

# ***The future of the economist's utopia in the Chilean school system<sup>1</sup>***

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## **Abstract**

*The radical transformations of the Chilean education system carried out by the military dictatorship during the 1980s were designated as an “economist’s utopia” given that they converted a preferably public and centralized system into one governed by the rules of the free market. Under this assumption, we examine the new system’s development, which quickly defaulted on its promises of providing efficiency and high quality education. With this objective, this study demonstrates the deterioration of the aforementioned utopia and how the analogy to the free market proved false. The role of the state as a regulator, provider and guarantor of the education system is criticized, as well as the disparate and occasionally contradictory use of information regarding the educational reform. Lastly, we examine the participation of parents and how the role assigned to them by the reform differed from their actual participation in the system. We conclude by noting that, in order to overcome the aforementioned problems, it is necessary to replace the logic employed during the formulation of these policies three decades ago with a more expanded outlook that offers sound answers to the problems confronted by the Chilean education system in regard to its quality and equality.*

## **Keywords**

*Market – Quasi-markets – State – Parents – Evaluations.*

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# ***El devenir de la utopía economicista en el sistema escolar chileno'***

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## **Resumen**

*Asumiendo que las transformaciones radicales introducidas a partir de la década de los 80, por la dictadura cívico-militar en el sistema educativo chileno, constituyen lo que se designa como utopía economicista, que estipuló el paso de un sistema eminentemente público y centralizado a uno gobernado por las reglas del mercado, se examinan los defectos que el esquema mostró en su desarrollo, defraudando a poco andar las promesas de eficiencia y calidad que eran los objetivos perseguidos y que motivaron dichas transformaciones. Con este objetivo, el trabajo muestra la devaluación de dicha utopía y cómo la analogía del mercado se revela errónea. Para ello se caracteriza críticamente el rol del Estado, en su calidad de proveedor, regulador y garante en el sistema escolar, la utilización de la información de resultados del sistema educativo, con sus usos dispares y en ocasiones contradictorios y, por último, la participación de los padres, de acuerdo al rol que les fue asignado por las reformas y el que efectivamente presentan en la actualidad. Se concluye señalando que para superar la situación es necesaria una racionalidad ampliada que sustituya aquella que orientó las políticas introducidas hace tres décadas y que ofrezca una respuesta a los problemas del sistema escolar chileno en su calidad y equidad.*

## **Palabras clave**

*Mercado – Cuasi-mercado – Estado – Padres – Evaluaciones.*

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## Introduction

The profound changes implemented in the Chilean school education during the 1980s can be said to represent an “economist’s utopia” by providing that the educational system should function as a market, that is, that it should be subjected solely to the rules of supply and demand and that the *qua homo economicus*<sup>1</sup> man (FOUCAULT, 2007) should move within it. Stated briefly, the aforementioned “utopian” character of the changes meant moving abruptly from a public and centralized system, in which the state was responsible for over 90% of enrollment, to a decentralized one with multiple actors responsible for educational provision. They also meant making the state educate only one-third of the students in the system 30 years later. This resulted in the need to redefine the role of the actors and the educational institutions, so that the state subsidized the cost of educating the population and generated information on the quality of the educational provision by conducting standardized evaluations, based on which parents would be able to choose the best schools for their children<sup>2</sup>.

As a result of the implementation of this dynamic in the educational system, establishments where enrollment systematically lessened were expected to gradually disappear, because of their not having shown the expected efficiency or the ability to compete in the emerging education market. Also, those who transformed the Chilean education system assumed not only that, by emulating the market,

**1-** The term *utopia* is used here in the metaphorical sense according to which M. Foucault noted that “*Utopias* afford consolation: although they have no real locality, there is nevertheless a fantastic, untroubled region in which they are able to unfold; they open up cities with vast avenues, superbly planted gardens, countries where life is easy, even though the road to them is chimeric [...] This is why Utopias permit fables and discourse: they are in the straight edge of language and are part of the fundamental dimension of the *fabula*” (FOUCAULT, 1994). In this case, it is an “economic fable”.

**2-** For a detailed description of the structure of Chilean education, see OECD (2004). Using some elements from OECD (2004), Alarcon, Castro and Donoso (2013), in particular on pages 170-173, describe the Chilean education system in several dimensions related to decentralization.

the efficiency standards of the establishments and of the education system as a whole would improve, but also that the creation of such a market would ensure freedom of education.

However, before long, this scheme showed multiple deficiencies in various aspects of its governance, functional organization and results. Bearing in mind such context, this article examines some of these shortcomings, focusing on the role of the state, standardized assessments and parental choice, with the aim of highlighting the harmful implications of having transformed the educational system in the direction of the market indicated above. This review begins by specifying the presumed expectations of such transformations, then identifies some of the problems that arose from their implementation and indicates the limited explanations of the market scheme when such scheme is used to account for the features of educational systems whatever they are, due to the complex nature of educational practice. Finally, we stress the need to develop changes in educational policy which follow an enlarged conception of rationality which transcends the market logic, making it possible to tackle the problems of inequality and high socio-economic segregation of the Chilean national school system, which we consider consequences of adopting the neoliberal model.

## The devalued utopia

The utopian character of the changes introduced in the Chilean school system is primarily due to the nature of the changes implemented during the 1980s, which showed Chile to the world as an unprecedented and a paradigmatic example of the market influence as a governing mechanism, both in the regulation and in the management of the school system.

The radical nature of the assumptions that shaped this utopia was such that it was assumed that education – in the image and likeness of the market – would perfect its efficiency standards and promote the quality of educational

provision as a result of the competition between schools. Such improvement was made under the implementation of this “utopia” as it demanded national educational policies of such aggressive, deep and fast character that they can only be understood by virtue of the existence of an authoritarian political context, within which there was not and there could not have been any public discussion or social consensus to justify the decisions and measures taken.

Such decisions and measures included public funding through a grant per student enrolled in each school – the so-called *voucher* –, free choice of establishments by parents, competition for enrollment between establishments and free entry of private managers into market (OECD, 2004). This last measure meant, in turn, moving from a centralized system whose main supplier and funder was the state, which was responsible for over 90% of the enrollment, to a system that, 30 years later, left the education managed by the public sector in the process of becoming a refractory expression of privately managed education.

But what is more, the design that supported the transformations of the school system also changed the way of thinking about education, developing a competitive narrative that introduced “the neoliberal economics as the main or even only discipline capable of generating explanatory and analytical language of the educational system” (CORVALAN, 2013, p. 68). In sum, Chile would be no longer the “laboratory” of the free market policies in education but the “model” to be emulated by all those who ascribe to an ideal society in which individual freedom is the supreme value (ARAUJO, 2013).

The situation of Chilean education was described by Friedman in a way that cannot be emphasized enough:

It is not about a difference between education and other activities, but between some provisions under which the consumer is free to choose and measures under which the

producer is in power, so that the consumer has little to say. If the consumer is free to choose, a company can grow only if it produces something that the consumer prefers due to its quality or price (1979, p. 219).

This argument is intended to defend free choice. It does not grant importance to the nature of education itself and focuses on the relative position of the actors in the exchange, favoring their provisions on the regulations that govern trade. The argument thus leads Friedman to say that “[In] education, parents and children are consumers, and teachers and school administrators are producers” (1979, p. 219).

In addition to their radicalism, another aspect that justifies describing the aforementioned transformations as “utopian” is their expansive nature. Indeed, the changes were not limited to education, since they also covered the health care and old-age pension systems, areas in which a major role was conferred upon the market while the state’s participation was minimized. As a consequence, in general, public goods such as education became understood as a commodity, susceptible to profit, in which access and enjoyment of their benefits depend strongly on one’s ability to pay or debt capacity (SOLIMANO, 2012).

Shortly afterward, however, the analogy with the market proved erroneous or at least insufficient, since schools evidenced that they do not operate as private companies; parents, in turn, showed a behavior far from “rational”, in the sense assumed by the market scheme; competition between establishments lacked the transparency conditions postulated; education, in short, proved to be a good of social value (a merit good) rather than a commodity (CEPAL, 2000, p. 91). Given the nature of the educational good, the market scheme was severely limited to deal with the existence of various educational inputs and to measure their quality, to observe and evaluate teaching practice, as well as to encompass its multi-product character and reduce the distortionary effects of a principal-agent model with multiple

principals (BELLEI; GONZÁLEZ, 2003; MIZALA; ROMAGUERA, 2005)<sup>3</sup>. In other words, all that was sought by introducing this mercantilist logic into the educational system seems impossible to achieve under the assumptions exposed: it is merely a utopia.

Given this set of problems, alternative characterizations arose, which are useful to describe situations in which the state does not control the provision. One of the most influential is the quasi-market idea, raised by Le Grand (1991). The term was coined in the context of M. Thatcher's England, when new providers of health and education services were incorporated, namely private, voluntary and nonprofit ones, which operate in competition with each other, aiming to eliminate the problems of monopolistic provision, in a system in which until then the state funded, produced and distributed services.

Le Grand wondered whether a quasi-market represented a break with the past, whether it would reduce costs and generate greater efficiency or, conversely, whether it would be a source of new inefficiencies, leading to unprecedented inequalities and eventually expanding the existing ones. These questions proved to be equally valid for Chile. Their validity in the case of the Chilean education is evidenced as one reviews the background of the deployment of education using data on performance, segregation and social reproduction.

Adding more precision to the description, since it is possible to identify the existence of different motivations within establishments, the devaluation of the market metaphor in favor of the notion of "quasi-market", generically known in the literature as "market failures", reveals that the educational system does not allow being reduced to an economic description and, what is more, that the nature of the educational asset resists any attempt to

**3-** Economic literature calls "principal-agent problems" the situation that arises when an actor – the "principal" – instructs another subject – the "agent" – to perform an action on which such actor does not have all the information, which leads to a situation of asymmetric information, which is detrimental to the principal.

turn it into something that it is not. The effects of such distorting transformation are also reflected in the way the role and interactions of the state, parents and standardized assessments of the outcomes of the educational system are described in a context that assumes education is a consumer good.

## **State, information and choice**

In parallel to the mutation of the market into quasi-market or, rather, the course of such mutation, it is possible to determine how the regulation of the Chilean educational system, by virtue of the state's role, was oriented in a direction that eventually proved disappointing. The same happened with the promise of providing transparent information and ensuring parents' friction-free exercise of freedom to choose.

The transformation of the educational system in the 1980s was radical and so were the means by which such transformations distanced from what was originally proposed.

### **The state: rower or rudder?**

In the early 1980s, there was a redefinition of the role of the state in education at different levels. With regard to school education, the reforms sought greater freedom and efficiency of the system, but lacked an empirical basis to justify the depth and extent of the changes. Hence the idea of Chile as a "laboratory" of policies (ARAUJO, 2013, p. 114). Even though now various reasons are put forward to justify the presence of private actors in the educational provision, the arguments that supported the reforms were ideological.

The first group of reasons relates to the idea of contributing to cultural diversity, respecting the plurality of values in social life and the different views on what "good education" is, which includes issues such as appropriate methodologies for achieving the expected results, the need to add a second language to school education, the problem of the cultural

identity and ethnicity recognition of indigenous peoples, the rising tide of immigration, among others. In the second, reference was made to prudential or convenience reasons, i.e., families choosing what they considered the best education and the real possibility that their choice does not match what the state is able to provide (GARCÍA-HUIDOBRO, 2010). Finally, as already stated, a third type of justification is the need to improve the system's efficiency.

As competition is not enough to ensure the quality of the educational system, the state played a major role in order to address what was considered "market failures" (MIZALA; ROMAGUERA, 2005, p 129) and had to push an agenda to establish different types of controls of the financial, curricular and normative systems. This was due precisely to the behavior of certain actors. A clear example is that some supporters doctored the enrollment and attendance records, because these indicators are associated with funding. And this falsification allowed them to increase their income and eventually make more money (INFORME CÁMARA DE DIPUTADOS, 2008). All this, needless to say, explicitly violates the existing regulations.

By projecting this kind of behavior, an obvious question arises: what is happening to key issues of the social function of education and its quality? This includes everything from matters involving strong value-related choices, such as the construction of equity and citizenship in contemporary societies, issues of performance and operation of establishments, such as the implementation of selection processes and the possibility of excluding disadvantaged students. Indeed, some studies have shown that educational establishments in Chile select students, and that such selection distorts the choice of families, since the selection criteria tend to be not educational ones, as family's ability to payment, for example (MADERO; MADERO, 2012).

Observations such as those of Gonzalez point to that. The author has argued that there are costs, "externalities" in economic

language, which have not been assumed by the institutions that select students. To take such costs into account, "it is necessary to establish tax or regulate these behaviors using norms. The norms can include the prohibition of conduct when facing a merit good" (GONZÁLEZ, 2005, p.255). This way, policy design has resulted in a true regulatory illusion – which may prefigure a new utopia –, since it is anyway "very difficult for privates to 'sell' exactly the kind of education that the state wishes to provide" (BELLEI; GONZALEZ; VALENZUELA, 2010, p. 229). Thus, one questions the effectiveness of a state that disregards the provision and focuses on the tasks of planning and monitoring, a state that changes from "rower" to "rudder", according to the suggestion of Cox (1997).

In this situation, the institutional response has been to establish sanctions and controls so that privates comply with existing legal norms, such as educating students considered "problematic" – due to their conduct or performance –, which disrupts the teaching-learning conditions, since children and youth deserve to be educated in institutions whose missions consider including any type of children and youth in their development processes and which do not do it against their will, as it happens now (BELLEI, 2011).

In this sense, the existence of monitoring and the continuous improvement and investment in management control or the correction of the "price" for schools to teach the same to the disadvantaged is another component of the economist's utopia, which promises – but is not able to fulfill such promise – to create the conditions of possibility of quality education by assuming the equivalence between its market value and its social value.

### **Assess, classify and report**

Standardized assessments reached their peak during the 1990s and emerged in the debate in Latin America due to the low level of accountability for school performance shown

by the managers of educational institutions, which is evidenced in the expectations of quality and equity (IAES, 2003).

Simultaneously with the advent of democracy in Chile, during the same decade, there arose a new agenda around improving education, establishing standards, forcing changes, accountability, providing incentives, certifying, accrediting or selecting, understanding and evaluating the educational system and the development of public policies (COX, 1997; SIMCE COMMISSION, 2003). Such education agenda was due to a context in which priority was given to modify the design and institutional structure of the educational system, in response to low levels of responsibility for poor results (GRANOVSKY, 2003)

Since then, standardized tests have been widely disseminated and results have been integrated into public debate, with various uses and consequences<sup>4</sup>. In fact, it can be seen that the results of the application of these tools lead to disparate behaviors, ranging from generating information that guides teachers and institutions, and whose results are delivered in secret, to developing classification tables which, embodied in maps and rankings, include exoticisms such as semaphores whose colors denote the achievements of establishments, inform parents on the heterogeneity and variability of the results obtained by the schools in these tests<sup>5</sup>.

Therefore, part of the problem related to the application of standardized tests is due to the lack of agreement on their meaning. For example, Tedesco suggests: “Why do we evaluate? To improve the efficiency of the investment in education? To steer demand? To compensate for social differences? To evidence

the level of social segmentation?” (2012, p. 104). Of course, the answer to these questions involves different consequences, given the also different assumptions involved in their formulation in terms of what design they follow and which component of the policy they are part of.

Finally, particularly in regard to *Sistema de Información y Medición de la Calidad de la Educación Escolar* (SIMCE – System of Information and Measurement of School Education Quality), Corvalán (2013) notes that different discourses coexist, which have different ideological perspectives: one sees parents as consumers and contributes to their deciding correctly; another sees SIMCE as a guiding resource that holds the state responsible; and finally another version states that this instrument provides information for schools to improve.

### Bounded rationality

As for parents, the design of the Chilean school system assumes that their intervention is critical, since the ability to exert pressure on institutions to improve their performance depends on parents’ participation and commitment. Regarding this possibility, under the assumptions that underpinned the reforms in the early 1980s, in fact, all the state can do is ensure that parents have the information they need – the results of standardized tests aforementioned – to make a decision on which school to send their children to, aiming to provide them with the best educational opportunities, which involves an assessment of the quality of the establishments.

However, from this perspective, parents’ behavior has proved an obstacle to the functioning of the education market model, since they are not – as it was stipulated they were – optimizing rational agents; on the contrary, they tend to act irrationally, as irrationally at least as not to proceed as an agent in the framework of the *theory* of rational choice would (SEN, 2011, p. 62).

**4-** In Chile, the most important of such assessments is *Sistema de Información y Medición de la Calidad de la Educación Escolar* (SIMCE – System of Information and Measurement of School Education Quality) applied since 1988 and whose direct antecedent is the PERT test, which had been applied since 1982 (COMISIÓN SIMCE, 2003).

**5-** According to Tiana (2003), there are at least five practices: (1) they are not used, results are not known, (2) they are used for reporting, (3) there is a confidential return of results, (4) they are published as ranking tables or (5) they are reported together with pedagogical guidelines for education agents.

The expectation about the behavior of parents in the education system depends very substantially on the information provided by the state on the results of standardized tests, which partially explains the disproportionate importance accorded to the latter, an issue which is also the subject of extensive public debate.

Indeed, their importance is deemed so high that the malfunctioning of evaluations is seen as a real “Achilles heel” of the Chilean school system (ELACQUA, 2004). Of course, given the context of this consideration, the importance attached to their failure proceeds precisely from the fact that families do not have the necessary and sufficient information to make their choice *rationally*, which should be understood as a choice not based on information, whose generation has a high economic cost and is difficult to interpret. Ultimately, as specialists say, it may be noted that poor choices are due to their low rationality.

It can be said that the failure of freedom of choice is largely responsible for the modest gains in the system outcomes and that it has simultaneously brought about high segregation and social differentiation (GARCIA-HUIDOBRO, 2010). That is why it is considered the Achilles heel of the Chilean education system. Given such parental behavior, in fact, years have failed to promote the formation of an informed and critical mass of consumers of education, capable of pressuring schools to improve their quality.

The evidence available has allowed consistently relativizing the logic that was supposed to guide parental choice, because of the decisions that are not based on reliable formal information and are guided rather by practical reasons, by the experience or by any set of beliefs not subject to rational testing (ELACQUA; FÁBREGA, 2004; CONSEJO ASESOR, 2006; MARCEL, 2010). A study based on in-depth interviews with parents of the Chilean capital explains that, although the Chilean education system has been built based on the model of “school choice”, there are families whose right to free choice is constrained for purely economic

reasons, and who, thus, develop choice experiences rather more subjective than those foreseen (GUBBINS, 2013).

In this regard, Raczynski et al. (2010) point out the plurality of motivations behind the choice of parents<sup>6</sup>, which range from passive choice considering the closest, “their lot”, said in plain language, to choice motivated by a desire for social mobility, i.e., a choice of “aspirational” nature. In none of those choices is SIMCE considered a determining dimension. Also, some studies show some irrationality on the part of parents, by revealing that, in the face of educational establishments with constant low performance at SIMCE in comparison to national averages, families express strong agreement with various aspects of what occurs in schools, including those purely academic (CORVALÁN; ROMÁN, 2012).

A second point regarding the assumption of the choice of schools by parents is that there has been a displacement that has proved as or more significant than that related to rational parental choice: contrarily to what was supposed, parents are not entitled with freedom of choice whereas schools are. This is paradoxical because the school system itself disabled one of the main mechanisms that would allow its improvement by imposing the power of schools to select their students on parents’ ability to choose the school for their children (ATRIA, 2012).

This situation is probably due to the error in the premise that education is produced by an offeror and delivered to a user, resembling the meeting of two wills, which characterizes the relationships that occur in a market. Actually, it is the exercise of a right in which there is an asymmetry between the educational institution – public administrators and private groups that have public funding – and a citizen exercising his or her right to education (ATRIA, 2007; 2010; 2012).

**6-** Based on a study of middle and lower class households, the authors suggest 6 types of patterns that guide this decision: (1) passive school choice, (2) familiarity, (3) self-exclusion, (4) seeking protection from risks in the environment, (5) social mobility and (6) personalized promotion.



## Data and methodological noise

Given all this evidence, how can one possibly insist on partial measures in order to improve access, educational processes and, finally, the contribution that education makes or can make to social development, human welfare and human flourishing? Such behavior can be illustrated by many examples of educational policy. It could be imputed to the true dysthania – to cruelty or rancor – of the educational policy for making the judgment on the quality of the educational system depend on the scores obtained by students in SIMCE. And for obtaining from there a figure that should guide parental choice and the state policies.

Cases like that of the choice of schools or the requirement that SIMCE imposes on the educational dynamics were built on the basis of the same reasoning that H. Putnam had identified as the typical behavior of “many economists” (1996, p.13). In other words, these cases follow a positivist prescription that indicates that there is a *dichotomy between facts and values* that obliges reasoning to admit what counts as “fact” and to refute what is intended as “value”. Therefore, capturing a certain kind of fact – the performance recorded by standardized tests – is what justifies the need for a series of educational SIMCE-type results. In addition to being the only fact epistemologically possible of being captured, such performance is the only one ontologically worth capturing (QUINE, 1962).

In other words, public policies are designed and justified by the adoption of a postulate that has turned the loss of values into a side effect. An example is provided by Harald Beyer, an economist and former Minister of Education, who pointed out that “measurements of institutional variation are not always accurate and, therefore, there is a lot of noise in these estimates” (BEYER, 2007, p. 3). Given this, since imprecision and “methodological noise” prevent something from being considered and, thus, dismiss it as irrelevant, it was argued

that there is *only one possible way* forward and that moreover – by means of sophisticated methodologies – it was claimed to be the *only correct or responsible way*.

All that would be fine if this way of thinking were not *cognitively wrong*. That is, irresponsible in the only regard in relation to which it was supposed to be responsible; it is *epistemically irresponsible*. Irresponsible because it is false. And its falsehood derives precisely from having accepted the separation between facts and values, from allowing the dangerous idea that values are mere conventions and facts are part of or even reality itself. What should be rejected is this very separation, since facts and values are “entangled” (PUTNAM, 2003, p. 396).

Putnam’s examination leads to ethical matters and hereby one reaches the dead end of economy. A dead end characterized by the suggestion that we should separate the “descriptive part” from the “normative part” of reality, since uniting them results in something quite distorted. A class of representation of the world is not a representation of the world we inhabit and, indeed, there is a profound mistake in supporting a procedure such as the economic one, which requires having a vision of a world that is not ours. Such is the basis of this radical utopia that requires making education something that it is not: a consumer good. Such is the reason that mobilized the utopian transformations in education in Chile in the 1980s, which led the country to a radical educational experiment whose effects are clear.

The reply to the utopia of such economists came from Iris Murdoch, who stressed that, when faced with a situation that requires ethical review, the descriptions we need – say, the motives and character of human beings – are descriptions in the language of a “sensitive novelist”, *not in the language of scientific or bureaucratic jargon*. That is, the world we inhabit cannot be described in terms of “value neutrality”; not without throwing away the most significant facts along with

“value judgments”. This allows thinking an economy and an ethics without dichotomies (PUTNAM; WALSH, 2009), since the-world-we-live-in is what economists should be interested in, just as moral philosophers are (PUTNAM; WALSH, 2009).

In short, the vision that has underpinned public policy for the past 30 years is based on just adopting a set of instruments without “methodological noise” and “value-free” to let market rules govern the education system. Moreover, calling “government” how the market proceeds is certainly excessive, since there is government only where there are shared goals based on a shared sense too. Where there is neither shared sense nor shared goals, by contrast, there is only blind exchange of things that are there instead of others.

**Conclusion:** soft definitions for a harsh reality

As we have seen, in this article, reflections are organized in two lines. One line is the form taken by the Chilean educational system, as a result of the deep reforms based on an economic rationality that we identify as utopian, at least in what regards the conceptions of the effects that it would have. And the other line is its evolution in relation to the structure of that rationality, whose deficits appeared gradually and steadily, and so did difficulties in operating the system, which were considered “market failures”.

Regarding the latter, it is worth remembering something known but forgotten: an analytical intelligence which only separates to exert cognitive control over phenomena atrophies the powers of understanding and reflection, eliminating the possibilities of a correct long-term judgment. Such intelligence is incapable of perceiving the context and, thus, makes people blind, unconscious or irresponsible. To some extent, it would be justified to say that these people lack intelligence. Confusing knowledge with certainty is rather the result

of a reflection that lacks the perception of its own limitations. And such limitations have led to technical perfection along with utter moral irresponsibility.

Such calculating rationality leads to an impasse that is probably what keeps the Chilean education trapped in its own dilemma. The horns of the dilemma are: either one accepts that education is a tradable commodity in the market and that it should be treated as such and, consequently, that its quality will come from unregulated increase in competition or education is excluded from the market sphere to rise as the non-commercial and non-commodifiable constitutive component of society, as the offeror of a political society that is the civic counterweight of the market and that regulates such market (GARCÍA HUIDOBRO, 2007). A society whose cement can only come from a normative consensus, i.e., justice.

As the Chilean situation has revealed since 2006, the issue of education concerns especially and above all the meaning or meanings of education. It concerns what was once called “purposes of education”. If we do not spontaneously understand “value” as its “price”, we can even state that the “value” of education has been jeopardized. The same can be said about education’s character of commodity. In other words, it is anyway the matter of what subsystem the educational practice is inscribed in: the economic or the social one. The focal point is how theoretically contradictory or how opposed both forms of understanding education and all the consequences associated with it are in practice.

Given all this context, and returning to the triad in which the text is concentrated, regarding the operation of the education system, it is necessary to redefine what roles are assigned to the state, assessments and parents. From an expanded rationality, as noted, which allows redefining and expanding the state’s role in the regulation and administration of the system, such as admitting the possibility of profit on public goods and social rights, it

is unacceptable that the most basic regulations are systematically violated. Not to mention the viability of policies for equity and equality, when schools assume as a right and usual practice the exclusion of “difficult” students.

Secondly, under the current institutional design, standardized assessments such as SIMCE have a completely oversized role, because, besides being one of the most important inputs in making public policy decisions and being the only yardstick for assessing the quality of education, at present, SIMCE also guides, rewards and punishes certain territories, establishments, teachers and parents with no evidence other than the performance of students.

Thirdly, regarding the role of parents, it is necessary to abandon the idea that they are “rational agents” who guide their decisions based on empirical information subject to a publicly tested method. The persistence of this assumption, another pillar of the economic utopia, is incomprehensible and one simply cannot continue to use these mechanisms to design policies and seek improvements to the system, since they always result in an evil for someone – those who do not know how to choose, the irrational, the poor. Moreover, curiously enough, the blindness to the evidence

that indicates that parents rarely consider SIMCE to choose the school of their children comes exactly from those who give voice to “data” and “cold numbers”.

Finally, the sense of entanglement of facts and values lies in encouraging the creation of a community – whatever the vision socially considered appropriate in a democratically-articulated society is –, which is a historical construction that requires “systemic voluntarism”. A good start would be to recognize that equality should be taught and learned in the framework of the integration of individuals to their social community of reference.

Education should contribute to this task so that all citizens meet and are recognized as equal, since education is a historically generated social space; a space in which democracy can be experienced as a *modus vivendi* and not merely as a system of government (SEN, 2011). In this logic, the school has a certain priority, since “no other institution [...] allows providing all with the same cognitive experience and develop in them the virtues and skills that are essential to democratic life” (PEÑA, 2007 33). A part of such democratic life depends on the equity with which the school distributes quality learning experiences, regardless of the ability to pay or market logic.

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