Successful Schools in Challenging Contexts: Evidence from Chile

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Abstract

This article summarizes a research study about six secondary schools from two different counties in Chile, which are characterized by a socio-economically disadvantaged student intake. The main aim of the study was to gain greater understanding of the particular features that characterize these schools and the influence of these characteristics on the students' outcomes. The sample of schools was selected after the analysis of the students´ attainment results in a national standardized examination over a period of three years. Four of these schools were considered to be more effective or 'atypical' in terms of academic achievement. The other two were considered to have average results or 'typical.' All the schools were analyzed using case studies and a mixed-methods research approach. The main focus of the analysis was to explore the school processes that support effectiveness and to generate some illuminating findings, in order to contribute to educational policy and practice.

Key words: secondary schools; disadvantaged student intake; students' outcomes; effectiveness.

Introduction

The research on successful schools in challenging contexts is a topic that has been extensively studied in the last forty years, especially in countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom. It is well known that the main catalysts of the School Effectiveness Research (SER) were the publications of Coleman et al. (1966) and Jencks et al. (1972). These studies opened the debate about the extent in which a school could make the difference in terms of students' outcomes. According to these studies, there was a greater influence of factors such as socio-economic status, race and IQ on students' outcomes than from the school. These two studies were heavily criticized by educational experts that were convinced that 'the school could make a difference'. Moved by this conviction, these researchers started to conduct research on School Effectiveness to prove that the school could have an effect on pupils' academic and social outcomes.

SER has been significantly influenced by social justice claims that demand that any student from a disadvantaged background has equal access to quality educational opportunities in line with those who belong to a more privileged social context. Early SER emphasized the role of the school to reduce educational inequalities, but at the same time, it acknowledged the importance of the school intake and their social background as important contextual factors that have to be considered in SER. According to Sammons (2007, p. 3), 'School Effectiveness Research has focused on exploring the role of educational experiences and influences but does not seek to ignore or marginalize the role of other factors'. In fact, social background has often been considered a key factor for the academic success of students and for their later occupational life.

In relation to this point, one of the aims of the study reported in this paper was to understand how particular school processes could minimize educational and professional inequalities that may arise from social and cultural backgrounds. The research study discussed in this paper focused on Chilean education. My particular interest in the topic of effective schooling in challenging contexts has arisen from my cultural and professional background. As a Chilean teacher, I have witnessed the inequalities of the educational system in my country, where pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds do not have access to the same quality of education. In fact, Chile has one the most segregated educational system when compared with other OECD economies.

This is mainly a consequence of some reforms that changed the structure and focused on the privatization and decentralization of education in the 80s, as a result of the introduction of a neoliberal economy. These particular policies reduced school budgets and introduced competence between schools for funding, which mainly affected socially disadvantaged schools that had fewer possibilities to compete given their contextual conditions. Considering this historical policy context which has resulted in permanent struggles from schools in challenging contexts to achieve better academic results, I considered very interesting to investigate schools that make a difference in terms of educational outcomes, even though the adverse circumstances they might encounter. The main intention was to explore the educational processes enhancing school effectiveness in socially disadvantaged contexts, with the aim of learning lessons from these schools about the necessary conditions that similar schools should develop in order to replicate successful experiences and achieve better results.

The Study Overview

The main aim of the research study reported in this article was to gain greater understanding of the particular characteristics of effective secondary schools characterized for having a socially disadvantaged school intake and the influence of these particular features on the students' educational outcomes. In order to do this, a group of six Chilean schools were explored focusing on their particular characteristics and internal school processes. Four schools are considered to be more effective than the other two in terms of educational attainment measured by a standardized examination. In my exploration of each school, I have addressed the main aspects related to school effectiveness. The exploration of these specific factors was firstly determined by the study of the literature. This gave me a specific framework to approach the study of these schools, bearing in mind some models of school effectiveness and some common factors that have been found in school effectiveness studies. The two less effective or 'typical' schools were also analyzed in order to compare their working systems with the ones of the 'atypical' or more effective schools and identify differences between them.

The Schools

The six institutions selected for this study are vocational secondary schools and in terms of administration and funding, they are either state schools with public funding or semi-private schools funded through public subsidies and parents' contributions. In order to have a more representative sample, four of these schools were selected from the Bío Bío County, which is in the central-south part of Chile and the other two from Santiago, the capital of Chile. The main school sample used in this study is purposive, atypical, and consists of four schools (Araucaria, Canelo, Rauli and Avellano). The second is a small purposive sample of two typical institutions (Quillay and Lenga). For ethical reasons, the schools have been identified with pseudonyms. These names correspond to the denominations of some native trees from Chile. The sample of atypical institutions considers schools that demonstrated results above the average in a national standardized examination used to measure the quality of education in Chile known as SIMCE. Specifically, results in Mathematics and Language during a period of three years (2003, 2006, and 2008) were analyzed. These schools were selected from the 30% with the highest level of performance during those years. In the case of the secondary sample of typical schools, it was selected from the groups of schools with an average level of achievement. In addition to these criteria, all the schools included in the samples are characterized by socioeconomic vulnerability, as defined by the Ministry of Education in Chile that considers students' household income, the vulnerability level index of the school and the parents' level of schooling to categorize schools in different socioeconomic groups.

The Participants

The participants who took part in this study were head teachers, teachers, students, and parents. All of them were asked to voluntarily participate and they signed a form giving their informed consent to take part in the study.

Firstly, all the six head teachers of the schools analyzed accepted to collaborate in the study. In all the cases, they were facilitators who helped in the process of gaining access to schools and to other participants. The majority of them have more than nine years of experience as head teachers with one exception. In terms of teachers, approximately twenty per school answered surveys and a group of between seven and ten teachers per school took part in focus group sessions. All the teachers who volunteered to take part in the study have an education degree and the majority of them also hold further qualifications. In relation to students, two classes per school were surveyed, approximately three hundred seventy students in total. In addition to this, a group of ten students per school took part in focus group sessions.

Regarding parents, a group of them were sent surveys to answer at home. In almost all the schools, with the exception of Rauli, the number of parents who responded the surveys was over thirty. Additionally, a group of between seven to ten parents per school took part in focus group sessions. Some contextual data from parents were also collected in order to have more information about the level of vulnerability of the schools selected for the study. For example, in terms of parents' level of schooling, 35% indicated that they did not complete either primary or secondary school and 38% indicated that they completed school. The rest did not give information about this aspect. Concerning their occupations, a significant number of mothers are housewives and the majority of the rest of parents does manual jobs, work in services or work as technicians.

Methods and Analysis

A mixed-methods approach (MM), which combined both quantitative and qualitative research methods and techniques, was employed in this study. The implementation of this particular methodology was undertaken through the use of a multiple-case research design, which means that different school case studies were undertaken. The adoption of this research design can be explained by the intention of gaining a real understanding of the internal processes that support the greater educational effectiveness of a group of schools. In doing so, it was necessary to apply varied methods of data collection in order to explore in depth the working systems of these schools, their educational objectives, their organizational characteristics, the nature of interactions between the different school stakeholders, the contextual scenarios in which they are located and some of the unique features and complexities of these schools. According to Tashakkori & Teddlie (2003), 'MM can provide better and stronger inferences than a single methodology.'

For example, a researcher might want to use surveys and cases studies in her study because one of the methods can provide greater breadth and the other greater depth to the findings. Bryman (2004, p. 464) supports this idea indicating that the use of different research strategies 'may provide a better understanding of a phenomenon than if just one method had been used'. The use of a mixed-methods approach is certainly not the only way to approach the research problem but it seems an appropriate one for the study of educational institutions, given their complex nature. Within the different mixed-methods designs, this study adopted an MM parallel design, 'QUAL + quan', which means that there was a prioritization of the qualitative strand and that the different type of data, were collected in an almost simultaneous manner (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009).

The different instruments and techniques of data collection include surveys that were administered to teachers, students, and parents; focus groups conducted with groups of teachers, parents and students and semi-structured interviews that were conducted with head teachers. The design of the instruments considered the study of the literature, some pre-existing school effectiveness characteristics defined by key authors in the field and, in the case of the surveys, the ISTOF questionnaire developed by Teddlie et al. (2006) was also considered. Before their administration, all the instruments were piloted. In addition, other sources of data such as schools' websites, documents, and interviews with other school members were used to complement and add robustness to the information collected by the main sources.

Regarding data analysis, this research study included many stages. Firstly, the quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed separately. In particular, the analysis of the surveys included the use of descriptive statistics and calculations of T-test scores to compare different groups. In terms of the qualitative part, thematic analysis was used to approach the analysis of data from the focus groups and semi-structured interviews with the use of the software N-Vivo that was a very useful resource to categorize the data. After the independent-parallel analysis, the qualitative and quantitative data were integrated using two different approaches: school portraits and cross-case analysis, which was undertaken through the use of analytical tables.

Findings

After the analysis of the data through different stages of parallel and integrative data analysis, it was possible to identify five main dimensions associated to the greater effectiveness of atypical schools. In addition, and through the comparison with the two atypical schools, some differences between both types of schools were established. The results of this study indicate that the group of atypical schools is characterized for displaying more effective processes in most of the educational aspects evaluated. In addition, it has emerged that many of the differences between atypical and typical schools are related to adverse contextual conditions.

Atypical schools are also affected by challenging contextual conditions, but it seems that the combination of some of the features that characterized the atypical schools analyzed in this study increases their resilience to contextual impact. It is important to mention that from the four atypical institutions that demonstrate a greater effectiveness, two of them are run by a corporation. These two institutions are subsidized by the government but administered by a non-profit corporation, which administers a total of eight vocational schools in Chile, and its main aim is to provide quality secondary education for students who want to follow a vocational route and work in the industrial sectors in the future. Although, also many students decide to follow an academic route and attend university. It has emerged from the findings that the particular type of administration that characterize these two atypical schools seems to have a positive impact on the effectiveness of them. Actually, from the four atypical schools, the two run by the corporation demonstrate to be even more effective than the other two.

In the following sections, the main findings from this study are discussed.

1. Effective schools are characterized by showing clear and systematic processes focused on academic success

This dimension was identified in all the atypical schools, but with a greater emphasis in two of them that are the ones run by a corporation. This greater focus on achieving academic success identified in atypical schools can be realized in many of their school processes, but with more emphasis in two main aspects: 'effective planning' and 'pupils' learning monitoring processes.' In relation to the first aspect, the literature review highlighted the fact that effective planning is an element frequently found in effective schools (Henchey, 2001). Concerning pedagogical planning, atypical schools show more organization and systematization of actions targeting academic success. In these schools, there is less space for improvisation than in typical schools. The pedagogical planning is more rigorous and the planning work of the subjects' departments is more efficient.

There is also pedagogical planning collaboration between colleagues from the same departments and between colleagues from different departments. On the other hand, in typical schools pedagogical planning was found to be less efficient, especially in Quillay School where participants emphasized that planning is not always done:

Depends on the teacher, I worked in the library for one year and I noticed that some teachers book their material in advance. Other teachers arrive in the morning to the library, just before their lessons, and try to quickly decide what they are going to do. (Parent, Quillay School)

Regarding institutional planning, in all the four atypical schools there is an institutional plan. However, in both corporation schools there is an efficient strategic plan to organize the actions oriented to achieve educational effectiveness. The strategic plan has its genesis inside the schools and it includes a high number of goals. The design of the plan takes into account the schools' vision and mission, which will be realized by the accomplishment of the goals described in this document. School stakeholders are expected to strive for success in the achievement of its goals. The corporation evaluates the achievement of the goals and the plans are updated every three years considering the suggestions and new needs of the schools' communities.

According to school members, having a strategic plan has a positive impact on effectiveness because the work system is organized and structured and individual responsibilities are made very clear for school members. Nothing is improvised in these two schools, everything is carefully planned, and stakeholders are very conscious that the corporation expects them to do well, as they are evaluated in relation to their results. There is general agreement between members of both schools about the relevance of the strategic planning as a catalyst for these schools' greater effectiveness:

The school working system is the result of a strategic plan that is generated in the school but is evaluated by the corporation. This plan has around 70 goals and it covers a three-year period. (Head teacher, Araucaria School)

In these schools, the institutional plan is not a document that is filed and kept in a school office that is only considered in case of school inspections. On the contrary, this document is a navigation map that is constantly guiding school processes.

Additionally, the second main aspect identified as being closely related to the schools´ greater focus on achieving academic success is the significant emphasis given to pupils' learning monitoring processes. Atypical schools place a higher importance on the internal and external assessment processes. In all these schools, there are some subject departments planning and collaboration between different school units to provide students with some strategies to face internal and external assessment processes.

In addition, in atypical schools, especially in Araucaria, Canelo and Rauli, school staff and pupils are aware of the importance that external assessment has in terms of future career choices for students and funding opportunities for the schools. For example, many school improvement projects created by the Ministry of Education or by external sponsors (which give funding to schools) consider schools that demonstrate a sustainable improvement in their results in external standardized examinations. On the other hand, in typical schools academic results are not considered to be very important by some teachers, who think that students' personal development is more important. Levin (2006, p. 405), referring to the findings of the study by Riffel & Levin (1986) concludes 'many educators in high-need communities give greater focus to the pastoral element of their work, which can cause them to de-emphasize academic achievement'.

This seems to be happening in Lenga where many teachers are satisfied with the effectiveness of the school in terms of pastoral aspects, thus they adopt a conformist attitude in relation to students' achievement levels. In Quillay School, a considerable number of teachers do not perceive academic performance as one of the most important goals of the schools. They think that the school should not be overwhelmingly focused on external examinations, such as SIMCE. In relation to the latter point, it is necessary to emphasize that in terms of educational outcomes the level of students´ attainment is one of the indicator of educational progression, but not the only one because the concept of education includes many other aspects, such as the development of strategies and competences to: solve problems, be creative, innovate, be critical, be socially responsible, build positive relationships with others, be a good citizen, etc.

However, it is also very important for a school to have a clear picture of students' attainment levels, in order to know to what extent teaching and learning strategies are being effective. For that reason, this study subscribes to the position that considers internal and external pupils' learning monitoring processes necessary, although not the only way to assess educational effectiveness.

2. In effective schools teachers demonstrate a particularly high level of professional and personal commitment

This factor has emerged as a differentiating element between both types of schools. For example, in atypical schools teachers demonstrate a strong disposition and willingness to get involved in professional development courses in order to update their knowledge and improve their teaching skills. In addition, they demonstrate a more efficient performance than their colleagues from typical schools in terms of pedagogical planning, optimization of teaching time, classroom management, and collaborative work with other colleagues. These findings are supported by many studies on Teacher Practices and Effectiveness, which have stressed that teachers are one of the most important elements for school success (Day C. & Gu Q., 2010; Day et al., 2007; Day C., 2002; Hargreaves et al, 2007; Creemers, 1994).

Contrastingly, in typical schools teachers tend to demonstrate a lower level of professional commitment than in atypical institutions. This element is particularly negative in terms of students' academic outcomes, since learning occurs at the classroom level and is mediated by the teacher. It has emerged from the data that some contextual conditions such as teachers' workload, lack of time and high number of students per class have an impact on teachers' disposition and commitment in typical schools. Harber & Davies (1998) highlighted teachers' absenteeism and lateness as factors affecting the effectiveness of educational systems in developing countries. Unfortunately, these problems are usually produced by contextual factors associated with teachers' inadequate working conditions. In Quillay school teachers reported to have a heavy workload which produces a significant percentage of teacher absenteeism caused by stress and depression. This has repercussion on students' learning because cover teachers are not sent to the school immediately:

Last year, there were many complaints about the extended medical leave of some teachers. If a teacher doesn't come, students miss classes because the municipality doesn't send a substitute teacher soon. (Parent, Quillay School). It is important to highlight the fact that the results of this study have suggested that in the group of atypical schools, the teachers' commitment goes beyond the professional aspect. Actually, a significant number of teachers in these schools demonstrate a personal commitment with their students. Many students feel that teachers are not only interested in their learning but also in themselves as individuals. Teachers also demonstrate their personal commitment with their students in the way they relate with them. In all the atypical schools, students agree on the fact that there is a warm and positive relationship between students and teachers. This aspect is seen as determinant for their motivation because they see teachers as inspirational and positive guides.

In contrast, in the typical school Quillay, for example, some parents that took part in the study indicated that some teachers only adopt a position of knowledge transmitters and do not relate to students in a broader sense. Similarly, in Lenga School, some school stakeholders think that teachers do not always demonstrate a strong professional commitment: Sometimes teachers are not very concerned about all the students, they do their classes, and they care too much if all the 40 or 45 students in the class understood.

They say that they can't dedicate extra time to a particular content because they have a program to follow and they don't want to be behind schedule. I don't mean that all the teachers are like that here, just some of them. (Parent, Lenga School) Probably, some of the contextual factors previously mentioned can explain, at least in part, the low motivation of some teachers, which has a negative impact on their commitment. However, adverse contextual conditions also affect atypical schools, but they do not have the same effect on their educational processes. It seems that the combination of particular characteristics of atypical schools make them more resilient to the negative contextual influence.

3. Effective schools are frequently characterized by having effective leaders who are key elements for the school success

In both corporation schools, Araucaria and Rauli, the leadership was considered particularly positive. These schools principals seem to adapt their leadership styles to the circumstances and although, most of the time they are considered democratic leaders who distribute power with other staff members, they might act in a slightly different manner when firm decisions are required. In general, school members and parents value the fact that their leaders make firm decisions for the benefit of the school. However, it is important to emphasize that even though it is important that leaders adequate their leadership styles to the circumstances and make firm decisions sometimes, a regular autocratic leadership style is not positive for the school climate and effectiveness. One example of this is the typical school Lenga, where the previous head teachers´ styles to lead the school have negatively influenced the way in which the leadership is perceived:

As far as I know, there was a very authoritarian system here. The previous head teacher was more dedicated to make administrative decisions rather than to deal with situations closely related to teachers or students. (Head teacher, Lenga School) Contrastingly, a very flexible leadership style or 'laissez faire' is also frequently criticized because it neglects school members and processes. For example, in the typical school Quillay, some teachers indicated that the leadership style is weak, flexible, and not very communicative. They emphasized that there is a lack of supervision and feedback on the part of the head teacher, in what concerns to teachers' duties. Teachers would prefer to receive more feedback about the way they are doing their job. They think that the autonomy they are given is good to a certain extent, but they believe that some members of the teaching staff need more supervision:

The leadership should be more demanding, sometimes principals think that the teachers are going to do what they are supposed to do, but it is not always like that and sometimes more supervision is needed. (Teacher, Quillay School) Classic school effectiveness literature defined effective leadership styles as being far from 'weak, but firm, purposeful and monitoring' (Edmonds, 1979; Mortimore et al., 1998; Teddlie & Stringfield, 1993; Sammons et al., 1997). More recent literature has described good leaders as being focused on capacity building in their schools and having transformational, pedagogical and democratic approaches (Fullan, 2005, Hopkins et al. 2011), which is also in opposition to a weak and uncommunicative approach. According to Muij et al., (2004), 'there has been a move towards a realization that the most effective means for true improvement lies in a more distributed and democratic form of leadership'.

Another aspect about the leadership in atypical schools that was highlighted by school members is that the leaders are supportive and encouraging. For example, leaders try to motivate teachers to get involved in professional development courses in order to improve the teaching and learning processes in their schools. Furthermore, in these schools, leaders are especially proactive and they like to get involved in different projects that frequently mean an improvement opportunity for the school. Something particular that characterizes the head teachers of the atypical schools Rauli and Avellano is the fact that they assume other roles in the school, which brings closer interaction with students. Moos & Huber (2007 suggested that good leaders should demonstrate 'involvement in and knowledge about what goes on in the classroom' (p. 581). This seems to be the case of Avellano and Rauli schools where the principals also do classroom teaching. Actually, in Rauli, all the members of the leadership team have to teach at least one lesson per week.

This particular school policy is a strategy designed to bring the leadership team closer to students and teachers and to understand their experiences. Leaders are not considered detached from classroom issues because they are aware of the type of discipline problems, personal issues and teaching and learning difficulties affecting teachers and students. In general, parents consider that this level of involvement is a very positive school feature because leaders are able to empathize with teachers and students and help them in a more effective manner:

We think that he wants to be really involved in what is going on in the school. It is very encouraging to see the head teacher or any other member of the management team teaching. It is very different from in other schools where the members of the leadership team would never teach. (Parent, Rauli School) In general, in the group of atypical schools, leaders are concerned about students' learning and they support teachers and teaching and learning processes in a very direct manner. In fact, these findings are supported by some relevant leadership studies, which have emphasized the key role of effective schools leaders in enhancing students' academic results (Robinson, 2007; Leithwood et al., 2006).

4. Effective schools are frequently characterized by having a positive school climate

An important factor that emerged from the data, which is common in all the atypical schools, is the good organizational climate that characterizes these institutions, especially in what concerns to the quality of relationships between school stakeholders and to the level of discipline of the institutions. Regarding relationships, the sort of interactions between different stakeholders tends to be respectful and constructive, especially in the case of teachers and students. Teachers care about students and students respect teachers, which has implications in terms of student motivation and also in relation to the level of discipline, responsibility and work disposition that students demonstrate. In all the four schools, teachers emphasized the quality relationship they have with students:

One of the strengths that we have in this school is the relationship we have with the majority of students. There is a lot of affection, a good climate. (Teacher, Avellano School) Contrastingly, the data have shown that in typical schools there are some problems of interaction between school members, which affect the general climate of the schools. For example, in Quillay School there are some tensions between teachers and also lack of communication between teachers and school leaders: I think that the organizational climate can be difficult sometimes. There are some communication problems. More transparency and effective communication between teachers and with the leadership team is necessary. (Teacher, Quillay School) Another important aspect that characterizes the school climate in atypical schools is the good level of discipline they have in comparison with typical institutions. In all these schools, staff reported that the level of discipline is very good when compared with similar institutions: Discipline is good and students demonstrate education and respect. It´s not like in other schools. (Student, Rauli School)

Discipline and respect between people are essential elements in creating a quiet and harmonious climate of interactions in the classroom and facilitate the teaching and learning processes. In their study about improving schools, Maden & Hillman (1993) found that these types of schools had set clear disciplinary rules and they put effort into creating an orderly school environment. The importance of an 'orderly environment' for learning has been emphasized in many school effectiveness studies and reviews, including some very influential ones (Edmonds, 1979; Taeuber, 1987; Scheerens, 1989 and Reynolds & Teddlie, 2000). In the four atypical schools student responsibility to display appropriate school social behavior is higher than in typical schools. For example, school staff from Araucaria school reported that in their school there is self-discipline system between students. Therefore, discipline rules do not have to be imposed.

Contrastingly, the data showed that in typical schools the level of discipline is lower than in the sample of atypical schools. It seems that the vulnerability affecting typical schools' populations seem to have repercussions on students' behavior. It is well known that the levels of social vulnerability of a school community might affect its discipline and according to some authors it is very important to set disciplinary rules and promote an orderly environment in disadvantaged schools as suggested by Muijs et al., (2004, p.156) 'In particular in disadvantaged areas, it is crucial to have effective discipline in place'. Finally, it is important to highlight that the level of social disadvantage that characterizes a significant part of the schools' populations of both atypical and typical schools does not seem to have an equal impact.

In the four atypical schools, discipline problems are minor and do not seem to affect the teaching and learning processes and the motivation of students and teachers. On the contrary, the good general climate of these organizations is an element that clearly contributes to these schools' greater success.

5. Effective schools are institutions that believe in their students and school stakeholders have high expectations of them

The evidence demonstrates than in atypical schools staff members have high expectations of students, even considering the difficult contextual conditions that a significant number of them have to face. In general, teachers and head teachers from these schools believe in students and encourage them to do their best. For instance, this level of expectations is demonstrated in teacher behavior, which tends to be very challenging with regard to student academic performance: I think that teaching and teachers in this school are very good, very challenging. It is difficult for students to be here when they are in their first year because they have to adapt themselves to the level of academic expectations in this school. (Parent, Canelo School) In general, teachers challenge students and do not assume that due to their personal circumstances and contextual barriers, they will not be able to succeed. Students perceive these high expectations about themselves and appreciate the fact that teachers and other school staff believe in their abilities to succeed.

This has a positive effect on their motivation, which eventually impacts their academic results. Additionally, students' expectations of themselves tent to be higher in atypical schools and they are supported by high expectations of their parents about their performance. It has been extensively documented by school effectiveness literature that schools that have high expectations of students tend to be more effective (Edmonds, 1979; Scheerens, 1989; Levine & Lezotte, 1990; Sammons et al., 1995; Reynolds & Teddlie, 2000; Henchey, 2001). Contrastingly, having poor expectations of students has repercussions on students' academic performance and consequently on the school's success. This seems to be the case of both typical schools, where school members tend to have lower expectations of students' success than in atypical schools. Teachers from Quillay School emphasized that this problem is not only evident in the school but in the whole community:

In this town, people don't have expectations, they don't have life projects and they live in the present without having projects for the future. This is a generalized problem in this town. (Teacher, Quillay School) In Quillay School the expectations of students, parents and teachers are affected by contextual conditions, especially by the high vulnerability level that characterizes the student intake and the community in which the school is located. School stakeholders consider that in that social context it is not realistic to have highly ambitious academic expectations of students. For example, there are some barriers for having higher expectations of students' future careers. Students who want to continue in higher education need to move to another city, where they will have to pay accommodation, cover their living expenses and pay college or universities fees, which is very difficult for the majority of the population in the town. Therefore, for them it is more realistic to imagine their futures as workers in the local industries (fishing or mining). The situation of low expectations is similar in Lenga School, where a number of teachers have a pessimistic view about students' chances of success:

Sometimes, as teachers, we also have low expectations because we think... well this is a difficult context; it is difficult to change the adversity that our students face, so why should I make a lot of effort? I think that it is imperative to change this pessimistic view. (Head teacher, Lenga School) Unfortunately, these low expectations seem to influence student motivation. Students feel that even if they make extra effort, their results will continue to be the same. Moreover, students believe that teachers are not challenging them enough because they do not trust in their ability to succeed. In addition to this, parents' expectations are also low which makes the situation worse, affecting students' self-esteem and their expectations of success. In summary, the lower level of expectations demonstrated by teachers, parents and students in the two typical schools differentiate these institutions from the group of atypical ones, where expectations of stakeholders are higher, which has positive repercussions on the motivation levels demonstrated by students.

Conclusions

This research study has given clear insights about the necessary conditions that schools need to have in order to be more effective in academic terms and in what concerns to the whole person development.

Through the exploration of the schools' internal processes and taking into account the testimonies of the main factors involved in these processes, it was possible to build a complete characterization of a successful school in a challenging context.

From the six schools that were explored, four of them demonstrate more effectiveness than the others, even though they have similar contextual conditions and school's intake characteristics. It seems that the particular combination of features that characterize these schools make them more resilient to external influence. The following table summarizes very succinctly the findings of the study.

Summary of Main Findings

School processes focused on success	Teachers' high level of professional and personal commitment	Effective leaders who are key elements for the school success	Positive school climate	High expectations of students
-Rigorous pedagogical planning -Effective strategic Institutional planning -Students' learning monitoring processes	-Willingness to get involved in professional development courses -Efficiency in terms of pedagogical planning, optimisation of teaching time, classroom management and collaborative work with other colleagues -Personal commitment with students	-Fluctuations between a democratic and distributed type of leadership and a firm and purposeful one when it is required -Principals are supportive and encouraging and constantly motivate staff to get involved in professional development courses -Principals are proactive and constantly get involved in different school improvement initiatives -Principals assume other roles in the school which bring closer interaction with students	-The sort of interactions between different stakeholders tend to be respectful and constructive, especially in the case of teachers and students -Good level of discipline when compared with similar institutions	-Schools staff members have high expectations of students, even considering the difficult contextual conditions they face -In general, teachers and head teachers from these schools believe in students and encourage them to do their best -Students' expectations of themselves tend to be high and they are supported by high expectations of their parents about their performance.

This study gives clear messages to practitioners, schools leaders, educational administrators and policy makers about the conditions that should be created in schools that aim to improve their educational effectiveness. In relation to the first finding which states that more effective schools have a greater focus on success, it would be a good first step for any school which aims to be successful, to have a clear 'strategic plan' of actions to be undertaken in order to achieve the desired success. It is also important to evaluate the progression towards the goals described in that plan on a regular basis and update it in the light of the results of the evaluation. In addition, it is important to highlight that regular internal and external monitoring processes of students' academic progress are necessary, which does not mean that schools should focus their efforts on preparing students for assessment; however, some accountability measures are required to evaluate students' learning progress. Regarding the second main finding which indicates that in more effective schools teachers demonstrate a particularly high level of professional and personal commitment, it is important to emphasize the importance of the implementation of better systems of teacher training and selection.

In the municipal sector, for example, teachers are sent directly from the municipalities and due to other duties that they have to address, frequently, there is not careful selection of staff. Schools should be given more autonomy to select their teachers because they know their own particular needs. In addition to this, it is necessary that teachers training programs improve their quality and attract better and more talented and committed applicants through the implementation of more effective application processes not only focused on students' academic performance, but also in the assessment of students' capacities to teach and deal with children and young students.

Another way to attract better applicants would be to gradually offer better conditions for teachers, especially in the publicly funded and semi-private sectors where the teacher's situation could be considered very unstable in Chile. Therefore, it is necessary to have higher investment in education, in order to gradually improve teachers' salaries, as well as to offer more professional development opportunities for them, in order to increase their level of motivation and commitment. In what concerns to the third main finding of this study which states that effective schools are frequently characterized by having effective leaders who are key elements for the school success, it is essential that the systems of selection of school principals become more professional in order to appoint more effective school leaders. This research has demonstrated that the most effective leaders are characterized by being able to assume challenges; being proactive; getting involved in improvement initiatives; encouraging teachers to get more involved and update their knowledge and demonstrating interest in teachers and student issues.

These characteristics should be present and desired in those aiming to assume a leadership position. In addition, it is essential that effective leaders are not only able to transform and improve their schools, but capable to sustain their success by building capacity between staff members that could preserve their legacies. Those necessary capacity building skills for leaders should be promoted by permanent professional development.

In relation to the fourth main finding of this study, which indicates that effective schools are frequently characterized by having a positive school climate, it is important that schools' members create and promote a positive atmosphere in their schools trying to avoid tension and resolve disagreement. A harmonious climate characterized by respect will facilitate interaction and will increase teacher and student motivation to work. In terms of school climate, it is also important that the level of discipline of a school is acceptable. Students need to learn in a quiet atmosphere; hence, positive behavior in the classrooms is essential. Therefore, it is important that the schools have clear rules and sanctions for students' misbehavior.

In the recent years, there has been a significant increment in the cases of bullying in Chilean schools and teachers have dramatically lost authority. In this scenario, some effective measures to stop such situations are essential. One of them was the promulgation of the Law 20.536 on school violence in 2011. This law obligates schools to assume serious responsibilities to stop anti-social behavior of students in schools. It is imperative that school leaders systematically implement measures to improve the levels of discipline in their schools, in order to contribute to a more positive school climate, which would promote the generation of an effective learning environment.

Finally, regarding the fifth finding of this research which states that effective schools are institutions that believe in their students and school stakeholders have high expectations of them, it is important to highlight the importance of encouraging practitioners to raise their expectations of students whose contextual circumstances make it difficult for them to aspire to a promising educational or professional future. Adverse conditions should not be a barrier for the development of students and teachers need to be aware of this and believe that their students are able to change their circumstances, as Levin (2006, p. 406) suggests: 'We should never give up our efforts at improving outcomes for students no matter what the context'.

This particular study has demonstrated that an important number of teachers from typical schools do not believe that their students are able to succeed because of the contextual conditions they face. Unfortunately, this pessimistic view does not help students because they perceive that some of their teachers and also their families do not believe in their capacity to succeed, and hence their motivation is adversely affected. The problem of raising teachers and parents' expectations of students is complex because it has to do with a change of mentality. Moreover, it is a not a problem restricted to the educational context. In relation to this point, Levin (2006) argued that schools are not the only place where changes have to occur. In his view, in vulnerable communities, sometimes it is even more important to change some contextual non-school issues. It involves society in general because it concerns social opportunities and equity.

A similar view has Lupton (2005), who argues that educational quality in the poorest neighborhood needs to be assured by policies addressing the particular contexts in which the schools are located. Harris et al. (2006) also emphasized the role of external environment as an important factor influencing the capacity of schools to succeed. In the case of Chile, many secondary school students assume that they will not have the economic resources to continue their studies in the future because higher education has been highly privatized and is expensive for the poorest families, so they do not see the point of making an effort in the school.

In addition to this, many of them face family or adaptation problems associated with the marginal social contexts where they live, which are commonly characterized by delinquency, teenage pregnancy, alcohol consumption, and drug abuse. Therefore, raising expectations is not only a responsibility of school leaders, practitioners, or families. It is an issue that has to be addressed by the government, using strategies to improve conditions and opportunities for young people living in contexts that are more vulnerable. Finally, it seems necessary to clearly state that this is not the first study that has arrived at similar conclusions, but it is important to emphasize that this study is especially relevant for the context of Chile and Latin America. Where schools in challenging contexts are frequently affected by contextual conditions related to economic and cultural deprivation of the school communities, low expectations of students' success, lack of future opportunities for students and bad conditions for teachers. According to Murillo (2007), the factors highlighted by Latin American studies on school effectiveness share many characteristics with classic reviews.

For example, 'high expectations of students' and 'effective leadership' are factors commonly present in school effectiveness studies undertaken in developed countries. Nevertheless, there are important differences between the research findings of developed countries and those of Latin American countries, especially in relation to factors such: socio-economic vulnerability of school communities; teacher training and professional development opportunities and teachers' working conditions.

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