Introduction

Chilean students broke records in 2006 and again in 2011, organizing the biggest protests the country had seen since the 1990 reestablishment of democracy after Augusto Pinochet’s brutal military dictatorship. On March 11, 2014, Michelle Bachelet took office as President of the Republic for a second time, having been reelected on a platform of social reforms focused around education and equality of opportunity. These reforms were a version of those originally articulated and demanded by the Chilean student movement, which she and her government had repeatedly decried, repressed, and deceived during her first term in office. In 2013 leaders of the student movement also won seats in the Chamber of Deputies, the lower house of Chile’s National Congress. How did students in a deliberately depoliticized country mobilize a whole society around the cause of education, leaving even the former president to incorporate their demands into her own reelection platform? To what extent does this recognition by official institutions constitute a victory for the student movement?

Education and Inequality

The current state of education both results from and contributes to the broader social and economic inequality that pervades Chilean society. Despite acclaim for its development and prosperity over the past few decades, Chile remains highly stratified: it is the most unequal country in the OECD as measured by Gini coefficient, and the 14th most unequal in the world. It is common to make reference to the existence of ‘two Chiles’: one with the income and resources of a rich developed nation, and the other in extreme poverty, evident from the shantytowns (poblaciones) just miles from the Louis Vuitton at Santiago’s Mall Parque Arauco.

Pinochet’s dictatorship transformed the very foundations of Chilean education as part of a radical project of social and economic reorganization imposed by violent force. Education was converted into a market good rather than a right, with lower education based on competition among schools through a new voucher system, the first of its kind in the world. Despite the official reestablishment of liberal democracy in 1990, the vast majority of Pinochet’s structural reforms remain in place today, including the 1980 Constitution and the marketized educational system imposed by the Organic Constitutional Education Law (LOCE). This system consists of public, subsidized private (particular subvencionados), and private schools, plus a small group of elite selective public schools known as emblematic schools (liceos emblemáticos). Despite the theoretical option for parents to select from any of these schools, in reality economic and geographic segregation work to determine who attends which school. High tuition and fees at private and subsidized private schools prevent the lower classes from attending them. Private schools may use their own criteria in admitting students; and despite legislation prohibiting selective admissions in state-funded schools, emphasis on high average results on standardized

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1 Country Comparison: Distribution of family income - Gini index.
tests leads subsidized private schools to select among applicants in order to better compete in the education market.

Higher education is similarly privatized, segregated, and profitable, despite the official prohibition of profit in university and lower education. Extremely high tuition fees (the world’s highest, relative to per capita income\(^3\)) have created a booming industry of predatory high-interest loans for all but the richest of university students. As in other areas like health care and basic consumer goods, higher education has grown hand-in-hand with credit industry, drawing the poorest further and further into debt. The relatively low income expected for most university graduates as compared to their astronomical debt makes paying off loans next to impossible: a university graduate’s average debt is 174% of her projected income, as compared to less than 25% in most of Europe\(^4\). Though the proliferation of private universities and the credit industry has increased access to education, it also systematically redistributes income from the poorest to the very richest.

Though these critiques are now common arguments in Chile, it was only through the political analysis and concerted ideological campaign of the student movement that they became so. It was the students themselves who first articulated these sophisticated and intersectional critiques of the education system, preempting the analyses of sociologists, philosophers, and experts in education policy\(^5\).

**2006 Pingüino Movement**

The 2006 Pingüino Movement was led by secondary school students (ages 14-18), colloquially called pingüinos (penguins) for their black-and-white uniforms. These protests did not arise out of nowhere: yearly protests by secondary and university students have a long history in Chile, and student unions were some of the few political organizations that maintained some continuity through the dictatorship, even helping lead the opposition to it\(^6\). Nonetheless, until 2006 Chile had stood out among Latin American countries for its lack of social mobilization since the dictatorship, and the protests of the Pingüino Movement constituted a significant change in the status quo.

After yearly clashes between students and the Santiago Seremi (Regional Ministerial Secretary) of Education, in 2005 the Seremi of Education set up official channels of dialogue with the students and defined short- and long-term agendas for education reform\(^7\). Despite the new Minister of Education denying any knowledge of these agendas once Bachelet took office in 2006, these talks trained the leaders of the movement in negotiating with the government, giving them a deeper understanding of education policy and allowing them for the first time to proactively build their own agenda and propose changes\(^8\). Students from schools across Santiago formed a single horizontal heterogeneous organization, AES (Assembly of Secondary School Students), incorporating members and spokespeople from disparate political parties and

\(^3\) Benedikter & Siepmann, 2013, p. 18.
\(^4\) Ibid.
\(^5\) Carrasco, 2014.
\(^6\) Guzmán-Concha, 2012, p. 413.
\(^7\) Donoso, 2013, p. 8.
\(^8\) Donoso, 2013, p. 9.
class origins. Its heterogeneity made it difficult for any one political party to coopt the movement, as well as bolstering public opinion by making it clear that their grievances were not specific to the left wing.

When the students began protesting in the capital’s streets in response to deplorable conditions in public schools in the small city of Lota, the media focused on the violence of their clashes with Chile’s militarized police force, denouncing the students and lowering public opinion of the movement. The students quickly changed their tactics in order to win back public opinion, occupying their schools (tomas) rather than protesting in the streets, and refining their message by formulating an official list of talking points and spokespeople. By strategically broadening the range of their protest tactics, they were able to engage more of their fellow students: increased participation by students gave them more bargaining power, and greater capacity to make profound political and structural demands rather than solely material or technical ones.

In response to the protests and their growing public approval, Bachelet formed a Presidential Advisory Council on Quality of Education, inviting students, school administrators, and professors to speak with policy makers on the future of the Organic Constitutional Education Law (LOCE). However, students felt that they were being ignored by the Council and left it in protest. The General Education Law (LGE) drafted in 2007 to replace the LOCE seemed to confirm that betrayal: it answered only their short-term demands for regulation, failing to address the demand for greater representation in educational policy-making and the end to the administration of local schools by individual municipalities.

Through attempts to ignore the movement, repress it by police force, and negate its political aspects by delegating it to a technocratic taskforce, Bachelet’s 2006 government was ultimately able to defuse the Pingüino Movement. The students found that their influence was limited significantly once they entered the institutional space of the government for formal negotiation. Some of the other causes leading to the dissolution of the movement were falling public opinion from growing radicalization and the abandonment of the Council; contention over internal voting procedures in the student organization; disagreement on the specific reforms to be made to the LOCE; and simple exhaustion on the part of the students.

However, the pingüinos laid the groundwork for what would become the 2011 student movement by organizing students, winning public support, and recognizing the problem with Chilean education as political and structural rather than merely technical. It also gave them practical experience in negotiating with public officials and countering government rhetoric and tactics by presenting their own agendas and framing the conflict according to their own point of view. The pingüinos were able to take advantage of Bachelet’s own discourse of

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9 Ibid.
10 Donoso, 2013, p. 10.
12 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
discontentment with the current state of politics – a popular enough position to have won her the presidency – and bend that public desire for change to their own movement, showing that in the end Bachelet had proven herself an ally of the very political status quo she had claimed to oppose. The pingüinos showed that students were a political force to be reckoned with, and put education on the agenda as a political and social issue, not one to be resolved through mere tinkering and surface-level reforms. They put forth expanded demands that challenged the very fabric of Chile’s neoliberal society.

2011 Student Movement

The 2011 student movement grew directly out of the work of the 2006 pingüinos, with many former pingüinos, who were now university students, participating. Protests began in April 2011 at the Universidad Central de Chile in response to a proposed sale of the university to a for-profit company, which soon transformed into a general demand to end profit in education with student unions across the country calling to mobilize. Along with marches endorsed by workers’ and teachers’ unions, students occupied their universities, prompting some to close indefinitely; and secondary school students followed suit. As students protested in increasing numbers, with labor unions and social groups joining them, the media focused on violent clashes between police and encapuchados, masked provocateurs at least some of whom were police officers disguised as students. Chile’s militarized police force (Carabineros) employed water cannons, tear gas, and arrests in attempting to disperse students marching or occupying their schools.

Students continued to march through the winter, rejecting proposals from the Ministry of Education to address some of their grievances or begin regular talks with students as insufficient and duplicitous. With the recent memory of betrayal by the Bachelet administration in 2006 fresh in their minds, the students were able to avoid a similar interaction with the government that could have forestalled their momentum. Despite open condemnation of the police by the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights and Chile’s own National Institute of Human Rights for repressive tactics, the government continued to praise them openly for maintaining order.

Students deliberately settled on a transversal strategy, framing their demands as ways to promote equality of opportunity and benefit nearly everyone in a society made deeply unequal by neoliberal policy. This allowed them to portray themselves as a social movement with broader goals than just education reform, and gain accordingly broader support as well. They found backing in the entire education sector, unions, and families, lending legitimacy to even their most ambitious goals. By making discursive links between their struggle and those of teachers, workers, and other Chileans, they established their rhetorical role as representatives of Chilean society as a whole, holding ‘family demonstrations’ and citizens’ strikes that

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18 Ruiz, 2012, p. 76.
19 Pousadela, 2013, p. 687.
20 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
24 Pousadela, 2013, p. 695.
implicated the entire country in their demands. Like the pingüinos before them, students strategically employed a wide variety of protest tactics (ranging from occupations to marches, hunger strikes, and theatrical demonstrations) in order to engage more participants and win themselves broader support and legitimacy. The movement ultimately broke with long-standing assumptions of political organization: it was the first massive social movement in Chile that was not led, organized, or mobilized by a political party, partly because its diversity made it difficult for any one party to coopt\textsuperscript{25}.

However, the heterogeneity of the movement was at times a source of weakness as well as strength. Then-president Sebastián Piñera’s right wing administration used the inclusion of multiple groups in the movement to try to split it: the government first entered into talks with deans and university students only and claimed that they were making substantial progress, thereby encouraging complacency in secondary school students, the most radical wing of the movement\textsuperscript{26}. Within the movement there was disagreement between deans and students on particular demands; and even the secondary school organizations CONES and ACES (representing prestigious emblematic and more radical peripheral schools respectively) often found themselves clashing\textsuperscript{27}.

The students also portrayed themselves as heirs to the pro-democracy movement under Pinochet, with Piñera’s government the ‘heir of the dictatorship’, a particularly salient claim in light of police repression of students\textsuperscript{28}. They drew on nationally specific historical protest methods to cement this comparison by calling for the first pot-banging demonstrations (\textit{cacerolazos}) in the streets since the 1990 reestablishment of democracy, a tactic familiar from pro-democracy demonstrations under Pinochet\textsuperscript{29}. Through their rhetoric and the careful staging of their protest actions, they were able to frame the student movement as the natural continuation of the pro-democracy campaign fighting in opposition to the legacy of dictatorship.

A combination of lasting grievances about social inequality, established organizations with the power to mobilize people, and a lack of response from political institutions led to the emergence of the student movement as a prominent social force\textsuperscript{30}. The movement was a product of years spent building networks and learning to communicate and negotiate with the government. Although many other groups in Chilean society share the same grievances about inequality and lack of opportunity, the relative strength of student organizations allowed them to mobilize for broad political change. Unions, in contrast, were systematically targeted and delegitimized during the dictatorship: today union membership is at a record low of 10\%\textsuperscript{31}. Students were able to make their call for change heard because of the particular historical circumstances in which they found themselves.

Reforms and the Student Movement Today

\textsuperscript{25} Pousadela, 2013, p. 698.
\textsuperscript{26} Pousadela, 2013, p. 690.
\textsuperscript{27} La Tercera, 2012.
\textsuperscript{28} Pousadela, 2013, p. 695.
\textsuperscript{29} Vallejo, 2011.
\textsuperscript{30} Guzmán-Concha, 2012, p. 414.
\textsuperscript{31} Guzmán-Concha, 2012, p. 412.
Bachelet’s 2013 reelection campaign against right-wing candidate Evelyn Matthei was based around a platform of social reforms, central among them a major tax reform she promised would be used to finance free education for all Chileans. Such was the power of the 2011 student movement: even their former adversary recognized the popularity of education reform and used it to ensure her reelection. As of 2015, her government has succeeded in passing an education bill through Congress that promises a host of educational reforms, including free public university education beginning in 2016. Other reforms include the end to selective admissions and parental co-pay in subsidized private schools, prominent student demands which are intended to limit the segregation by class endemic to the lower education system. The law also formally bans profit in the education sector for all schools receiving public funds, although this was already forbidden by the General Education Law (LGE) and nonetheless widely practiced.

Former student leaders have made their own forays into institutional politics: Camila Vallejo, Giorgio Jackson, Karol Cariola, and Gabriel Boric all won seats in the Chamber of Deputies in 2013; and in 2015 Camila Vallejo was made president of the Commission on Education of the Chamber of Deputies. Despite Bachelet’s fulfillment of various student demands, not all of the students are wholly content. As Gabriel Boric, a former president of the Student Federation of the Universidad de Chile (FECh) explains, her reforms do not substantially alter the market logic of the dictatorship’s neoliberal education system predicated on vouchers. Despite attempts to regulate profit and prohibit schools from preferring to admit upper-class students, the market incentive remains for schools to seek profit in any way they can. Boric argues that Bachelet’s reforms amount to “patching the dictatorial legacy” rather than starting anew by building a new system of public education.

Valentina Saavedra, current president of the FECh, has signaled that 2015 will again be a year of student mobilization because “[taking to the streets] is the only way to apply pressure and have weight in each of the debates” on educational reform. In light of disappointment on the part of teachers and municipalities with the details of Bachelet’s reform, Saavedra emphasizes that the Confederation of Students of Chile (Confech) must maintain pressure and have an active voice in discussions in order to achieve the outcome they desire. In a recent interview Vallejo echoed Saavedra, emphasizing that many of the students’ demands remain to be met, including reform of the teaching profession (carrera docente) and of the regulatory framework of education. Despite her own position as president of the Commission on Education, she too prioritizes the student movement’s grassroots capacity for exerting pressure and making proposals: otherwise, she argues, that capacity falls to those who do not want to make changes.

Although Chilean students have won an impressive victory in the form of nation-wide education and tax reform, as well as representation in Congress, their work is far from over. By

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32 Author’s translation.  
33 El Mostrador, 2014.  
34 Author’s translation.  
35 Rojas, February 2015.  
36 Ibid.  
37 Rojas, March 2015.  
38 Ibid.
incorporating other social actors and issues beyond education, students set their sights beyond the reform of education to the reform of an entire society. Chile remains a profoundly unequal country, a dynamic that will require much more radical change than education policy can bring about. Even within the realm of education not all of the students’ demands have been met, and the voucher-based market system remains in place as the basis of lower education.

Just as the 2011 student movement was only possible because of the organizing and experiences of the 2006 pingüinos, it will be crucial in the wake of Bachelet’s reforms for students today to maintain their organizations and institutional knowledge acquired through years of missteps and false starts. Even beyond the foundations laid by the Pingüino Movement, it was the organization of Chilean students over decades that led them to emerge as a formidable political force even when other social actors were unable. Their organization and acquired knowledge gave them the necessary tools to win the support of Chilean society at large through, allowing them to demand profound structural change and force the president to answer their grievances. Bachelet’s reforms do not signal an end to the student movement. If anything they prove that sustained organization and mobilization are crucial to the project of voicing and achieving student demands. Without continued pressure exerted by the student movement, it is all too easy to imagine the changes they won through years of struggle being reversed by a better organized reactionary force.
Bibliography


