CHILE: GENERATING SOCIAL CONSENSUS
FOR A LONG-TERM REFORM OF EDUCATION

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The political challenge for the new Minister

The Minister of Education in office in the early 1990s had managed to obtain an impressive increase in teachers' salaries. He had achieved this through a strong political position coupled with his status as a presidential candidate. The new administration, coming into power in 1994, was based on the same political coalition. However, the educational rhetoric of 1994 spoke about improving the quality of education, although the meaning of 'quality' was not defined. Improvements were promised through decentralization, higher salaries and teacher re-allocation. This policy was certain to clash with the powerful teachers' union, since the security of employment of teachers would inevitably be threatened. Furthermore, the government was still involved in bargaining with the teachers about the final terms of the above-mentioned salary increase. These terms were not clear and the union was getting ready to protest. Such a scenario did not appeal to aspiring politicians (and three of them had already refused the post of minister of education), so the job was offered to myself—a professional with a technical background and no party affiliation.

I accepted the post because I believed that social consensus could be reached on educational problems and on how they were to be overcome.

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Even though the President-elect quickly endorsed the tentative governmental plan for education, political in-fighting over the appointment of the Vice-Minister of Education suggested that I would receive little political support. As an alternative, support was sought from public opinion and the international community.

**Mapping the educational challenge**

During the two-month preparatory period before taking office, wide-ranging reviews and consultations were held with all of the parties concerned. During this period, a reliable group of five personal advisors emerged: representatives of the three main political parties of the coalition, and members of the research community and of the private sector. Weekly meetings with this group proved invaluable.

As in most Latin American countries, the key issue in Chilean basic education was poor quality (UNESCO, 1992; Wolff et al., 1993). Some 40% of fourth-grade students were unable to understand simple written messages (Schiefelbein & Tedesco, 1995).

The traditional scenario of the teacher standing in front of the class and dictating the lesson to the pupils did not stimulate democratic attitudes, creative or participative skills and social cohesion. Indeed, it discouraged independent thinking and personal initiative.

Research findings from schools in poor urban and rural environments had shown that learning modules could generate children’s interest and teacher commitment, leading to dramatic improvements in the quality of education (Schiefelbein & Vera, 1992; 1993). These research findings were going to play a key role in the subsequent public opinion campaign.

These facts and ideas were well received by the private sector, politicians and the mass media. However, most Chilean educational policy makers were unaware of them and they were also reluctant to look at foreign experience. The staff of the Ministry of Education believed that better education could only be achieved through massive teacher retraining, in spite of the research findings (Murnane & Levy, 1996).

The previous administration had not attempted to change the frontal teaching process, but had improved basic education by implementing the remedial project P-900 to upgrade slow learners (generated by frontal teaching) based on a well-evaluated experiment (Vaccaro et al., 1976) and launched locally designed education improvement projects (PME). Surveys carried out in 1993 showed that even in secondary education, 80% of teachers ‘dictated’ to their classes (Edwards et al., 1993), suggesting that, without student modules (showing how to create interesting learning environments) it would be almost impossible to generate the required change in the role of teachers.

This scenario on basic education eventually included the key elements of the ongoing bargaining process with teachers’ unions and negotiations to finalize the project for secondary education in order to obtain a new loan from the World Bank in late 1994.

Quality was also the main problem in higher education. Research showed that 80% of the 20,000 university professors had less than a doctoral level of training (Altbach, 1996). Thus, upgrading the faculty became a first priority, given that rote learning prevailed here too (Boyer, Altbach & Whitelaw, 1994). To make matters worse, senior staff were continually leaving to work abroad where they could obtain salaries at least