

# Teaching in the pandemic: reconceptualizing Chilean educators' professionalism now and for the future

Teaching in the  
pandemic

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This essay explores the effects of school buildings closure during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic on Chilean teachers' and principals' professional role and values, highlighting implications for reconceptualizing educators' professionalism for the post-pandemic era.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Competing versions of Chilean educators' professionalism during the pandemic were analyzed based on government guidelines, national teachers' association statements, news reports and testimonies from teachers and principals collected from webinars.

**Findings** – The guidelines that the ministry issued after school building were required to close motivated educators to challenge a version of professionalism founded on new public management (NPM) policies, which mandated external control and emphasized students' academic outcomes. By challenging the dominant NPM perspective of professionalism, educators advocated for professional autonomy as well as students' and communities' well-being.

**Originality/value** – This essay offers insights into how the Chilean school system's response to the crisis evidenced competing notions of educators' professionalism. As the pandemic continues to be an ongoing phenomenon, four implications for reconceptualizing educators' professionalism are drawn, which could inform and offer guidance to practitioners and policymakers in the post-pandemic era.

**Keywords** Professionalism, Teachers, Principals, New public management, Autonomy, Well-being

**Paper type** Research Paper

The rapid spread of the novel coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) prompted a pandemic causing great health concerns and disrupting people's lives globally. Chilean teachers and principals are challenged to continue supporting their students' learning at a distance, while also being confined in their homes. Teachers have had to quickly adapt to remote instruction and maintain contact with their students and families through online platforms, phone calls or periodic visits to students living in high poverty areas with poor or no connectivity. Meanwhile, principals have had to develop strategies for supporting teachers and their communities, while also responding to the demands from the Ministry of Education to continue with the educational process as usual. Such an extremely challenging scenario is having an impact on educators' professionalism in terms of the role and values that distinguish the teaching



profession. The school system's response to the crisis, as well as the health and social effects of the pandemic, evidences an attempt to reconceptualize educators' professionalism in terms of possibly transforming or reinventing the teaching profession for the future.

In this essay, we analyze how the crisis created an opportunity to reconceptualize Chilean educators' professionalism. We examined government guidelines, national teachers' association statements, news reports and testimonies from teachers and principals collected from webinars. Moreover, we explore the extent to which forced school building closures and the move to remote instruction evidenced a divide between the notion of professionalism embedded in the initiatives fostered by the Ministry of Education and educators' views about their professional role and values during the crisis.

### **Professionalism before the pandemic: external control over educators' work and emphasis on academic outcomes**

In the 1970 and 1980s, the civic-military dictatorship that controlled Chile introduced neoliberal educational policies, reshaping the school system and the teaching profession through decentralization, marketization and privatization (Bellei and Vanni, 2015). The Chilean Government transferred school administration from the state to municipal governments, introduced a voucher-based funding formula relying on students' monthly average attendance and private providers were allowed to run schools with government funding. Meanwhile, teachers lost their status as public servants and their salaries were frozen, diminishing their professional reputation (Núñez *et al.*, 2011).

In the 1990s, after the end of the dictatorship, several democratic governments introduced educational reforms seeking to improve teachers' work conditions, increase education quality and reduce inequity. New public management (NPM) policies were enacted that linked schools' and educators' performance to rewards and sanctions as well as economic incentives within a high-stakes accountability system (Fernández and Madrid, 2020). For instance, since 1996, the National System of Performance Evaluation (SNED) has linked principals' and teachers' bonuses to their schools' performance, which their students' average test scores and year-on-year gains on standardized tests determine (Carnoy *et al.*, 2007). Later, in 2008, the Preferential School Subsidy Law extended SNED's rationale and associated additional funding for schools to the performance of their most disadvantaged students in standardized tests (Contreras *et al.*, 2012).

NPM policies have had a particular impact on educators' professionalism. In 2016, the Teacher Professional Development System policy modified the national teacher evaluation system implemented since 2004, introducing merit pay for all teachers in public and private-subsidized schools. Mandatory content tests for teachers were added to previous evaluation tools (portfolio, principal's report and classroom video evaluation) and their results determined their progression through five career stages, each associated with salary increases (Fernández and Madrid, 2020). Similarly, in 2011, the Education Quality and Equity law introduced salary bonuses for principals who entered into a performance agreement with municipal administrators. Yearly efficacy indicators such as students' test scores, enrollment and attendance goals comprise these agreements (Montecinos *et al.*, 2015). NPM policies have required external control and surveillance over teachers' and principals' work, promising them improved professional status, higher salaries and more autonomy and flexibility to those who demonstrate students' outstanding academic outcomes measured by standardized tests.

Despite two decades of policies promising to improve educational quality and equity, national and international standardized tests have repeatedly shown evidence of a persistent opportunity gap between students from varying socioeconomic backgrounds within the Chilean school system (Valenzuela *et al.*, 2013, 2015). In response, students, parents and teachers have formed diverse social movements and demanded structural changes in the educational system to address this issue, acknowledging larger political, economic and societal factors (Cabalin, 2012). Ironically, the National System of Quality Assurance of

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Education that was created in response to the demands of these movements not only strengthened previous NPM policies but also increased the pressure on educators to perform according to externally defined standards. Similarly, the demands to de-emphasize students' academic outcomes on standardized tests as a measure of education quality resulted in a set of social and personal development indicators being introduced, which are currently used to externally evaluate schools' performance (Agencia de la Calidad de la Educación, 2020). Although these indicators acknowledge important aspects of students' well-being, their measurement maintains an emphasis on external control and surveillance over schools and educators, disproportionately valuing and relying on quantitative data.

### **Professionalism during the pandemic: the crisis as an opportunity for reconceptualization**

On March 3rd, the Ministry of Health reported the first person who tested positive with COVID-19. The rapid increase in cases led the Chilean Government to issue a nation-wide night curfew, restrictions for nonessential businesses and workers, sanitary controls in highways and quarantine for municipalities with high contagion rates. By June, quarantine was issued for 50 municipalities, 43 of those were in the metropolitan region, which is home to about 40% of the country's population. In response to the pandemic, educational authorities have emphasized the need to continue teaching and learning. The Ministry of Education has insisted schools to be prepared to reopen and recover as many face-to-face hours as possible (Ramírez, 2020) and issued guidelines which describe a two-stage pandemic response and recovery process.

First, the decision to close all school buildings in the country and move from face to face to remote instruction was announced in March 16th, providing an online platform with curriculum materials to support learning with the expectation to reopen school buildings at the end of April (MINEDUC, 2020). Principals and teachers had to quickly adapt to the announcement in a context where most schools were not prepared for online interaction and most families did not have adequate Internet access. In April, a survey published by the Ministry of Education indicated that 71% of schools were providing printed material to their students and only 54% were using the ministry's platform (Radovic, 2020). Similarly, a survey published by a nongovernmental organization (NGO) reported that 50% of school students had occasional or no access to the Internet at home and 63% reported lack of contact with their teachers (Educación, 2020). These numbers echoed principals' and teachers' testimonies in webinars describing the struggle of educators and families attempting to continue with the educational process from home while dealing with the health and social effects of the pandemic. They reported spending long hours working on adapting their activities to an online format, providing printed resources for families without access to the Internet and offering feedback to parents and students. Educators demanded flexibility to adapt their academic plan and make autonomous decisions about the best strategy to support their communities (Liderazgo Escolar UDP, 2020; Lideres Educativos, 2020; UAH, 2020).

Second, at the end of April, the Ministry of Education declared a two-week winter break after four weeks of remote instruction and announced face-to-face classes would be postponed indefinitely and until conditions improved (Meza, 2020). To complement its online platform, the ministry made a partnership with TV stations to provide educational shows for all students and delivered printed materials to schools and families in isolated locations (Collins, 2020). In a survey conducted by an NGO in May, teachers reported pressure to maintain the evaluation schedules and syllabi elaborated before moving to remote learning and indicated that prioritizing students' well-being was more important than covering the national curriculum and evaluating students' progress during the pandemic (Elige Educar, 2020).

Similarly, Mario Aguilar, President of the *Colegio de Profesores*, the national teachers' association, declared that

This so-called new normal is trying to force a return, but health is at stake. Parents have already said it, they prefer that their children lose the year before risking their health [ . . . ] We said we were not going back [to school buildings]. We have the support of city Mayors, parents and guardians (Campos and Medrano, 2020).

Meanwhile, the ministry fast-tracked a prioritization of national curriculum learning objectives, instructed teachers and principals to focus on preparing a gradual return to face-to-face activities and announced that the national teacher evaluation and the students' standardized test would be applied despite the emergency context, the latter only with a diagnostic purpose (Soto, 2020). This announcement ignored the recommendations from a diverse group of academics of suspending standardized national evaluations in 2020 due to their impact on teachers' and students' well-being and its incapacity to offer timely information for pedagogical decisions (Claro and Mizala, 2020). However, the ministry insisted that these evaluations would provide necessary data for educators to make informed decisions when schools resumed face-to-face activities. In June, the tone did not change significantly as the minister insisted on the importance of preparing for a safe return to school buildings (Said, 2020). Finally, after pressure from educators, academics and members of congress, the Ministry of Education announced the suspension of the *Sistema de Medición de la Calidad de la Educación* (SIMCE), being replaced by a sample and voluntary evaluation to assess learning and socioemotional conditions of students when they return to school buildings (CNN Chile, 2020).

The Chilean school system's response to the pandemic illustrates a divide between the notion of professionalism embedded in the initiatives fostered by the Ministry of Education in their effort to continue the educational process as usual and the educators' views about their professional role during the crisis. The different perspectives demonstrate competing notions of educators' professionalism, which seem to clash in the current context. From the tension between these notions of professionalism, we see an emerging demand for increased professional autonomy of educators as well as an emphasis on students' and communities' well-being.

The crisis has shown us that educators need and have demanded increased professional autonomy to make curricular and pedagogical decisions they determine are best for students' learning. NPM policies in place before the pandemic as well as the prescribed national curriculum and evaluation framework restricted teachers' decisions. However, troubleshooting the heterogeneity of students' access to the Internet or other home conditions creating obstacles for learning have required more room for teachers' professional judgment. Teachers need this increased professional autonomy to determine essential content for their students during remote learning, according to their individual circumstances, before the ministry's prioritization of learning objectives (Liderazgo Escolar UDP, 2020; Líderes Educativos, 2020; UAHC, 2020). In a public statement, the national teachers' association illustrates this point:

In this context, the need arises to elaborate a proposal, together with teachers (from a perspective of collaborative professional autonomy), that goes beyond the simple prioritization or "cutting" of Learning Objectives, and take this crisis as an opportunity to move towards a change effort in the approach of curriculum development [ . . . ] it is essential to focus the learning in context, approaching the subjects in an integrated way and situating the disciplinary knowledge and skills according to the elements of the reality of students, their families and territories, as sources for understanding the world in which they live in and for their comprehensive ethical and socio-emotional development (Colegio de Profesores, 2020, p. 5).

Similarly, principals faced challenges requiring increased professional autonomy as they needed to develop strategies ensuring the educational process continued at distance and

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complied with national and local regulations. In some instances, this has meant innovating and adapting their strategies to the local context's changing needs and opportunities. Principals often gave teachers authority to decide how best to communicate with their students and prioritize developing social and emotional skills to face the current situation, along with decision-making over curricular content. In a recent webinar series ([Liderazgo Escolar UDP, 2020](#)), a municipal school principal described how they developed a collaborative strategy with teachers to comply with the ministry's demands. They used data about students' learning before moving to remote instruction as well as data collected from families about Internet access and home conditions, which informed teachers' professional judgment regarding appropriate strategies for academic and nonacademic support to different groups of students.

Along with the demands for increased professional autonomy, educators have been extremely vocal about the negative effect of the crisis on the well-being of their students, families and themselves. Because the Ministry of Education has made saving the school year and maintaining the student's national standardized evaluations imperative, the pressure on schools to attain academic outcomes has continued. In response, the national teachers' association declared people's well-being as their priority during the pandemic, "from a comprehensive perspective, and that certainly includes attention to people's mental health and socio-emotional balance. We understand that this should also be the priority of the authorities" ([Colegio de Profesores, 2020](#), p. 2). Similarly, in a webinar on remote instruction ([UAHC, 2020](#)), educators from three schools discussed the design and implementation of learning experiences centering the well-being of their students as an integral part of the educational process. For instance, one school described the use of project-based learning to integrate different learning as well as social development objectives from the curriculum. Other schools introduced a strategy where students choose a book or story and had regular communication with teachers to discuss not only their progress but also their feelings in relation to their reading. Also, formal and informal school networks have been developed to share and analyze strategies among different schools to support students' well-being ([CIAE, 2020](#)).

Meanwhile, principals' roles have become more complex, from managing the teaching and learning process to offering emotional support to teachers who became exhausted and frustrated working from home and faced constantly changing scenarios for the return to in-person education. In addition, principals have expressed concerns for the impact on families of school building closures, especially those parents who have had to continue working throughout the pandemic or rely on school meals to feed their children. To care for those families, educators have agreed to maintain ethical shifts to care for some children or deliver food packages and in some cases have made home visits to check on them.

The analysis of teachers' and principals' response to educational authorities' demands suggest that the well-being of students and their families is as important as continuing with the process of teaching and testing student retention of mandated content during the pandemic. Similarly, educators reclaiming increased professional autonomy became an essential condition to translate this conviction into their work. As some of the examples above have shown ([CIAE, 2020](#); [Liderazgo Escolar UDP, 2020](#); [Lideres Educativos, 2020](#); [UAHC, 2020](#)), this involves professional responsibility in making decisions based on educators' professional judgment to better serve the needs of their students. It also involves collaboration within and between schools to find solutions to shared problems arising from the crisis. However, these demands have not yet translated into systemic changes to educators' professionalism as this has become a contested issue to the extent that the Ministry of Education continues to exercise control over educators' work and emphasizing academic outcomes, despite the educational, health and social effects of the pandemic.

**Professionalism after the pandemic: what next?**

The unprecedented pandemic experience demonstrates that teachers' and principals' professional role and values in Chile are very much a contested arena. It invites us to take this crisis as an opportunity to reconceptualize educators' professionalism as defined before the pandemic. On the one hand, the crisis has catalyzed historical demands to transform the teaching profession as the response of the educational authorities has shown how NPM underlies the educational policy decisions that govern the system. On the other hand, educators' responses have centered the well-being of students, families and teachers, prioritizing emotional and material needs over mandated curriculum and standardized testing during the crisis. Educators have also fought for professional and institutional autonomy to define the best strategies to continue and adapt educational processes in unpredictable future conditions that will make them better prepared to ensure the well-being of everyone involved.

The experience in Chile, as in other school systems around the world, shows that the decision to transfer school work to homes through remote and online teaching strategies revealed the precarity of many families' lives, not only concerning connectivity problems but also due to their social and economic vulnerability. Likewise, teachers and school leaders found themselves in complex situations trying to maintain contact with their students during the closing of school buildings, while also accompanying the educational process of their own children and/or dealing with precarious conditions similar to those of their students. Furthermore, the educational authorities' insistence to return to normal, pushing the system to continue with business as usual, only revealed the irrationality of what normal has come to mean in our education systems. The emphasis on students' academic achievement on standardized tests, the disproportionate value of and reliance on quantitative effectiveness indicators and the permanent performance monitoring and control of teachers and principals work have finally sparked a necessary conversation about educators' professionalism.

Reflecting on the experience of the pandemic, we draw important implications for reconceptualizing educators' professionalism in Chile that could inform and offer guidance to policymakers and practitioners post pandemic. First, the inevitable return to school buildings requires that we ensure the health of school communities as we face the possibility of new COVID-19 outbreaks and the emotional well-being of educators, students and other community members. Second, after this complex and sometimes traumatic experience, all decisions regarding the future of the school will require that educators have sufficient professional and institutional autonomy to reframe their professional role and values in accordance with local community needs. Third, we need to sustain the professionalism that arose out of urgency and necessity with a vision that emphasizes professional responsibility and collaboration among educators and between their communities. And fourth, as the immediate responses to the crisis from the Ministry of Education are phased out, such as the closure of school buildings, it is imperative to reconceptualize the vision of teaching, learning and leadership that allow us to remain adaptive to the challenges of the post-pandemic era.

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