Silence, Fear and Desire: Why Chile doesn’t have a gender equity policy in education, and some lessons for Australia

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to explore three levels of explanations for the absence of gender equity in the Chilean national educational policy since the recovery of democracy in 1990. The explanatory levels are related to the shape of the democratic ‘reforms’ to neoliberal reforms that were set by the military government, the persistent power and influences of the Catholic Church in Chilean society, and the dynamics of the Chilean women’s movement in the last twenty years and its relation with the political structure. In a context of lack of explicit gender equity policy in education, this explanatory level constitutes at the same time a sort of implicit gender equity policies. I will call them politics of silence, fear and desire respectively. The paper suggests that all these politics are related to the persistence of an authoritarian and traditional culture in the policy-making process that does not reflect the transformation of Chilean society in the past twenty years. At the end, some lessons for Australia will be drawn -in terms of exchange of experience- in relation to the “boy turn” in educational policy and the construction of boys as the ‘new disadvantaged’ in this country.

Keywords: gender equity, educational policies, neoliberalism, Catholic Church, feminist and women movement, Chile, Australia, boys’ education.

Introduction

Gender equity has been a major public issue since the United Nations Decade for Women (1975-85). Though a common project has arisen in conferences and forums at global and national levels, different countries have given different emphases and range to this problem. While some countries have constructed broad gender equity policies -not always without controversies-, others have only shyly started diffused, partial and sometimes incoherent actions, with an interrupted character throughout time. The latter is the case for Chilean educational policy. The absence of a gender equity policy in education does not mean that in Chile during the democratic government of Concertación - a centre-left political alliance that has been ruling the country since 1990 - nothing has been done in order to promote gender equity. On the contrary, following the agreements supported by different international declarations, these governments have developed different policies to improve women’s situation.

The problem has been that in Chile unfortunately the educational reform promoted by the Ministry of Education (MINEDUC) and the gender policies promoted by the Women’s National Service (SERNAM) almost has not interacted in a systematic and coherent way in the last twenty years and has not always promoted a broad practice of equity. For example, this coherence has not been expressed in an educational policy document that stresses the gender equity framework and objectives for a reasonable period of time, from which different strategies and actions can be articulated and implemented. Moreover, when actions have been developed, they have focused mainly on the distributive justice (e.g. access to resources and services) rather than on the cultural or symbolic justice (e.g. recognition and against discrimination of marginalized groups) (Fraser, 1997).

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Of course, explicit policies are not the only way of reaching gender equity in education. As Arnot, Davies and Weiner (1999) have pointed out for England and Scotland, social transformations (especially in the labour market) or implicit policies (as curriculum changes) can challenge traditional gender orders. Also, as Lingard (2003) has stressed for the ‘boys’ turn’ in Australia, media reports and popular literature can act as policy-makers in a context of decentralised schools and lack of policies. Furthermore, sometimes indirect school practices can have stronger effect than direct practices (Connell, 1989). However, explicit policy certainly can facilitate changes and also express political compromise.

**Chilean experience as a case study: educational policy, gender dynamics and social justice**

In Chile the democratic educational reform has not included the perspective of gender in the development of its policies. Nevertheless, as it has been stressed by other scholars (Ávalos, 2003; Guerrero, Valdés and Provoste, 2006a), in Chile during the current educational reform different ‘actions’ have been carried out that have had gender equity as objective. These actions however have been diffused, partial and sometimes incoherent, with an interrupted character throughout time, and have lain more on individual wills than on an articulated policy. The main booster of these actions has been SERNAM rather than MINEDUC. The main areas for these actions have been: sexual education; national curriculum; teachers’ development (Madrid, 2007). (For an overview of Chilean educational system see Annex).

Generally, these ‘actions’ have not been developed with an accurately understanding of the process of the construction of gender and its dynamics or the social embodiment of gender (Connell, 2009). That is why these actions have left aside topics such as gender relations in schools not only among students but also among students and teachers; school gender regimes in terms of their structures, normative and forms of functioning (Kessler et al., 1985); the questioning of hegemonic patterns of masculinity promoted by schools and the media; or the development of an inclusive curriculum from the point of view of girls and marginalized and subordinated boys (Connell, 1996); or pedagogical practices that promote gender equity (Mills and Keddie, 2007). Instead, the main focus has been almost exclusively on topics that have to do with access, parity and permanence in the system.

Thus when these ‘actions’ have been implemented, they have been centered mainly in the notion of girls at risk or as disadvantaged (e.g. under performance; early sexual initiation, adolescence pregnancy and motherhood) or boys as problems (e.g. violence and bulling, alcohol and drug abuse) and not from the point of view of the right to education of quality as an issue of social justice (e.g. boys and girls as individuals with personal projects and trajectories). This means that the focus of these actions has not been to support students in their experience of schooling and in the process of constructing their gender identities. This situation can also be seen in other Latin-American countries where none of them have witnessed the development of educational policies that lead towards the equity of gender (Messina, 2001; Stromquist, 2005; Guerrero, Valdés and Provoste, 2006b).

In Chile, the lack of a gender policy in education is evident in schools and classroom dynamics. First, a recent study related to teachers’ formation concluded that the incorporation of gender perspective in programs financed by MINEDUC for teachers’ initial formation and continuous development in Chilean universities was ‘weak, imprecise, and inadequate being situated more in the discursive arena’, and also, the programs analysed did not show a theorical, ethical and normative framework about why and how to incorporate the gender perspective in teacher training (Fritz et al., 2008: 155-163). Second, a study that examined the interaction between teachers and students in classrooms in 5th and 8th grades (upper primary education) suggested that there have been fewer improvements in this area. Although, the curriculum reform states no discrimination by sex and promotes notions of equality, diversity and human rights in the transversal objectives (OFT) and also incorporate explicitly a gender balance perspective in the
minimum contents (CM) (SERNAM 2009b), the research concluded that many of the classroom dynamic and teachers’ practices hinder girls’ learning process by promoting stereotyped visions of gender (they receive less interaction with teachers, more disqualifications, teachers use more masculine examples to explain concepts and content or to refer to the classroom; examples that show men in public sphere and women at home) (SERNAM 2009a).

This ‘state of the policy’, I will argue, is related to the Chilean historical and cultural trajectory that combines conservative and progressive gender projects and politics. These projects, policies and trajectories are very contradictory and have relevant consequences. For example, according to the Human Development Index, Chile is one of the most developed countries in Latin-America being in the group of high development (ranking 40th). But on the other hand, Chile lowered its position in the Index of Gender Empowerment (ranking 60th). This is seen for example, by the fact that Chile has one of the lowest rates of female participation in the workforce and in the political arena among Latin America countries (UNDP, 2007).

These contradictions are especially evident in the case of educational dynamics and outcomes. On one hand, Chile has high coverage in both primary and secondary education (in both close to 100%) and the rate of gender equity in access close to equal rates in all levels of education (UNESCO, 2003). But on the other hand, Chile shows what could be called a gender pattern of results: boys tend to do better than girls in Math and Science while girls are higher achievers in Language Studies—although girls have been improving their performance in science in recent years (OECD, 2007; IEA, 2004; MINEDUC, 2005a, 2007). Also, while women have had a sharp increase in the access to university in the last ten years—equalising men in intake number, and even overtaking men in permanence and graduation rates—, the majority of them are still mainly entering traditional female areas (nursing, education, care, etc) that are less worthy in the labour market (Consejo Superior Educación, 2009). According to this, women that work are still earning less than men despite having the same level of education (Valdés et. al 2006).

Furthermore, we can see the contradiction of Chilean trajectory if we examine the education labour force. Although around 70% of teachers in Chile are women, only 50% occupy positions of power in the school organization (e.g. principals). Also, the proportion of women teachers in classrooms radically diminishes as the level of schooling rises (e.g. 99% in early childhood, and 55% in secondary). This gendered division of labour is also expressed in the type of contract: while 36% of male teachers have a full-time contract only 22% of women teachers have this kind of contract (Madrid, 2007).

The invisibility of gender: politics of silence

The first level of explanation for the lack of a gender equity policy in education is the invisibility of gender in neoliberal politics by reducing equity to only one dimension. In order to understand this silence we need to briefly go back to the early 1980s to understand the major changes in the Chilean educational reform.

Chile has been one of the first and most radical countries in applying Neoliberal reforms since the mid 1970s under Pinochet’s right-wing dictatorship (1973-1990). These reforms have significantly changed social structures and dynamics (Faletto, 1999; Garretón, 2009), and especially, the conditions in which gender relations are experienced (Valdés and Olavarría, 1998; Olavarría, 2001). In education those reforms can be divided into two stages. The first is composed of reforms that were applied between 1981 and 1990. I will call this stage the orthodox neoliberal educational reforms. The second is composed of reforms to the orthodox reforms that were carried out by Concertación democratic governments since 1990. I will call this stage the ‘growing with equity’ neoliberal educational reforms (Ffrench-Davies, 2001).

In 1981, the orthodox neoliberal educational reforms started a process of decentralization, deconcentration and privatization of public education; a process of marketisation was started.
These transformations were led by three main ideals: *freedom of teaching*, *freedom of choice* and *preeminence of the market over the state*. In the name of a ‘modernisation process’, this orthodox market oriented reforms profoundly transformed the administrative and financial model applied to the school system (Delannoy, 2000). The role of the State was redefined from the all-knowing and encompassing (Teacher State) to the subsidiary State. As Garretón (2009) has suggested, this implies a deep break with the traditional socio-political matrix of development. These changes were locked up by the pass of a Constitutional Law on Education (LOCE) the last day of the dictatorship (10 March 1990).

In 1990, *Concertación* democratic governments began to apply a new educational agenda. Progressively an educational reform began. However, this reform did not change the structural transformations made by the military government. The main concept during the period was ‘continuity with change’. The main difference with the previous stage was that the State developed policies focused on the *quality and equity* of the school system, *processes*, and *learning outputs*, especially in well-off sectors. It also provided a new national-level status for teachers (Cox, 2003, 2006; OECD, 2004). All these actions where designed to counterbalance the imperfections of the market. However, as we will see, these imperfections remain after 20 years of counterbalance policies. For example, the paradox between the processes of decentralization-centralization continues because while MINEDUC finances the system it cannot intervene in what schools do.

In this context, in the last twenty years the discussion about education has been dominated by the ideological struggle to know which sort of schools perform better in standardized tests: municipal or private (see a brief characterization of school sorts in annex). In this sense, educational quality has been reduced to learning outcomes, leaving aside the quality in social relations, and especially gender relations that schools promote. Hence, it could be said that the educational policy has constrained the idea of equity and social justice in education to learning outcomes in standardized tests. The latter is typical of market logic and currently is a worldwide phenomenon. Three factors can explain this constriction of educational discourses about equity and equality in terms of type of schools and effectiveness.

First, the maintenance of the neoliberal structure and funding in the educational system has brought up a dramatic segmentation and inequality in the system related to the socio-economic stratus of students (García-Huidobro and Bellei, 2003). This has happened despite the affirmative programs, the improvement of the school conditions (the Full-Day Reform) and the learning opportunities (the curriculum reform) in the context of the “growth with equity” reforms. The consequence of this dramatic segmentation has been that the poorest students remain in the municipal schools; the ones that cannot pay for the supposedly better education provided by private schools. This also produces difference in learning, but also in school experience and dynamics. This situation, for example, provoked that in the winter of 2006 a massive mobilization of municipal secondary students claimed for an education of quality (see: Garretón, 2006; Falabella, 2007). The consequence was that a Presidential Commission was formed (Consejo Asesor, 2006) and then that LOCE was derogated and changed to a new General Law of Education (June, 2009) that made important institutional changes in the organization of the system.

Second, due to the parity rate in access to the system, both in primary and in secondary schools, “gender equity” is perceived as something that has been overcome. Although the rise in the access rates is one of the most important successes of the *Concertación* governments, this is a reduction of equity to only one dimension. From a gender perspective this does not address the main problem that is the gender regime of the schools, its dynamics and practices, and how these bring up discriminations in the process of identity construction and in the post school pathway processes (in labour, politics, family, etc). That is so much harder to address and needs an integral perspective in educational policy and practice.
Third, trying to overcome the limitations of the process of decentralization (schools are responsible for administration) and centralization (MINEDUC is responsible of pedagogical aspects), in the last years a new series of neoliberal mechanism were supported by MINEDUC technocrats: evaluation, supervision and accountability mechanisms are starting to be installed in different levels of the system. Also, the management and the administration styles in schools (in line with business administration) as well as the leadership of their principals (as managers) and teachers (as technicians) become more and more relevant. In this process gender is only a variable.

It is interesting that despite gender is a relevant issue for the improvement of learning outcomes for neoliberal institutions (OECD-UNESCO-UIS 2003), gender equity has been a theme of secondary category in the design and implementation of the Chilean educational policy during the democratic governments. This is the silence of neoliberal politics in education in relation to gender equity.

Catholic Church and the sense of education: politics of fear

The second level of explanation is related to the sense of education and who defines it. In all societies there are different beliefs about the nature and purpose of schooling. There are visions that promote education as equalizer; others as promoter of social mobility; finally, as a transmitter of social norms and values (Yates 1993). In Chile, all these visions coexist at the same time but the two latter are the predominant ones. The idea of education as social mobility has risen with the implementation of neoliberal politics. The idea of education as transmission of values and social norms is rooted in the idea of the Nation and has the longest history. This idea lies in the necessity of coherence and unity to the surface of the Republic (despite the fact that Chile is and has been a multicultural and diverse country). One of the elements that have contributed to this imaginary has been the catholic religion or the so call ‘Catholic’s essentialist discourse’ (Larraín 2001).

It is in this context that the Chilean Catholic Church has a very strong ‘moral’ influence in the policy-making process in education (and also in other areas of social life such us health, especially sexual and reproductive health). The Chilean Catholic Church has systematically opposed itself to all initiative related to gender equity, especially, in the field of sexual education and diversity in schools. For this, church gender is a scandalous category that goes against the ‘natural differences’ between the sexes or against the heterosexual family (see, Pope Bendict XVI, 2008). Even initiatives developed by the civil society have been undermined by the Catholic Church, too. This last one is the case of the pedagogical material developed by the Chilean Movement for the Homosexual Integration and Liberation (MOVIL) for reducing the sexual orientation and gender identity’s discrimination in schools (MOVIL 2008). All these have happened despite the recommendation of the CEDAW panel to the Chilean government to design and implement a fully financed program in sexual education from a gender perspective.

They protect their own beliefs under the protection of freedom of teaching principle but they forget two important elements: the right for an education of quality in all aspects, and that with their oppositions they are affecting the freedom to teach girls and boys that do not go to their schools or that are not Catholics. In summary, they try to impose their own vision of the world to the rest of the society.

It can be hypothesised that this strong influence comes from two sources. First, the proportion of the Chilean population that is catholic. But if we examine the data we can see that there has been a strong reduction of people that identify themselves as catholic: from 98% in 1930 to 65% in 2009 (Lehman, 2001; PUC and Adimark, 2009). This is especially true among people under 29 years old where only 56% declare himself or herself as Catholic (INJUV, 2007). Also, there has been a dramatic fall in the frequency of religious practices, the rise of opinion of catholic against the traditional catholic doctrine, and the dramatic fall in the number of priests (Larraín,
As Valenzuela (2008) has stressed only 14% of Chilean are ‘active Chatolics’ (p. 24). Second, that they control a big proportion of the educational system intakes and schools so they represent the majority of students and parents’ interests. However, in 2001 no more than 15% of the total intake in primary and secondary education goes to 654 Catholic schools (Almonacid, 2004). I will propose three different hypotheses.

First, that the Catholic Church interests are very well organized. They are represented by the FIDE (Federation of Private Schools), the CONACEP (National Corporation of Private Schools) and by the ‘Vicaría de la Educación’ or the Vicarage of Education dependent of the Catholic Church. All these groups also have support in the Congress. These well organized institutions have had the skills and abilities to make pressure over the government and block different processes that attempt to gender equity, especially in sexual and affective education.

Second, during the last four governments of the Concertación all Ministers (with the exception of three) have been militants or sympathizers of the Christian Democracy (as were the first two democratic Presidents since 1990). Although this party is part of the progressive coalition of government, it is the most conservative of its parties because it is a catholic party with extremely close relations with the Church. For example, MINEDUC advanced the most in the re-designing of a sexual education policy with a gender perspective when there was a progressive minister from the PPD (Party for the Democracy, composed among others by ‘renovated socialists’).

Third, during the transition and in the name of stability, consensus and agreement policy, the so called ‘hot’ and ‘problematic topics’, as gender and sexuality, have been put aside. Frohmann and Valdés (1995) refer to this kind of policies as a gentlemen’s agreement or ‘acuerdo de caballeros’ (p. 277) that has blocked progression in gender policies. All the educational policy has been built looking for agreement because the Concertación does not have majority in the Congress: right-wing coalition is overrepresented because of the binominal election system inherited from the dictatorship. This ‘agreement policy’ has worked to have coherence in the educational reform but clearly has helped neither to a more democratic society nor to represent the interests of the students and teachers that claim for a sexual education of quality (MINEDUC, 2005b).

All these elements have influenced the design and implementation of the educational policy and the subjectivity of Chilean policy-makers. That is why I call this process the politic of fear: fear of interrupting a conception of the Chilean identity that is not supported by all the people but by a part of the elite, the conservative one. This fear also can be linked to the political trauma that Chile experienced during the dictatorship.

Women’s movement and the state: politics of desire

The third level of explanation is related to the dynamics of the Chilean women’s movement in the last twenty years and its relation with the political structure. One of the major victories of the women’s movement was the creation of SERNAM in 1991. According to the law, SERNAM is a ministerial-level coordinator organism without attributions to implement policies and programs; but that has the attribution to propose policies and law reforms to reach and assure gender equality (Valdés, 2007). During the 1990s, women’s movement reached different goals throughout SERNAM actions or by itself (Guzmán, 2001; Franceshet, 2003, Hass, 2006). For example, a gender agenda was settled in social policy.

As I stated above, SERNAM has been the main booster and promoter of actions related to gender equity in education even over MINEDUC (Madrid 2007). Special importance has had the Plans for Equal Opportunity (SERNAM 1995; 2001) and the Mainstreaming strategy. All these actions have allowed to make gender issues visible in the MINEDUC (as in other ministries in the Chilean State) but have not allowed to develop a gender equity policy in
education at national level (Valdés, 2007). These absences have occurred despite Bachelet’s government has boosted a governmental Agenda on Gender Equity (SERNAM, 2007). Different factors can be identified to understand the absence of a gender equity policy in education from the point of view of the women’s movement.

First, the weakening of women’s movement as a political actor in the transition and post-transition process in terms of disarticulation, and diffusion of feminist ideas through Chilean society (Ríos, 2003). This weakening has its roots in different social processes such us the internal dynamics of the transition and the process of institutionalization by SERNAM. For example, during democracy “even though women seemed to reach more and more formal leadership positions, the locus of decision-making and political power always shifted to where women were absent” (Frohmann and Valdés, 1995, pp. 288-289).

Second, the characteristic of the Chilean political system and the dynamics of the patriarchal state are important. Analyzing the progress of women in terms of the passage of legislation (bills) that promotes the goals of the women movement since the recovering of democracy, Hass (2006) has argued that “two primary factors impact the success of feminist policy proposals: the institutional structure of the Chilean political system, which mitigates against cooperative policymaking between the Executive and the Congress, and the strength of the conservative opposition to women’s rights, which enjoys disproportionate political influence within the political system” (p. 205). The character of the Chilean patriarchal state and its relation to women’s right has been demonstrated in historical research that have explored the relation among social policy and the formation of the male-led nuclear family in Chile during the twentieth century (Rosemblatt, 2000; Olavarría, 2000; Valdés, 2004).

Third, it can be seen that in the last ten years women’s movement focus has shifted towards other issues such as violence against women; sexual and reproductive health and rights; political participation and leadership; participation and discrimination in labour market, among others. The shift can be seen by analysing the objectives of different SERNAM’s policies and plans. Although these policy instruments have incorporated goals for education, they are not priorities. This policy situation contrasts a lot with the demand that first and second wave of Chilean feminism have done where the focus on women access to education system was very strong (Labarca, 1947; Montecinos and Rosetti, 1990; Edwards et. al., 1993 Rosetti et al., 1994).

Fourth, and final, the gender mainstreaming strategy has also contributed to the absence of a national gender equity policy in education. Since the Beijing World Conference on Women in 1995 it is ‘the’ strategy to promote gender equity by gendering the whole policy-making process (United Nations, 2000) (for a critical discussion see, Bacchi and Eveline, 2003; Walby, 2005). In Chile the gender mainstreaming strategy has been implemented since 2002. It has the “purpose of generating changes in the existing policies and programs to assure that these policies do not have unequal and discriminatory effects” (Guerrero 2005, p. 4). The problem in the Chilean context is that this strategy does not have a political role to influence contents; that requires qualified officers; and that there is a lack of connexion among the main instruments of mainstreaming within each ministry (Valdés 2007, p. 15). The latter is exactly what happened in the MINEDUC: there are fragmented gender equity objectives and fragmented gender equity actions. Also, in the name of mainstreaming, specific programs have finished and the level of inter-ministerial articulation is low (contradicting the gender mainstreaming theory where the strategy has to be articulated with specific programs).

All these have consequences in the way that gender has been installed in the educational reform. The desire of equity and equality in education has been changed from the women movement from having a highlighted place to a secondary and almost forgotten place. Also, it has been a desire difficult to implement in the practice.
Sharing the experience: some lessons for Australia

The Australian case represents an opposite experience to the Chilean one. Australia has a long tradition in designing and implementing gender equity policy in education at national level going back to 1975. However, this process has not been exempted from contradictions, conflicts and tensions from both the political agenda and the research community (Foster, Kimmel and Skelton, 2001; Francis and Skelton, 2005; Mills, Francis, Skelton, 2009). This situation is expressed in the fact that during this time, different policies have had different emphasis, direction and implementation of strategies.

In the early 1990s Lyn Yates (1993) in an examination of policy and research in girls’ education suggested that besides the Commonwealth’s funding development that followed the Girls, Schools and Society Report (School Commission, 1975) in the 1980s this support had resulted in ‘isolated projects which had little impact on mainstream education’ (p. 13). Also, when Yates commented the National Policy for the Education of Girls in Australian (Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1987) she stressed that although general political support to it different States and Territories had different response to it in practice and that this highlighted the importance of regulation mechanism (p. 23). In the early 1990s National Action Plan for the Education of Girls 1993-97 was launched as an outcome of the review of the National Policy. One of the main conclusions of that review was that an ‘education which leads to equality of outcomes for girls and boys has not yet been achieved [and that is one of] the disturbing contradictions of Australian social condition’ (Australian Education Council, 1993, p. vii).

But maybe the most conflicting issue appeared with the explicitly inclusion of boys is the equity policy. Although this inclusion started with the National Policy for the Education of Girls in the late 1980s, it was radicalized in the mid 1990s. Hence, in 1997 the Gender Equity Framework tried to include boys in educational policy but brewed a lot of discussion (MCEETYA, 1997). For example, it was stated that this policy promoted a conservative discourse that has a strategic essentialism (Ailwood, 2003), that treats girls and boys as ‘equal but different’ (Foster, Kimmel and Skelton, 2001); it promotes a displacement of girls as ‘educationally disadvantaged’ (Hayes, 1998) that can be interpreted as a structural backlash against feminist politics (Mills, 2003). However, the ‘boy turn’ (Weaver-Hightower, 2003) in the Australian educational policy has forgotten that until these days there is strong discrimination against women in schools and in their post school trajectories (Kenway and Wills, 1997).

As Yates suggests (2000) in the boys’ educational disadvantage discourses there are a lot of facts that ‘assumed a taken-for-granted that hides the politics of what is being taken up’ (p. 309). Three are the most important issues: (a) focus on outcomes rather than on processes and practices in schools; (b) focus on ‘broadening options’ rather than on challenging current values in society; and (c) focusing only on middle class interests. As Mills and colleagues have argued (2007) since the House of Representative report Boys: Getting it Right these facts of the case have allowed a more radical strategy in overcoming boys’ ‘underachievement’ and also acting against girls because they are developed without a national policy.

For example, the Boys’ Education Lighthouse Schools Programme initiative was strongly focused on improving boys’ literacy and their learning outcomes. Also in its framework it doesn’t distinguish which boys are failing, hiding class nor race issues. Also it can be seen as a cut off from the gender perspective because it is extremely focused on the notion of gender-base difference in learning styles rather than on structural dimension such as power relations (DEST, 2003; Cuttance et al., 2007). The same can be seen in the Australian Government’s AU $19.4 million Success for Boys (DEST, 2005) initiative that was based on the Boys’ Education Lighthouse Schools Programme. As it has been pointed out, this initiative has distorted issues of gender and social justice, has promoted gender differentiation and has ignored that some men continued having economic and cultural advantage over women (Keddie, 2005), and over other men –e.g. hegemonic over marginalised, heterosexual over homosexual (see, Connell, 2005).
As a recent paper has stressed, gender policies in Australia are based nowadays in a discourse about boys as victims (poor boys) boosted by both mythopoeic and men’s rights movements. Also, it is clear the anti-feminist character or the current policy where educational programs have failed to address issues of misogynist and homophobic behaviours and attitudes and have ignored the impact of these programs on girls (Mills, Francis, Skelton, 2009, pp. 42-47).

In a milieu of school marketisation and neoliberal influence in educational policy, Chile has an absence of gender equity policy in education and it is replaced by politics of silence, fear and desire. On the other hand, in Australia, neoliberal pressures have produced a turn in the gender equity policy from policies for social justice to policies that promote the results of learning through standardized tests and that are clearly against a feminist agenda. In both cases, girls and marginalized boys are not target for educational policies. In this context, the Chilean experience could be useful to Australia. The lessons will be organised in relation to the three policies that replace a formal gender equity policy in education in Chile: politics of silence, fear and desire.

Lessons related to politics of silence: dealing with marketisation as gendered policy

The Chilean case has shown that the achievement of parity rate in access to the system, the rise of a policy of ‘accountability’, and the segmentation and inequality in the educational system have constricted the discourses about equity to only one dimension: related to type of schools, that is an expression of class. However, the silence about gender policy in education has gendered consequences. For example, in the segmentation process it produces new relations of dominance and subordination depending on the position in the ‘school market’. Also, the neoliberal policies in education produce a lot of tensions and pressures within schools setting that are trespassed to the students in terms of the enhancing of competition to success. This produces conflicts within boys and girls that cannot follow this successful pattern. In Australia, the effect of marketisation can be related not only to class but to race/ethnic and immigrant ghettos but also to gender relations in almost the same way. Although Australia has gender equity policy for a long time, these policies have had a fluctuation in the conceptual framework that also expresses the contradiction of marketisation of schooling; the discourse as new disadvantages are only one of its consequences.

Lessons related to politics of fear: avoiding de facto policies in gender equity

The Chilean case has shown that without an explicit policy on gender equity in education other actors, as the Chilean Catholic Church, start developing their own policies that usually are more conservative. The sexual education is an example of this. In Australia the lack of a gender equity policy in gender since 1997, has led to a de facto policy lead by conservative reports or the media panic (Mills et al., 2007). These de facto policies produce paradoxical consequences that can go against girls’ situations at school levels, for example, in the process of setting and streaming (Charlton et al., 2007). The Chilean politics of fears also can illuminate the current row over sex education that is facing Australia in relation to the discussion of the new Health and Physical Education National Curriculum that is intended reasonably to incorporate issues of contraception as part of a third phase of the nationwide curriculum (Gilmore and Benns, 2009). Not only in relation to the influence of other agents as the Catholic Church but also in relation to the structure of the curriculum

Lessons related to politics of desire: women’s movement support is needed for social change

As the Chilean case shows, the weakening of women’s movement as a political actor has diminished the possibility of having a gender equity policy in education. Also, the turn in the women’s agenda to other topics (e.g. political participation, sexual and reproductive health, and domestic violence) reduced the possibilities of having a coherent gender policy in education. Australia, on the other hand, has a long history of femocrats’ interventions, especially in
education, reaching senior positions and degrees of influences (Eisenstein, 1996, p. 53). Nevertheless, as Yates (2008) has recently argued, Australian feminism has shifted in the field of education in the past decades. For example, she states that feminism has moved from a visible social movement in the 1970s and early 1980 to a less present form of association in the current decade. Also, she stresses the reduction of equal opportunity units and the fact that despite the fact that nowadays there are more women in senior positions, they not necessarily advocate feminist interest. In this sense, she argues that there has been a turn from a broaden concern about social justice to a concern about private competition and individual choice in education. In the field of research, she states that there has been a shift in the agenda from researching the sources of gender inequalities and strategies to changes to different accounts of identity formation.

Finally, a gender policy in education needs to address directly these issues if it wants to promote social justice beyond parity in access to the system or in educational learning outcomes. A coherent policy needs to address the contradictory, dynamic and active character of the growing up gendered process; the place of sexuality in the policy and the relation with diversity and democracy. Also, a coherent national policy has to face the question about the balance between centralization of policies and autonomy of school practices. In this sense, the Chilean case can help to understand that the solely inclusion of boys in educational equity policies does not counteract the improvement of females; it depends on the context and the framework where that inclusion is produced. Hence there are other social forces that lay behind this last process such as the politics of silence, fear and desire that in the case of Chile have similar consequence to the Australian “boy turn”.

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