whole wellbeing. The areas of conflict noted by van den Berg (2002) affecting teachers’ identity construction are present both in the statements provided in the survey and in the views expressed during interviews and focus group meetings. One of these is the questioning of the legitimacy of work definitions provided by others. They reject (especially teachers in

private schools) a definition of their professional identity, which is solely or principally defined in terms of their contribution to school learning results.

The clash between the two sources of identity definition of teachers is most evident when teachers reflect on the quality of their working conditions, especially the scarcity of time, which is felt more harshly by teachers in the publicly funded system. Teachers realise that their task is a vast one, but feel the frustration of not being able to move ahead with it in the way they would like, because there simply is not enough time. This affects an important component of teacher identity: the sense of being able to carry out their work competently. While the teachers surveyed state that they believe others doubt their competence (public others), they also recognise that there is an element of truth in this, because the circumstances in which many work simply do not allow them to do a good job.

However, in most of the focal groups in which we worked, we found teachers who hold on to a broad definition of their mission and identity, even though they work under the same limitations as all their other colleagues:

I think everybody has many possibilities, and as a teacher this gives me hope. Hope that these kids will learn and will continue to learn ... to develop freely and as individuals, without becoming a weight for the State or their parents. At times one walks into the classroom bringing unsatisfactory grades [in a test], because such were its results. But then I tell them: "this is your last chance". And the kids get on board and the grades go up. This is a source of hope ... but one does not struggle only for one, one struggles for all of them, so they may all have greater chances in life. One has a certain degree of confidence that they will make it. ... We have many examples of people who struggle and move ahead. Opportunities exist, but we must show them and somehow provide to these kids. It is tiring though! [*Young teacher in municipal school*]

In concluding, it would seem that together with the concerns that policy makers and education authorities in Chile may have about teacher quality and their effects on pupil results in schools, they should note in their actions and change decisions, that most teachers have forged a self-identity linked to broad education aims, and that demands for changes and reforms have to build on these definitions. Not to do so, is to lay conflict in their work lives, reduce their self-confidence or as occurs in well-documented circumstances, cause teachers passively or actively to resist the call for change however well-intentioned it may be. Because as Tenti-Fanfani (2006, pp. 139-140) notes: "the key factor in the struggle for teacher professionalism is not the need for a longer or better teacher preparation ... but the issue of who will control the development of the profession".

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