



The inadmissibility of standardizing the teaching work: An analysis from Chile

La improcedencia de estandarizar el trabajo docente: Un análisis desde Chile

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Abstract

Every day, more countries implement reimbursement and standardization policies as a way to solve problems related to equity and quality education. This article examines the design appropriateness of teaching work, based on different standardization mechanisms. Thus, the Henry Mintzberg proposal is used, an organizational theory behavior that proposes coordination mechanisms regarding different ways of organizing work according to its characteristics and objectives. Using this theoretical framework, the Chilean school model is analyzed, which stands out using standardization to regulate processes and results. The analysis confirms the hegemony of these standardization mechanisms using different evaluative and prescriptive devices of the school policy, as well as allows to affirm their inadmissibility because of diverse empirically supported negative externalities. Emanating of mentioned above, the appropriateness of other coordination mechanisms for the design of school policy is discussed, proposing a model that prevails in regulatory forms linked to the development of situated skills, collaborative work and training in socio-educational values.

Keywords: Chilean school model, school policies, teaching work, standardization of processes, standardization of results, organizational behavior.

Resumen

Cada vez, más países implementan políticas de rendición de cuentas y estandarización como solución a los problemas de equidad y calidad educativa. Este artículo examina la pertinencia de diseñar el trabajo docente con base en diferentes mecanismos de estandarización. Para ello, se utiliza la propuesta de Henry Mintzberg, una teoría de comportamiento organizacional que plantea mecanismos de coordinación referidos a distintas formas de organizar el trabajo según sus características y objetivos. Con este marco teórico se analiza el modelo escolar chileno, que sobresale por el uso de la estandarización para regular procesos y resultados. El análisis confirma la hegemonía de estos mecanismos de estandarización mediante distintos dispositivos evaluativos y prescriptivos de la política escolar; así como también permite afirmar su improcedencia por efecto de diversas externalidades negativas empíricamente sustentadas. A partir de este examen se discute la pertinencia de otros mecanismos de coordinación para el diseño de la política escolar, proponiéndose un modelo que prevalezca en formas regulatorias ligadas con el desarrollo de habilidades situadas, el trabajo colaborativo y la formación en valores socioeducativos.

Descriptor: Modelo escolar chileno, políticas escolares, trabajo docente, estandarización de procesos, estandarización de resultados, comportamiento organizacional.

1. Introduction

In the face of the challenge for improving the quality and equity of contemporary school systems, one of the most booming governance models in the current global education agenda is New Public Management (NPM), which, with different local adaptations, has been implemented in several countries in Asia, Europe, Latin America and North America (Bezes et al., 2012; Hall et al., 2015; Holloway et al., 2017; Maroy & Pons, 2019; Maroy et al., 2016; Normand et al., 2018). This model is based on the transfer of theories and management techniques from private enterprise to traditionally public organizations (Ball & Youdell, 2008) such as schools. It is concretized into a set of measures that can include provision through quasi-markets, administrative decentralization, performance agreements, standardization of practices and results, accountability with high-risk consequences, payment for achievement of goals, among others (Anderson & Cohen, 2015; Carvalho & Normand, 2018; Gleeson & Knights, 2015; Verger & Normand, 2015).

Far from generating consensus and unfettered adherence, the application of the NPM in the educational field causes intense debate and questioning about its ability to promote school improvement (Maroy & Pons, 2019; Normand et al., 2018). Thus, international literature has concentrated on those devices that standardize pedagogical results and practices, as well as on the negative externalities entailed for the teaching work. In this regard, it has been argued that the use of standardized tests to measure large-scale learning linked to consequences leads to curricular reductionism and an overevaluation of the results, becoming the sole purpose of teaching (Chan, 2010; Darling-Hammond, 2014; Luengo-Navas, & Saura-Casanova, 2013). In turn, findings on the standardization of the work of the faculty have been reported, warning profound changes in the daily work that are translated into performance (Ball et al., 2013), emasculation of local knowledge against the application of the

policy (Herr, 2015), and psychological distress due to an intensification of work to achieve its adaptation to these applications (Tsang & Kwong, 2016; Viera & Oliveira, 2013).

In this general context, this article presents a theoretical analysis of the difficulties involved in applying the standardization mechanisms of the NPM in the teaching work and its methodological inadequacy to regulate pedagogical practices. To this end, Henry Mintzberg's theory, a theory of organizational behavior that proposes coordination mechanisms for six forms of operationalization, is used as an analytical framework to verify and articulate organization's activities, which vary according to the nature and objectives of the work (Mintzberg, 1980; 1984). This theory deals profusely, through coordination mechanisms, with standardization by results and processes, providing arguments regarding its connection to specific work activities. Therefore, these conceptual approaches allow to analyze the relevance or inappropriateness of these forms of coordination applied to the teaching work.

The aim of this analysis will be to focus on Chile's school policy, a national case that is described as extreme in the adoption of market-oriented policies and NPM-based devices, and that stands out for the use of standardization mechanisms at both the school and teacher management levels (Assaél & Cornejo, 2018; Falabella, 2015; Verger et al., 2016). In a timely manner, the standardization of results by means of the SIMCE,¹ is relaunched, and it not only evaluates the learning levels achieved by standardized national tests, but also the main source of data used for the elaboration of a performance ranking² associated with punishments applied to schools (Assaél et al., 2018; Carrasco, 2013; Pino et al., 2016). An intense standardization of pedagogical practices is identified and observed in official instruments that systematize "best practices", among which can be named the Manual of Good Teaching (MBE) that operates prescriptively in support of a National System of Teaching Evaluation with high-risk conse-



quences (Ávalos, 2017; Cavieres & Apple, 2016; Cornejo et al., 2015; Fardella, 2013; Sisto, 2012). The topic becomes more relevant to the Latin American context due to the growing dissemination of educational privatization models in the region (Verger et al., 2017) and, particularly, of models based on standardization (Internacional de la Educación para América Latina, 2015).

Because of the latter, this article is structured into three main paragraphs. The first section provides a conceptual description of the coordination mechanisms that are postulated in Mintzberg's theory. Secondly, the correspondence of standardization of processes and results with the standardization forms applied in the Chilean school policy is analyzed, and questions are also raised about the application of this type of standardization in the teaching work. The third paragraph proposes other coordination mechanisms which are more relevant to the pedagogical activity. Finally, the conclusions present a synthesis of the analysis carried out and its implications for the design of the policy.

2. Henry Mintzberg's coordination mechanisms

All organizations require designing and performing a number of specific tasks to achieve their objectives. Therefore, every productive activity requires a process or sequence of interdependent actions, which can be regulated by means of coordination mechanisms (Pucheu, 2013; Schmidt, 2006). As mentioned, coordination mechanisms are various ways of systematizing, verifying and articulating the work, which are used to design and ensure the success of a productive process. Thus, they are considered fundamental elements in the structure of an organization, as they operate as the link that keeps it together and communicated. Following the postulates of cybernetics, they can also be understood in terms of forms of control, as they — coordination and control — aim to check the quality of the actions conducted (Mintzberg, 1992; 1993).

Henry Mintzberg (1980) proposes six coordination mechanisms:

The first is called *mutual* adjustment and it consists of obtaining coordination of work through simple informal communication in horizontal interactions. This means of coordination is typical of informal organizations, where people work closely together and based on informal relationships. It is also often used in highly specialized organizations, as it operates in circumstances of extreme complexity and uncertainty that require innovative responses (Mintzberg, 1984).

The second is *direct supervision*, which achieves coordination by endorsing the responsibility of one person over the work of others, verticalizing labor relations through instructions and direct enforcement (Mintzberg, 1984).

The third mechanism is *standardization of processes*, referring to a form of coordination related to a work program that prescribes sequences of processes or practices, thus reducing the need for continuous and face-to-face communication. This coordination is determined *a priori*, i.e., before work tasks are performed, since work processes, both inputs — skills and knowledge — and outputs — actions — can be made in a predetermined regulation or manual of procedures (Mintzberg, 1984).

The fourth term is standardization of results, which aims to normalize results by prescribing them, focusing only on the expected performance (Mintzberg, 1984).

The fifth mechanism, *skills standardization* is the most appropriate form of coordination in complex tasks, which cannot employ the two previous forms of standardization (Pucheu, 2013). In more detail, this standardization modality deals with the specification of the skills and knowledge required to perform a job. Thus, the standardization of skills achieves indirectly and organically what the other normalizations — processes and results — attempt to achieve in an exogenous and prescriptive manner (Mintzberg, 1984).



Finally, there is the *standardization of criteria*, which conceives the coordination based on the transmission of a system of beliefs and meanings shared among the members of the organization, i.e., the construction of an organizational culture (Mintzberg, 1984).

Although no organization bases its operation on a single coordination mechanism, but instead these have simultaneous occurrence, it is common that organizational objectives and design parameters of the work have a predominance in favor of mechanisms over others. In this sense, following the notion of predominance, Mintzberg (1984) identifies a typology of organization whose functioning is based mainly on the standardization of processes and results, essential in the context of this analysis.

There are organizations that operate in various productive and service sectors, but they are characterized by operational routine work with highly standardized processes, this is called mechanical bureaucracy. In this configuration, technostructure³ exerts its influence by prescribing the work processes through a limited horizontal decentralization and generating an order-oriented structure and repetition of processes to achieve prescribed results (Mintzberg, 1980). *Mechanical bureaucracy* is effective under conditions where the task and environment are usually stable and simple. On the contrary, these centralized control systems generate organizations that, when dealing with varying circumstances, become slow and ineffective. This is evident in activities where personal services or capacity transfer are sought, as these activities require particular responses to the needs of each user (Pucheu, 2013).

3. Standardization of processes and results in the teaching work: The case of Chile and its questionings

In a school system with national scope, it is possible that all the coordination mechanisms

proposed by Mintzberg will be accommodated. However, in the case of Chile, the adoption of NPM devices has strengthened the application of consequences in the form of incentives and threats of dismissal or closure in the face of non-compliance with standardized practices and results (Oyarzún et al., 2019). For the above, even if there is coexistence of multiple forms of coordination, the mechanisms of standardization of processes and results achieve greater centrality in the Chilean school system. This section will analyze synthetically how these two mechanisms condition the teaching work, along with the questions arising from the examination.

To understand how standardization of processes is presented in the normal work of teachers from the perspective of Mintzberg (1984), it is necessary to note that this author suggests the relevance of standardization of skills for the organization of schools. Structural configurations resulting from the primacy of any of these standardization mechanisms, whether processes, results or skills, differ in terms of the autonomy conferred to the staff, i.e. teachers working in the classroom. In simple terms, in the face of standardization of skills, the autonomy of teachers increases, while in the face of standardization of processes or results the autonomy decreases, while the power remains in the external prescriptions of the instruments of the policy.

In Chile, the legal provisions have ensured that teachers are positioned as implementers of plans, curriculum bases and non-school normative frameworks, elaborated without their participation and, therefore, reducing their autonomy (Cornejo et al., 2015; Fernández et al., 2016; Sisto, 2012). The strategies that formalize the content of pedagogical practice include mandatory curriculum bases, school texts of state distribution, the MBE and various accountability mechanisms with high-risk consequences, applied at both the teacher and school levels (Assaél et al., 2018).

As an example of the above, at the individual level, the teacher performance is linked to a National Evaluation System that results in



consequences related to incentives — individual bonuses and access to improvement facilities— and sanctions — possibilities for dismissal after two ongoing assessments at an *inadequate* level, the lowest performance category— (Bonifaz, 2011). This evaluation is based on four instruments that measure compliance with standards or performance indicators contained in the MBE, including the unrestricted application of curriculum bases and pre-established pedagogical practices (Taut & Sun, 2014). Despite the changes made through the recent Law on Professional Development of 2016, several authors argue that the evaluative system retains a predominantly managerial modality, mainly based in a high-consequence individual accountability (Assaél & Cornejo, 2018; Ávalos, 2017; Ruffinelli, 2015).

On the other hand, at the organizational or school level, the school management model — strongly influenced by the NPM — establishes vertical contract systems in which schools sign agreements for the fulfillment of management standards and results, whose non-compliance implies eventual sanctions installed with the enactment of the Preferred School Grant Act (SEP) of 2008 (Oyarzún et al., 2019). From this milestone, schools are ranked according to their performance—as anticipated, the rating system was perfecting—so that sustained low performance could involve the closing of the school organization (Parcerisa & Falabella, 2017).

These strategies make it difficult to assume that they are used as a condition of standardization. However, in the case of Chile, these strategies are applied through high-consequence accountability at the organizational and individual levels. This sets up a strongly prescriptive system that applies standardization as the main coordination mechanism and, therefore, as the central objective of the teaching work. The standardization of results is particularly important, since it is mainly the results obtained by the students in the SIMCE that determine, to a greater extent, the classification categories. In addition, such results are published and are viewed by

families, adding social pressure and strengthening the centrality of this type of coordination mechanism. Research and experiences in Chile report that such provisions lead the teaching work to unexpected practices such as the loss of collaborative work (Assaél et al., 2012; Assaél et al., 2014) and training for standardized assessments, leading to the devaluing of other areas of knowledge (Pino et al., 2016; Reyes & Akkari, 2017; Weinstein et al., 2016). Thus, the deprofessionalization is that compliance with these external instruments and evaluations is expected in conditions where the time is insufficient and, moreover, it is required to hold responsibility for a high volume of administrative work, intended only for the production of evidence to be held (Assaél et al., 2012; Braslavsky, 1999; Fardella, 2013; Rojas & Leyton, 2014).

Thus, why standardizing the processes and results of a job? According to Mintzberg, occupational activities are standardized to reduce their variability, operate under qualified and uncertain conditions and thus ensure their prediction; as well as respond to an arbitrary desire for order, exercising control over behavior, concentrating power on the technostructure and/or perceiving the worker as an interchangeable piece. However, variability and diversity in pedagogy are the rule and, therefore, structuring the pedagogical practice to an “average” and non-existent student only promotes exclusion and generates an educational service that unduly addresses the needs of learners (Meyer et al., 2014).

Moreover, Mintzberg (1980; 1984) states that professional work cannot be controlled because of its high complexity and multiplicity of possible results, and its standardization by processes or results is inappropriate. Thus, the standardization of processes and results applied to the professional work of teachers has several perverse effects: A) it implies the obedience to standards by professionals becomes an end in itself; b) it becomes ineffective as the professional operator loses control over complex work; c) it reduces the analytical processes underlying



ing the professional work; d) it imbalances the relationship between the professional-client (in this case teacher-student) by undoing free and personal contact; e) it reduces innovation; and f) it increases the passivity of the professional.

Finally, it is important to examine the role of *direct supervision* as a coordination mechanism which, in the context of the Chilean system, appears subsumed to the supremacy of standardization by processes and results. While the current policy discourse attributes a transcendent role to managers and members of the management team as “pedagogical leaders,” in their daily work, they are primarily concerned to ensure that their schools advance in the categories of performance through better results in the SIMCE and to ensure sufficient funding sources according to the per capita subsidy system (Montecinos et al., 2015; Weinstein et al., 2016). Consequently, according to the empirical evidence in Chile, some of the resulting consequences involving policy decisions are: (A) the application of selection measures to improve the socio-economic and cognitive composition of the student (Carrasco et al., 2017; Weinstein et al., 2016); (b) Implementation of discrimination and expulsion measures (Carrasco & Fromm, 2016); (c) concentration of students with intellectual disabilities in schools of lower socioeconomic status (Fundación Chile, 2013; Rosas & Santa Cruz, 2013); and d) concentration of the teaching practice in the evaluated areas, moving away from an integral conception of teaching (Assaél et al., 2018; Reyes & Akkari, 2017).

4. Discussing “the other” coordination mechanisms in Chile

As noted, Mintzberg asserts that standardization of processes and results are not adequate mechanisms for coordinating pedagogical practices (Mintzberg, 1984; Pucheu, 2013). Specifically, this author assumed that standardization of skills could be considered as a device that better suited the inherent complexity of the education-

al situation. Organizationally, the result of prioritizing this mechanism entails the emergence of professional bureaucracies, characterized by a group of professionals who have autonomy but do not necessarily collaborate with each other.

Following Mintzberg (1984), common problems arising in professional bureaucracy include: A) difficulty in coordinating professionals; b) constraints from trying to understand contingencies outside the categories of knowledge they share; (c) difficulty in dealing with unethical professionals, since skills, though standardized, require considerable judgment; (d) difficulty in dealing with incompetent professionals who do not want to update their knowledge; (e) lack of attention to the needs of the organization, as they are not perceived as part of a team; f) lack of adaptation to the needs of users to include only what professionals know or want to do; g) inability to innovate.

In this line, Braslavsky (1999) quotes Mintzberg, stating that this theory allows to understand, from a historical perspective, the state of professionalization that existed before the current deprofessionalization of the Magisterium. This author proposes that, rather than seeking to professionalize or return to the previous situation, it is necessary to re-professionalize or reinvent the teaching profession for the 21st century. This process should primarily consider skills that allow a better performance in daily life problems and situations and greater participation in the reinvention of the school and the educational systems.

Additionally, Carbonneau and Hétu (2005) state that each teacher must face unprecedented situations and, for which the professor must draw up a unique response, since there are no universal solutions to educational problems. Thus, competences are required to critically analyze practices, taking into account multiple action models (Carbonneau & Hétu, 2005), theoretical bodies and standards (Altet, 2005) and, of course, the needs and particularities of the students in their context (Coll, 2016). Therefore,



the normative frameworks that prescribe the teaching practice in a generic way in Chile, for example, the MBE, may be useful as one among various pedagogical models or approaches.

Vocational training depends on a reflective analysis carried out with teaching peers and focused on daily pedagogical practices, the result of which will be knowledge based on action (Altet, 2005). Therefore, collaboration is essential to foster innovation and educational improvement processes from shared reflection (Butler & Schnellert, 2012). From the Mintzberg model, it is possible to assimilate the mechanism called mutual adjustment with the dynamics of collaborative work. Indeed, this theorist postulates that this mechanism allows a better adaptation to complex and particular situations and, moreover, it favors innovation.

In this scenario, learning communities resulting from strengthening mutual adjustment can favor the discussion of technical aspects, but also of values and purposes, being essential a diversity of ideas (Philpott, 2018). Consequently, reflective and collaborative spaces can include teachers and other educational actors and members of the educational community, giving way to common agreements under democratic reasoning. This is also the case for *standardization of criteria*, formulated by Mintzberg, which contributes to the development of organizational cultures, but from an inductive logic, i.e., from constructive dialogue between the different social actors that make up a community. The development of both mechanisms identified — *mutual adjustment* and *standardization of criteria*—could induce the generation of professional skills, but no longer from the logic of the standard emanating from a centralized matrix, but from a focused perspective that responds to the ever-changing and contextual diversity and teaching condition.

The application and development of work closely related to pedagogy also depends on structural conditions. In this sense, three critical aspects are identified for the occurrence of col-

laborative and innovative work based on located knowledge. Firstly, management practices promoted from the policy that aim to install collaborative and reflective dynamics at the school level are still incipient,⁴ because these depend on what might lack genuine use by educational actors by the pressure from NPM strategies, also the mandatory requirement via decrees or regulations do not guarantee their appearance or permanence. In this regard, the importance on deactivating the sanctioning mechanisms that provide prescriptive character promoted by school policy is identified. Secondly, temporary spaces are needed to facilitate collaborative work, such as learning communities. This aspect seems to be still insufficient, since even when considering the changes introduced by the Law on Professional Development, the time for class preparation reaches only 35% in 2019 (OECD, 2017). Thirdly, another aspect is the low confidence placed in educators, their local skills and knowledge (Carrasco, 2013; Sisto, 2012). In this connection, the individual evaluation endorsed in the Law on Teaching Professional Development is viewed as a strategy (Ávalos, 2017; Ruffinelli, 2016), that externalizes the categorization of “good” and “bad” professors by judging external evaluators based on a set of standards. This not only exerts an impulse against collaborative work, but also shows distrust in teachers’ skills and professional judgment.

5. Final considerations

The previously revised approaches allow to understand that the theoretical contributions of Mintzberg are distanced from the normative structuring of the Chilean school system, particularly in relation to the pedagogical practices and the school management. In more detail, the use and application of NPM devices and technologies, assumed as effective (Verger & Normand, 2015), generates perverse effects or negative externalities. Thus, it is possible that the secondment to prescriptions is an end in itself or that



the analytical processes underlying pedagogical work be drastically reduced, among others. In other words, standardization processes and results are inappropriate in the face of pedagogical dynamics and, paradoxically, these tend to bureaucratize the teaching work rather than make it more effective.

In conclusion, standardization mechanisms by processes and results that require conditions of regularity and simplicity are damaging; hence, other ways of regulating this type of work are necessary. Therefore, as a result of this analysis and when thinking about the design of the teaching work, it is proposed to consider other coordination mechanisms more similar to the pedagogical work, among which are identified: a) the standardization of skills: critical and reflective competences that include multiple theoretical and practical knowledge; b) mutual adjustment: facilitation of collaborative spaces and learning communities; and c) standardization of criteria: agreements generated inductively from schools.

Thus, the classification of coordination mechanisms mentioned by Mintzberg several decades ago in the organizational field constitutes a theoretical framework for understanding the various areas and dynamics that structure and regulate a school system. On time, it is possible to identify multiple problems related to the way of designing the teaching work in Chile. Throughout these pages we have even reflected, from the chosen perspective, possible ideas for the optimization of the school system analyzed.

Notes

1. National System for Measuring the Educational Quality: Standardized evaluation of learning in the subjects of Language and Communication; Mathematics; Natural Sciences; History, Geography and Social Sciences; and English. The SIMCE tests are applied during 2°, 4°, 6°, 8° "básico", and "II medio" following an Evaluation Plan [Source: <https://bit.ly/36tDuJo>].
2. Law 20.529, which creates the System for the Assurance of the Quality of Education (2011), sets out four categories of performance: Insufficient, medium low, medium and high. In addition, article 31 provides conditions that could imply the loss of official recognition for a school that remains, at least, four years in the

category of insufficient performance.

3. Group of technocrats responsible for the design of the work.
4. For example, hours for collaborative work between regular classroom teachers and professionals in the School Integration Program for the care of students with special educational needs [Source: <https://bit.ly/39lxiz0>].

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