



Pathways, limits and lessons of the Stop the SIMCE Campaign in Chile

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Introduction

It has been almost 30 years since the first application in Chile of the SIMCE (the Education Quality Measurement System), one of the oldest standardized tests in Latin America. Its validity has been based on a complex interaction of interests that have strengthened it to become the main regulator of the Chilean education system (Campos et al, 2014). We can trace its origins to the dictatorship, and its continued development to democratically elected governments, both those on the centre-left and on the right (OPECH, 2005).

This political and technical consensus on the need for and appropriateness of a standardized test has been completely disassociated from the reality of schools. We can summarize the main consequences of the tests on school life as: student and teacher stress, the pressure to achieve better results, the selection of and discrimination against students who do not achieve high results and the concentration of teaching on Spanish

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**IF ONLY LEARNING WERE
AS IMPORTANT AS TESTING.
TO OVERWHELM, IS NOT TO EDUCATE**

and Mathematics. On the other hand, the observable effects on the education system as a whole have included: increased privatization of services in order to increase results, a decrease in hours spent on or the complete elimination of some subjects in favour of dedicating more time to those subjects that are measured, the hegemony of the SIMCE over the education research agenda and disproportionate spending on the development, application and improvement of the tool (Docencia, 2009; Inzunza, 2014).

Resistance to the policies of standardization has been present since the beginning. The teachers' union congresses (First National Education Congress of 1997 and Pedagogical Curriculum Congress of 2005) (Teachers College, 2006) and the critiques made by student movements, especially since the Penguin Revolution (2006), have been the main moments of protest against standardization. An accumulation of factors and a progressive awareness of the centrality that the SIMCE was taking on in the system, lead to the emergence of the Stop the SIMCE campaign (AaS) in 2013. This campaign included high school students, university and

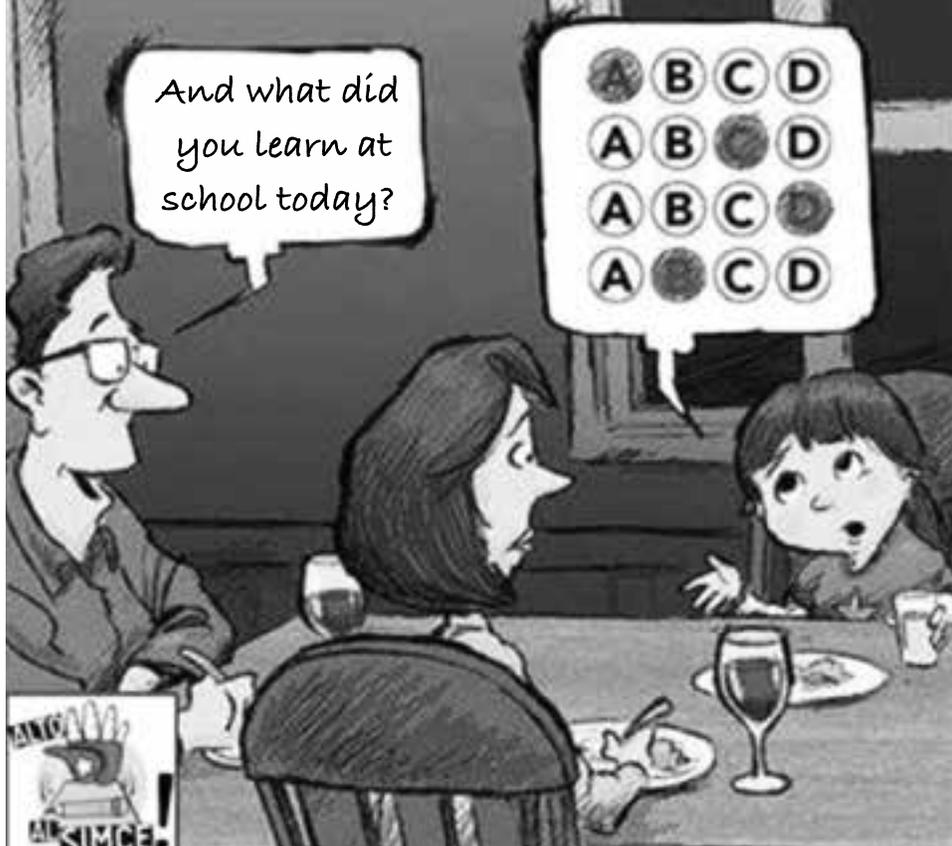
post-graduate students, teachers, parent organizations, and education researchers. In what follows, we will review the stages of this campaign between 2013 and 2016.

The ideological-cultural battle against the SIMCE (2013)

In the first stage of the campaign two main objectives were established: a) to bring together students, parents, teachers, school directors, academics and politicians in order to confront the SIMCE's negative consequences and b) to democratically construct a new evaluation system by defining education as a social right (AaS [a], AaS [b]). The main challenge was to question the normalization of the SIMCE as an "innocuous [tool] that promotes quality." This idea was established both in the general public opinion, as well as in many schools and in the academic field. In this stage, the main actions were the creation of public declarations, press releases, letters to the media and contact with critical Internet sites. This alliance of different actors allowed the issue to reach such important visibility in the education debate that ministerial officials had to take a position.

This also provoked a defensive reaction from the academic-political networks that sustain the SIMCE. The opening of Facebook and Twitter accounts was key to be able to achieve a greater reach (Inzunza, 2015).

This initial national work went along with a desire to establish international connections. Contacts were made with the Latin American Campaign for the Right to Education, the Latin American Social Sciences Council, Save Our Schools, Chicago Teachers Union, Red SEPA (Idea Network), the Tri-National for the Right to Education, among others. This line of international work meant that the campaign was spread through publications and forums outside of Chile.



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Mass media influence, debate and a new image (2014)

In 2014 the campaign was recognized as a valid interlocutor in the media. It was frequently brought up as part of radio and television interviews. The campaign took up the demand to suspend the application of the test in order to generate debate on a new evaluation system, something that was supported by important education researchers, senators and members of Congress. Another strategy was the call to artists who signed a declaration against the decrease or elimination of hours of art and music instruction in the schools due to the application of the SIMCE. An important strategy for visibility was to use Antoine de Saint-Exupery's character of the Little Prince as a representative of the campaign who, together with the spokespeople, took a letter to the Minister of Education to initiate the dismantling of legislation associated with incentives and punishments based on test results.

The government responded to this demand by creating a commission that included the teachers union, but which was also directed by the same technical team historically responsible for the creation and development of the SIMCE. Due to the inclusion of the latter, the commission's conclusions supported the logic of

standardization, control, pressure and categorization, although these did include a declaration of opposition to the publication of school rankings.

Resistance and repression (2015)

In 2015 the campaign was focused on important work within school communities which involved preparing for a boycott to the test that year. The movement grew, with groups forming in various regions of the country. The members of the Santiago table were invited to different schools and universities throughout the country, and succeeded in motivating the creation of debates and round tables. The communications campaign made a point of raising awareness of the adverse effects that the test had in schools. The boycott achieved an important level of support. Student organizations called for a mobilization in the centre of Santiago, which included shutting down 30 to 50 schools, and local resistance sprung up with students not showing up to take the test, crossing out the test response forms, or handing in the test forms empty.

The success of the call, however, was tarnished by the actions of various governing bodies, teachers and local authorities, who strongly repressed the students'

actions through disciplinary action, suspensions and expulsions. This created division within school communities. In the street protests, the police confronted the students who had mobilized.

A return to daily life (2016)

The harshness of the educational community's reactions to the boycott surprised the campaign. After the massive mobilizations of high school students in 2006 it was believed that school administrators and teachers were more conscious about the issue of standardization. The campaign supported grassroots work to encourage reflection at the local level and to strengthen direct actions in the same communities. Various schools that took a lead in the boycott in 2015 were punished in 2016 with the loss of incentives. A debate was started over what

the point system actually meant and to what degree it expresses a certain degree of excellence, a question that has still not been resolved in Chilean society.

By the end of 2016, the campaign had entered a phase of waiting for the re-launching of some education policies. Work continues periodically in analyzing the situation of global education reform, and how to establish paths forward with good proposals in a field full of critiques. The campaign continues to be a space of interaction between different school actors, and it is in this diversity that one of its greatest strengths resides. In addition, it brings together different progressive political views that are not univocal.

The experience of AaS is a model for those of us who are imagining resistance to neoliberal education policies based on the concrete actions and mobilization



of different social actors, both in the medium and long term. We need more opportunities for solidarity and work that goes beyond national borders, in order to challenge the dominant logic of technocracy.

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