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Perceived Success Factors in an Outstanding School Serving Vulnerable Students: Case-Study of a Chilean Public School

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Abstract

This research analyses, using a case-study approach, the perceived success factors in an outstanding Chilean public school serving socioeconomically vulnerable students. This qualitative study draws on qualitative interviews with school staff and class observations, using the Instructional Core model as an analytical framework. Analysis revealed that the beliefs and structural cultural values shared by the school community were more relevant to explaining school success than concrete practices, and highlighted the importance of the interrelation among success factors for understanding their impact on school effectiveness. Additionally, elements such as the ongoing and changing nature of success factors, the strong influence of leadership and internal relationships and the use of professional judgement and situated knowledge by teachers were also identified as key to understanding effectiveness. Lastly, the unintended consequences apparent in this case-study are discussed, as the school under study confronts the hostile and inequitable Chilean education policy context.

Keywords: school effectiveness, vulnerable students, Chile, public school, thematic analysis.

Factores de Éxito Percibidos en una Escuela Destacada con Alumnado Vulnerable: Estudio de Caso de una Escuela Pública Chilena

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Resumen

Esta investigación analiza, mediante un enfoque de estudio de caso, los factores de éxito percibidos en una destacada escuela pública chilena que atiende a estudiantes socioeconómicamente vulnerables. Este estudio cualitativo se basa en entrevistas cualitativas con el personal de la escuela y en observaciones de las clases, utilizando el modelo de Núcleo Instruccional como marco analítico. El análisis reveló que las creencias y los valores culturales estructurales compartidos por la comunidad escolar eran más relevantes para explicar el éxito escolar que las prácticas concretas, y destacó la importancia de la interrelación entre los factores de éxito para comprender su impacto en la eficacia escolar. Además, elementos como la naturaleza continua y cambiante de los factores de éxito, la fuerte influencia del liderazgo y las relaciones internas y el uso del juicio profesional y el conocimiento situado por parte de los profesores también se identificaron como claves para entender la eficacia. Por último, se discuten las consecuencias no deseadas que se manifiestan en este estudio de caso, ya que la escuela estudiada se enfrenta al contexto político educativo chileno, hostil e inequitativo.

Palabras clave: eficacia escolar, alumnos vulnerables, Chile, escuela pública, análisis temático

Understanding why some schools are more effective than others has been a longstanding topic of discussion among scholars, both in Chile (Bellei et al., 2014; Palomer & Paredes, 2010; Portales & Heilig, 2015; Valenzuela et al., 2016) and elsewhere (Chapman et al., 2016; Reynolds, 2002; Smith, 2011). Since 1970, researchers have analysed hundreds of schools in tens of countries, trying to understand the differential school characteristics that could explain variance in the school effect (James, 2006). Although there is no consensus about what specifically constitutes an effective school (Reynolds et al., 2011), the school effectiveness movement has been able to analyse the link between several specific school characteristics and effectiveness, suggesting that schools are able to add value to student outcomes through schooling (Muijs et al., 2004; Rivkin et al., 2005; Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000), even in disadvantaged contexts (Ainscow et al., 2012b; Aubert et al., 2008). Various education models, such as the Instructional Core (City et al., 2009), have been used to explain how this process occurs within schools.

In the Chilean education system, school effectiveness is highly correlated with the socioeconomic status (SES) of the student body, due mostly to high levels of socioeconomic segregation according to school type (González, 2017; Valenzuela et al., 2014). Private and subsidised schools tend to attract more skilled students from middle and higher social classes, concentrating the most vulnerable pupils in the public sector (Contreras et al., 2010; Troncoso et al., 2016). According to the OECD (2017), vulnerable Chilean students tend to perform lower than their peers from higher quintiles. As a logical consequence, evidence shows that public schools, overall, have lower performance than private schools (Muñoz & Queupil, 2016).

Nevertheless, there are public schools that are able to achieve outstanding results despite the hostile and inequitable Chilean education policy context, which have been highlighted as successful cases (Bellei et al., 2004; 2014). Therefore, there is a strong interest among Chilean authorities in trying to understand how despite all of these disadvantages, certain public schools, which serve large percentages of vulnerable students, are able to be effective (Education Quality Agency Chile, 2017a). This research analysed one such successful school in-depth, aiming to provide insights and evidence to be used by practitioners and policy-makers working in similar contexts (Harris

et al., 2013). According to Bellei et al. (2014), understanding why these schools are effective is relevant to promoting suitable improvement strategies for public schools in Chile.

Literature Review

School Effectiveness

Mortimore (1998) suggested that an effective school can be defined as “a school in which students progress further than might be expected from a consideration of its intake” (pp.319). Several authors have proposed that some schools present outstanding characteristics, managing to be more effective than others, concluding that schools are mainly able to influence student outcomes, regardless of their initial conditions, due to key internal features (Cohen et al., 2003; Reynolds et al., 2002; Rivkin et al., 2005; Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000). As a result, the study of school effectiveness focuses its analysis on school success that cannot be explained by contextual factors. Chapman et al. (2016) suggested that school effectiveness is not only related to the internal organisational processes that make a school more successful than others but also how it is able to offer added value to all students. Further scholars highlight that effective schools are those that are able to ensure inclusive and equitable education for all students (Ainscow et al., 2012a; Escudero et al., 2013; Flecha, 2014; Muijs et al., 2010).

Leadership has been also acknowledged as an important factor in effective schools (O'Brien et al., 2008). According to Muijs et al. (2010), leaders in effective schools are able to promote improvement following an inclusive education approach. In this sense, positive school leaders are able to promote strong relationships, motivate, and encourage hard work among their staff, especially in disadvantaged contexts. Additionally, Brighthouse and Woods (2008) highlight that effective schools present a remarkable capacity to adapt effectively to change. Building on Fullan's (1992; 2020) work on the ongoing nature of the educational process, explanatory schemes, such as Creemers and Kyriakides's (2010) Dynamic Model of Educational Effectiveness, understand school effectiveness as a process in constant adaptation (Chapman et al., 2016; Muijs et al., 2014). In this and other models, teaching and learning are emphasised as key elements that explain effectiveness.

At school-level:	At classroom-level:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An ecology of equity (promotion of equitable and inclusive education among the school community) • Effective, adaptable and purposeful leadership • Clear and shared school and instructional goals • Collaborative ethos among school staff • Confidence and trust in school staff • Permanent professional development • Clear and challenging staff roles • Use of data in instructional practice • Parental and community involvement • Capacity to innovate and openness to change • Positive school climate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High expectations for student outcomes • Equitable education for all students • Emphasis on inclusion • Well-conducted lessons and learning orientation • Collaborative and flexible class planning • Positive view of students' capacity to learn • Effective time management • Progressive evaluation and provision of quality feedback to teachers and students • Positive learning environment and classroom climate • Promotion of students' autonomy and self-responsibility • Well-structured curriculum, adapted to students' needs and characteristics
<p>Source: authors own elaboration based on Ainscow et al. (2012a; 2012b), Aubert et al. (2013), Chapman et al. (2016), Dean (2005), Flecha (2015), Fullan (2020), Harris (2010), Hudson (2009), James (2006), Kerry and Wilding (2004), MacBeath and Mortimore (2001), Muijs et al. (2010; 2014), Muijs and Reynolds (2001), Reynolds et al. (2011), Sammons (2007), Smith (2011), Teddlie and Reynolds (2000), Teodorovic (2009).</p>	

Figure 1. Characteristics of an effective school identified in the literature

Effective Classrooms

Before 1990, most of the literature on school effectiveness focussed on the factors that influence performance at system-level and school-level, not necessarily considering classroom-level factors. Gradually, scholars began to research elements of teaching and learning dynamics to understand school effectiveness in a more holistic manner (Marzano, 2003; Muijs et al., 2004; 2014). Watkins et al. (2007, pp.xii) noted that “the context of the classroom affects a great deal of what teachers and pupils do”. Jones (2012) grouped all the key events of the classroom context into a cycle (Figure 2).

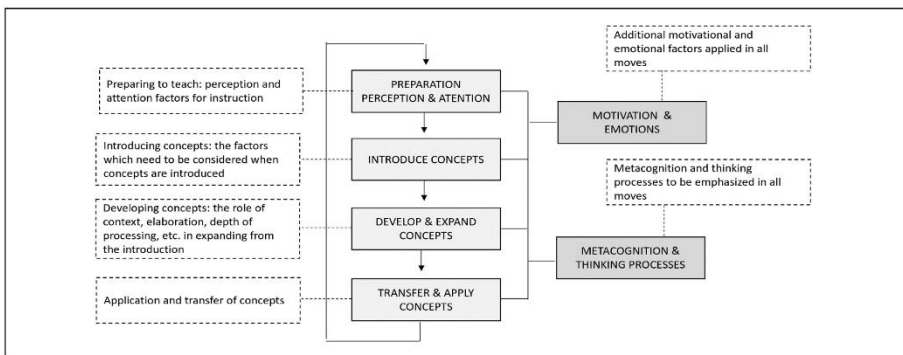


Figure 2. Basic cycle of classroom events that impact effectiveness (adapted from Jones, 2012)

This model includes all the pedagogical and contextual elements that can affect effectiveness within a typical lesson, recognising that the instructional process will be directly affected by the learning approaches that teachers implement. Adopting a similar perspective, Kington et al. (2014) also identified the key factors that contribute to effectiveness in classroom practice, shown in Figure 3.

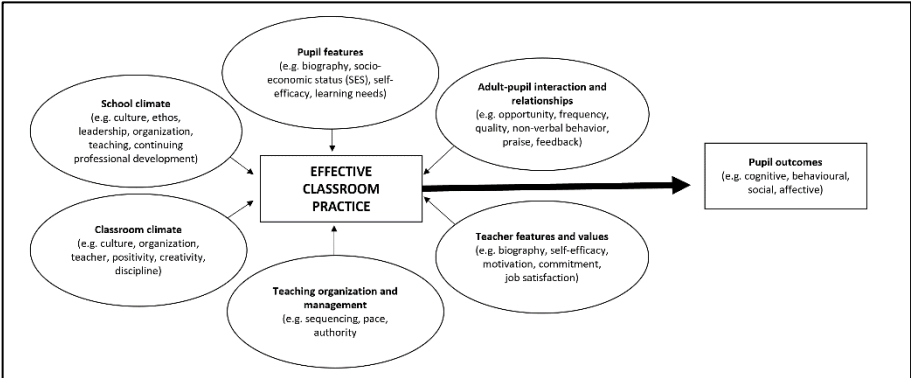


Figure 3: Model of factors for effective classroom practice (adapted from Kington et al., 2014)

The Instructional Core

As a theoretical framework, the Instructional Core model offers a clear explanation of how effectiveness is influenced by school and classroom level processes. It is composed of three elements, which are considered to form the centre of pedagogic interaction: teacher and students in the presence of content (see Figure 4).

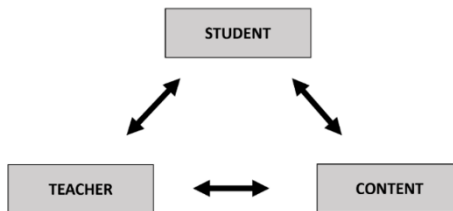


Figure 4. The Instructional Core model (City et al., 2009)

This model highlights the relevance of the relationship between these elements over the qualities of each factor by itself (City et al., 2009). The model is based on Cohen and Ball's (2001) work on the instructional effect of educational resources in promoting effectiveness. The authors questioned the traditional perspective in this matter which focused the school improvement process on contextual resources, suggesting that "if practice-embedded knowledge and action affect learning, then teacher's and students' knowledge and actions also are resources" (Cohen et al., 2003, pp.122).

Since instruction consists of a set of interactions among teachers and students in the presence of content, there is necessarily an interdependent relationship between them (Cohen & Ball, 2001). Cohen et al. (2003, pp.132) remarked that "teachers' effectiveness depends partly on how well they can use students' ideas and initiatives, and students' effectiveness depends partly on how well they can use the tasks their teachers set". Thus, teachers and students calibrate their actions according to these connections. It is thus argued that the interdependent relationship between teachers and students, and the process of calibrating these interactions when they face content through tasks within a given structural educational context, determine effectiveness (Childres et al., 2011). Thus, the Instructional Core provides a suitable model for analysing and understanding how school effectiveness operates within a school (e.g. Loughland & Nguyen, 2016).

The Chilean Educational Context

The Chilean education system is one of the most socioeconomically segregated systems worldwide (Bellei, 2013; Madero & Madero, 2012; OECD, 2012; Santos & Elacqua, 2016; Thieme & Treviño, 2013; Valenzuela et al., 2014), presenting one of the highest correlations between SES and PISA results (OECD, 2017). This inequality is mainly explained by the implementation of a shared financing scheme, cream-skimming processes, privatisation and the strong promotion of competition among schools (MINEDUC, 2017; Verger et al., 2017). These systemic mechanisms have relegated the majority of lower-SES pupils to public schools, minimising the motivation to provide an educational service equivalent to the private sector (Canales et al., 2016; Contreras et al., 2010; Elacqua, 2012; MINEDUC,

2017) and creating a hostile and inequitable policy environment which particularly affects public schools (Portales & Heilig, 2015).

From a statistical perspective, school effectiveness has also been affected by these policies. Research evidence has systematically demonstrated that private and subsidised schools perform better than public schools (e.g. Mizala et al., 2002; Muñoz & Queupil, 2016; Troncoso et al., 2016). It has been suggested that these differences could be explained by public schools' inability to select students and deficient governmental regulation, which negatively impacts public schools: "most central regulations seem to weaken public schools, which, in turn, have created serious segregation levels of poorer students" (Muñoz & Queupil, 2016, pp.322).

Therefore, this paper addresses a gap in the literature and offers valuable new evidence, examining how one public school has 'overcome the odds' to achieve outstanding student outcomes despite its high proportion of socioeconomic vulnerability and the inequitable national policy context (Portales & Heilig, 2015) - a rarity in Chile (Mizala et al., 2002). This research aims to explain those aspects of school success which contextual factors do not explain, identifying success factors in one school through an in-depth analysis of the perceptions of school staff, intentionally capturing sufficient detail to facilitate the use of this information by other researchers, policy-makers and practitioners working in similar contexts. The initial research questions were: (1) What are the perceived success factors that, according to school staff, can explain the outstanding performance of this school? and (2) How can these perceived success factors explain the outstanding performance of this case-study?

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs qualitative research methods (Mason, 2018) and following the suggestion of Marshall and Rossman (2016; see also May, 2011; Yin, 2012) a case-study strategy was selected. For the analysis, an interpretivist paradigm was used (Blaikie, 2009), adopting Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic analysis. The guiding principle was to

build data-driven theoretical insights to support the subsequent construction and interpretation of the emerging themes (Charmaz, 2014).

A multi-method approach was used for data collection, conducting 13 semi-structured interviews with school staff and non-participant observation of three classrooms. The sample was selected using purposive sampling based on convenience (Alasuutari et al., 2008). Ten teachers from different subjects and grades and three school leaders were interviewed, and three teachers were observed over one class period. The fieldwork was carried out at the school's facilities from May to July 2018. Following Mason (2018) and Bryman (2012), interviews considered pre-established general topics but maintained flexibility using open-ended questions. This study was reviewed and approved by the University of Glasgow School of Education Ethics Committee, as part of a postgraduate research.

Research Context

The Chilean school analysed is an urban, public, not-for-profit, secular, non-fee-paying and non-selective school, situated in a neighbourhood with a predominantly low-SES population in the Antofagasta region. It is a primary school, serving students mainly between 6-14 years old who are distributed across eight grades. Currently, it employs 28 teachers, who serve 685 students, with an average of 42 students per class. 84% of its students were classified as vulnerable in 2019 (JUNAEB, 2019). The school has achieved outstanding results in almost all the effectiveness indicators measured from 2000 onwards. It is the only autonomous school in its province, which is a special status given to schools that present sustained excellence. It has obtained the maximum level of the excellence subsidy granted by the National Performance Assessment System from 2008 onwards (MINEDUC, 2018).

Analysis and Procedure

NVivo 12 was used to assist analysis following mixed-method and deductive-inductive analytical strategies (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Using a theory-driven approach, initial coding categories were established based on

the Instructional Core model. Subsequently, a data-driven approach was adopted to allow sub-codes to emerge (Bryman, 2012).

The procedure followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) phases of thematic analysis. Firstly, the raw data was transcribed and incorporated into NVivo 12. Secondly, initial sub-codes were generated and incorporated into one of the pre-established categories. Each data extract was incorporated into one or more of the emerging codes, through analytical connections. Thirdly, all codes were grouped into potential themes. Fourthly, all the themes were contrasted with the conceptual framework and triangulated with the data from class observations. 12 themes resulted from the thematic analysis (six for the Teacher category, three for the Student category and three for the Content category). Finally, a name and definition for each theme were established, guided by the theoretical framework.

Findings

Teacher Category

Autonomy and flexibility. Participants reported autonomy and flexibility in classroom planning and management as one of the most important perceived success factors. Teachers stated that they had high levels of independence within their classrooms, and were able to make decisions using their own professional judgment, improving their performance: “there is autonomy in relation to what happens in our classrooms. By autonomy, I’m referring to the whole decision-making process” (Teacher 6). Teachers are autonomous to define many aspects of their classrooms, such as time management, curricular adaptations, methodologies, articulation between subjects, learning environments and assessment approaches.

School leaders understand the importance of autonomy for achieving positive results, providing high levels of independence to teachers as long as they meet the accountability requirements established by the Ministry of Education. Informants defined this as regulated autonomy: “this is not about autonomy based on what the teacher wants to impose, but rather it’s teaching autonomy that is socialised and discussed with my bosses and colleagues” (Teacher 5). Nevertheless, teachers explained that given this level of

autonomy is something unusual among public schools, new teachers tend to struggle at first, requiring more support from their senior colleagues and school leaders.

Participants connected autonomy and flexibility to the promotion of teacher adaptability. There was a shared perception that teachers' independence allows them to adjust readily to different lesson conditions:

When I determine that the class did not turn out as expected, for the next class I tend to change the strategy. I return to the content of the previous class, but using another strategy, changing the way I'm delivering that content (Teacher 5).

This adaptability and autonomy allows teachers to use their own discretion to improve their effectiveness in time management. Hence, teachers are able to use their time to concentrate on topics or tasks they consider to be more important, taking into account their students' backgrounds.

Motivation and commitment. The majority of informants reported self-motivation, commitment, and proactive focus as key success factors. There is a strong shared belief in the importance of teachers' role in counteracting the complex external context. Teachers internalised this self-responsibility as a type of professional duty: "we believe that it is our responsibility that students learn, and that will depend on how we teach them" (Teacher 7). This internalisation promotes a high level of self-responsibility among teachers: "we are measuring against ourselves; we do not measure ourselves in comparison with anyone (...) I'm very demanding with myself" (Teacher 10).

Teachers assume this self-responsibility with a powerful sense of empowerment, a perception which is also shared by school leaders: "here it's easy to work, in the sense that teachers know what they have to do, so you don't have to be on top of them" (Leadership Team 2). Despite this commitment, some teachers reported stress trying to manage high levels of autonomy and responsibility. This was particularly true for new teachers, who used personal time to prepare classes, impacting their personal lives on occasion. Teachers reported efforts to find the best strategies to promote

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better learning, even where this demanded additional work, due mainly to high student-teacher ratios. Informants justified these extra efforts based on their sense of gratitude to the school:

Sometimes you feel that with the time available you cannot cover everything you want to with the necessary depth, so if I need some extra hours out of my day, I do it. I stay because I want to, nobody asks me to (Teacher 9).

Teachers explained that this commitment is mainly supported by the high level of confidence and trust in teachers at the school. This connection is illustrated in one slogan created by teachers:

We were in a meeting talking with a new teacher, and I asked him how his adaptation process had been. The teacher told me that, unlike his previous experiences, trust exists here, and when there is trust, commitment is generated. In the end that became a kind of slogan among the teachers for a while: Trust generates commitment (Teacher 7).

Regarding this culture of commitment, there was a shared positive view among teachers of the way that the leadership team recognises and supports them. Senior leaders actively promote leadership among teachers, including them in school-wide decisions. Teachers reported that the school does not have a standardised supervision mechanism to monitor teachers' performance. All supervision is discussed and agreed in advance between leaders and teachers. The aim is to create an atmosphere of dialogue: "here nobody watches us supervising if we are doing our work. Here everyone knows what they have to do and will endeavour to comply, and the leaders know it" (Teacher 6). This lack of standardised supervision does not mean a total absence of monitoring. The leadership team used the concept of classroom accompaniment to define their supervision mechanism: "the management team can go to the classroom, without a guideline or standardised topics, be with the teacher and see their progress" (Leadership Team 3). Part of this perception of trust is based on the credibility that the

leadership team has among teachers: “teachers here are treated as experts in what they do (...) here the leadership team believes in what I do as a teacher” (Teacher 4).

Another element reported was the connection between teachers’ commitment, and the setting of high expectations for teachers: “a teacher will not be able to promote high expectations in their students if we as managers don’t generate high expectations of them. That’s why I always tell them: ‘teachers, you can do it’” (Leadership Team 3).

Professionalism and improvement. Teachers reported continuous self-analysis and reflection on their performance and practice, examining in detail how their work impacts students’ learning. It was possible to identify constant self-judgment of their actions, analysing how their own characteristics might influence their performance:

I cannot say that all my classes are successful, because it is impossible. But there is a space for reflection, to see what I did wrong and how I can improve it for the next class (...) I do self-analysis and self-criticism, and I see what I failed at and why (Teacher 1).

Most of this analytical process is developed by teachers sharing their experiences among peers: “sometimes I consult other colleagues or the Headteacher, to get ideas about how to make the corresponding improvements” (Teacher 8). The leadership team created two formal strategies to support this reflective process: one is technical meetings, in which teachers from one subject or level share their pedagogical practices, analysing student outcomes and detecting improvement needs; the other is mentorship, whereby a senior member of teaching staff supports other teachers who present difficulties. In addition, the leadership team is active in seeking and engaging support from external institutions, such as other schools, universities or consultants, in order to improve their teaching strategies. Teachers also reported the relevance of adopting a professional approach based on continuous teacher improvement, inquiry, and training and self-criticism and resilience, accompanied by positive error handling.

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Teachers tended to adopt an open and critical approach to evaluating their own errors and seeking improvements:

When something that was planned in class doesn't work out, I readjust many things, actively looking for where I failed and why that happened (...) trying to change the focus and understand why the students are not understanding me (Teacher 10).

This openness to communicating errors appeared to be due to a safe school environment described by teachers, in which they are able to openly criticise their own performance and seek help: "I'm not ashamed to ask if I don't know something, and my colleagues are not going to reject me if that happens" (Teacher 7). However, teachers were less open to receiving feedback provided by external practitioners, newly recruited colleagues or new school leaders, analysing these recommendations more cautiously. Hence, the leadership team is careful to communicate their criticism with empathy:

We as leaders are also very careful to respect the career and experience of our teachers (...) one must give feedback in a very humble way, using a lot of judgement, trying not to establish criticism negatively (Leadership Team 1).

This humble approach is well-recognised by teachers: "when there are problems achieving progress, there is no bad attitude from the head of the technical unit; on the contrary, they give recommendations to support us" (Teacher 9). This safe environment promotes among teachers a quick responsiveness to finding and applying solutions.

Collaboration. Informants reported a collaborative approach, communication and the setting of shared instructional goals as relevant success factors. Senior teachers explained that the collaboration observed was gradually developed by the staff, given the complex context that they needed to confront:

At the beginning, everything was very complex, we had students who had very disruptive characteristics (...) we felt among the teachers who started the school that we had no other choice but to unite against all these problems that we had to face. And we began to share, to plan the classes together, to see what gave us good results, to give each other recommendations, because we had to overcome all this. What began as a way to face a difficult context, was installed as a culture (Teacher 10).

This school culture of collaboration was constantly remarked upon. It is characterised by a shared conception of the importance of teamwork. This approach is supported by the belief that every member of the school is relevant and that success must be shared. This collaborative ethos was not based on formal efforts undertaken by the school: “it’s not a formal policy, it’s not written anywhere, but we all share the belief that if a person on the team is doing well, the school is doing well” (Leadership Team 2). Nevertheless, teachers described difficulty for new colleagues in adapting to this collaborative culture, taking considerable time (1-2 years) to achieve proper integration, affecting their initial performance. Some new teachers had been not able to manage this internal culture, resigning within this period. Even though the staff are supportive in this stage, they tend to be highly vigilant in protecting the collaborative climate, giving fewer opportunities to new teachers to contribute.

Student-orientation. Participants reported several efforts to promote a positive affective involvement and closeness with their students, explaining that this emotional connection was one of the primary goals when the school was established: “when this school started, we received students from different schools, many of them with very complex social contexts (...) one of our main objectives to generate a common school culture was to work with affection (...) we thought that the first thing we had to do, before focusing on academic performance, was to give them affection” (Teacher 8).

This approach was focused on the construction of a safe classroom environment, where students can feel comfortable: “this is not only about giving them affection and concern, but also taking care to give them dignity” (Leadership Team 2). One of the main objectives was to avoid social issues

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related to the vulnerability of students' backgrounds and contexts arising within classrooms:

Students feel safe and free of any risk in the classroom because they are treated well (...) they are given love and affection so that they respond well. If they witness situations of violence, which are common in their social environment, they will see it outside of school (Leadership Team 3).

This safe environment and perception of protection were judged to promote higher confidence in students to meet academic goals: “if you observe any class, you will notice that the students are not afraid to ask (...) that creates in them a sense of belonging to the school and urges them to strive to get good results, because they feel safe” (Teacher 7). Teachers are concerned with not being seen as strict authority figures: “they don't see the teacher as someone distant who is above them, but as someone close and involved” (Teacher 1). However, teachers are aware of the importance of maintaining appropriate levels of control, ensuring that this emotional bond cannot be misinterpreted as a lack of authority. This approach is not always successful with all students, sometimes resulting in the use of stricter strategies.

Innovation and change. This theme is composed of two aspects that were interconnected in the analysis: openness to innovation and new ideas and openness to change. Teachers are constantly presenting new initiatives, working together with the leadership team.

A wide range of innovative initiatives could be observed, such as thematic classrooms, project-based learning, flipped classrooms, implementation of the Singapore method, a small library operated by the students, a simulated supermarket where students learn mathematics, implementation of playground activities to promote positive values, debate contests and thematic fairs. All these initiatives were developed without external guidance: “we cannot wait to be told

what to do. We must as a school be active in doing things” (Leadership Team 3).

In this sense, innovation has been used as a strategy to confront the lack of resources and external support and make the most of their own capabilities. Teachers reported that, even though they have internal support to promote new ideas, it is not always possible to carry out innovations, due mainly to the decontextualised demands of external accountability. Interviewees highlighted that standardised national education policies not only do not promote innovation within public schools, but often discourage it.

Student Category

Metacognition and thinking processes. The informants reported, as an element relevant to students’ performance, the encouragement of metacognition and thinking processes. Teachers develop several pedagogical approaches specifically intended to promote meaningful learning: “when I give them new content, I often ask them to initially investigate and analyse it, to invent proposals about that content so we can take that knowledge into practice” (Teacher 9). Teachers are active in promoting analytical approaches, using strategies such as questioning, flipped classrooms, problem-based learning etc: “I try to focus the whole class from the perspective of what kind of analysis my students can develop of specific content” (Teacher 5).

Teachers tended to prioritise quality over quantity in curricular coverage: “sometimes I did not cover 100% of the content, but that which was covered was achieved well, with a satisfactory level of attainment for the majority of students” (Teacher 3). This encouragement of metacognition is interrelated with positive error handling. Teachers shared the opinion that errors are an important part of learning, using errors strategically to encourage thinking skills:

When they don’t do something right, I analyse it with them and help them discover their mistake. I don’t tell them what is wrong; on the

contrary, they will realise the error, based on what I ask. They have to understand why they were wrong (Teacher 1).

Curricular adaptations play an important role in the promotion of metacognition and the anchoring and appropriation of content. Therefore, students' own life experiences and previous knowledge are used by teachers to connect curricular content with students' contexts and prior knowledge: "I try to contextualise it as best I can, using the experiences they have, asking about their interests" (Teacher 3). Teachers were concerned with promoting equitable and inclusive education among pupils, adapting the content according to students' characteristics in order to encourage meaningful learning for all.

Participants also identified the promotion of autonomy and discipline and a collaborative approach between students as success factors. Teachers explained that the process to achieve appropriate levels of discipline had been difficult, lengthy and ongoing. Teachers indicated that very often students presented difficult behaviour, so the importance of discipline was frequently reinforced.

Motivation and emotions. The promotion of motivation, participation, and engagement among pupils was the most referenced topic in the student category. All participants reported the importance of establishing a positive classroom climate to promote engagement. These efforts to establish a positive physical and psychological environment were connected to the idea of providing the minimum conditions to develop a proper instructional process. Teachers reported efforts to create motivating lessons to encourage student engagement: "when I look for resources and materials, I try to find the most entertaining thing that I can find for them, always putting myself in their place" (Teacher 3).

Teachers reported using students' emotions as a key motivational trigger, in order to incorporate a connection between emotions and curricular content to promote meaningful learning. This emotional component was also supported by teachers' efforts to set high academic and personal expectations and promote self-confidence and self-esteem among students: "it's totally forbidden to tell a student that he's not capable of something. They're always

told, within their capabilities, that they can do things” (Leadership Team 3). Teachers declared the existence of a culture of high expectations, highlighting a saying that was created and reinforced daily: “I want, I can, I achieve” (Teacher 2).

This culture is based on the idea of equity, considering all students capable of learning, regardless of their differences and origins. Nevertheless, teachers reported a clear understanding of their students’ complex and vulnerable backgrounds and the lack of resources and support available to the school to counteract those contextual elements, making major efforts to not categorise students and give them a real opportunity to show what they are capable of:

I took some students who repeated 1st grade. I told the parents that for me they were not repeating students, but new kids, and they should not tell me bad things about them. I told them I wanted to not predispose myself, to first know their strengths and weaknesses and, based on that, to see how to approach them. Then, I gave the report card to one of the parents and she cried at the good grades (Teacher 1).

The informants explained that this culture was developed under the influence of the idea that education is the only real opportunity that their students have for a better future: “we must consider that we don’t select students, like private schools, we receive very confrontational students (...) we try to show them that there are other options, that there are other realities” (Teacher 10).

To reinforce this mentality of overcoming difficulty, teachers reported efforts to improve students’ confidence as key to promoting high expectations. Therefore, teachers avoided the promotion of competition among students or the incorporation of punishment. Conversely, they reported always reinforcing student improvements: “we work hard on students’ self-esteem, where small achievements are congratulated and highlighted. I try to persuade students that they can achieve what I’m asking them to do” (Teacher 10). Teachers repeatedly reported the difficulties of implementing this mentality, mostly due to the lack of confidence that the students exhibit when they arrive at the school.

Related to the previous factor, another important aspect was active engagement with students' families. Participants remarked upon the relevance of the inclusion of parents within school activities, in order to promote an alignment between the interests of the school and families:

We started holding workshops for parents with simple materials, the same ones we used with students, showing parents how we did it in school. Then we modeled an accompaniment process for home, where we taught parents how, using these materials and strategies, they could help their children in a simple way (Leadership Team 3).

In this sense, the school actively organises activities to promote the continuous involvement of parents in the school's development. Teachers promote high expectations among parents, showing that any student is able to learn with the appropriate support: "the trust that parents see that I have in my students causes them to also strengthen their confidence in their children. By creating that basis of parental confidence, they gradually raise their expectations" (Teacher 7). Students' families are involved in a wide range of relevant school activities, for instance, strategic management decisions, the determination of academic approaches, the organisation of curricular and extra-curricular activities and active participation in academic support strategies, among others.

Differentiation. According to the interviewed teachers, differentiated instruction is mainly based on four types of actions within the lesson: levelling of content complexity according to students' abilities; use of intentional clustering; supporting strategies for underachieving students and appreciation of diversity and equity. These actions seek to address the inequalities present between students due to their contexts. Regarding content levelling, participants highlighted that they make efforts to create a proper balance between the level of difficulty and students' abilities, adapting their teaching strategies based on their knowledge of the students: "sometimes I plan an activity, but then I decrease the degree of complexity if it doesn't work, in order to reinforce students' confidence. Then I make them come back to the difficult exercises" (Teacher 7).

The use of clustering in the classroom was also reported, especially as a way of supporting underachieving students. Extensive use of mixed-ability grouping was observed, creating groups with higher and lower performing students, promoting peer-effect:

I detect which students have better performance and I pair them with students who present difficulties so that among them they can collaboratively undertake the activities (...) they understand content better when they learn it from a peer (Teacher 6).

Teachers also reported a wide range of strategies to support underachieving students, such as reinforcement workshops, parental workshops and tutoring with the scholar integration programme. In this sense, staff understand the importance of adapting their teaching practices and strategies in different ways, in order to ensure that all students can thrive equally.

Content Category

Content adaptations. Participants remarked upon the existence of a curricular flexibility in class planning and management. Teachers are free to autonomously implement the curriculum as they consider appropriate. Thus, teachers are able to manage their time in the most effective manner to achieve content coverage goals.

They reported using their own discretion to analyse the most appropriate coverage strategy, promoting a proper balance between time, curricular requirements and students' characteristics. Although each teacher can exhibit different curricular coverage strategies, the general outcomes tended to be similar: "in general, all courses are between 89%-100% compliance" (Leadership Team 3). To strike this proper balance, the use of curricular contextualisation based on students' needs was reported. Teachers remarked upon the importance of generating a link between content and students' needs, perceiving these actions as crucial to promoting ownership of learning, inclusion and equity.

Content implementation. Another factor reported was the strategic planning of learning processes. This planning is not bound to specific lessons, but considers the whole learning process. Teachers remarked upon the importance of having a broad perspective on students' learning progression, creating proper connections between lessons, units, grades, and cycles. This strategic approach requires teachers to be highly methodical about curricular implementation, using autonomy but also precision: "you must be orderly, be very careful to know the programmes, curriculum, contents, and determine the times for each unit" (Teacher 7). Also, teachers reported using data from different evaluations to promote students' progression:

We work a lot using data to guide our management. Therefore, if I have 7% of students who are performing at a lower level finishing the 4th grade, the teacher who takes this 7% in 5th grade, they already know who should be given more support (Leadership Team 3).

Other perceived success factors were innovation and creativity in curriculum implementation, practical adaptations of curricular content, curricular articulation among subjects, use of playful learning strategies and active use of technology in the learning process. Teachers pointed out that ongoing pedagogical innovation has been relevant to the school's achievements: "one aspect that has had a high impact in this school is the ability we have to constantly renew what happens inside the classroom" (Teacher 8). According to teachers, the main objective of these innovative and practical approaches was to create attractive ways to deliver curricular content. Other positive practice described was the fostering of connections between subjects in the same grade. Additionally, participants reported changes to learning environments as a common practice, using a variety of learning spaces.

Content assessment. All participants declared a strong result-oriented pedagogical approach. Teachers take care to analyse the curricular objectives carefully, in order to use the most effective pedagogical approach to achieve

them: “I analyse the level of mastery needed to achieve the content and, above all, what are the learning objectives I will focus the class on. For me, the objectives are decisive” (Teacher 5). To support this result-oriented approach, teachers are careful to use their task-time effectively and align most instructional activities with curricular goals. Despite this orientation towards academic outcomes, teachers understand that standardised evaluations are not their final goal: “we don’t tell them that SIMCE [National Student Assessment] is the goal because it’s not” (Teacher 10).

The leadership team also encourage the use of progressive assessment strategies to support teachers with updated data. The school implemented two key assessment systems to supervise academic progress: the monthly progressive assessment and the triangulation strategy, wherein the leadership team, together with teachers, analyse students’ performance. The monthly progressive assessment is a method in which the school applies a subject evaluation in some grades. The evaluations are tabulated immediately by the leadership team and the results are analysed with each teacher.

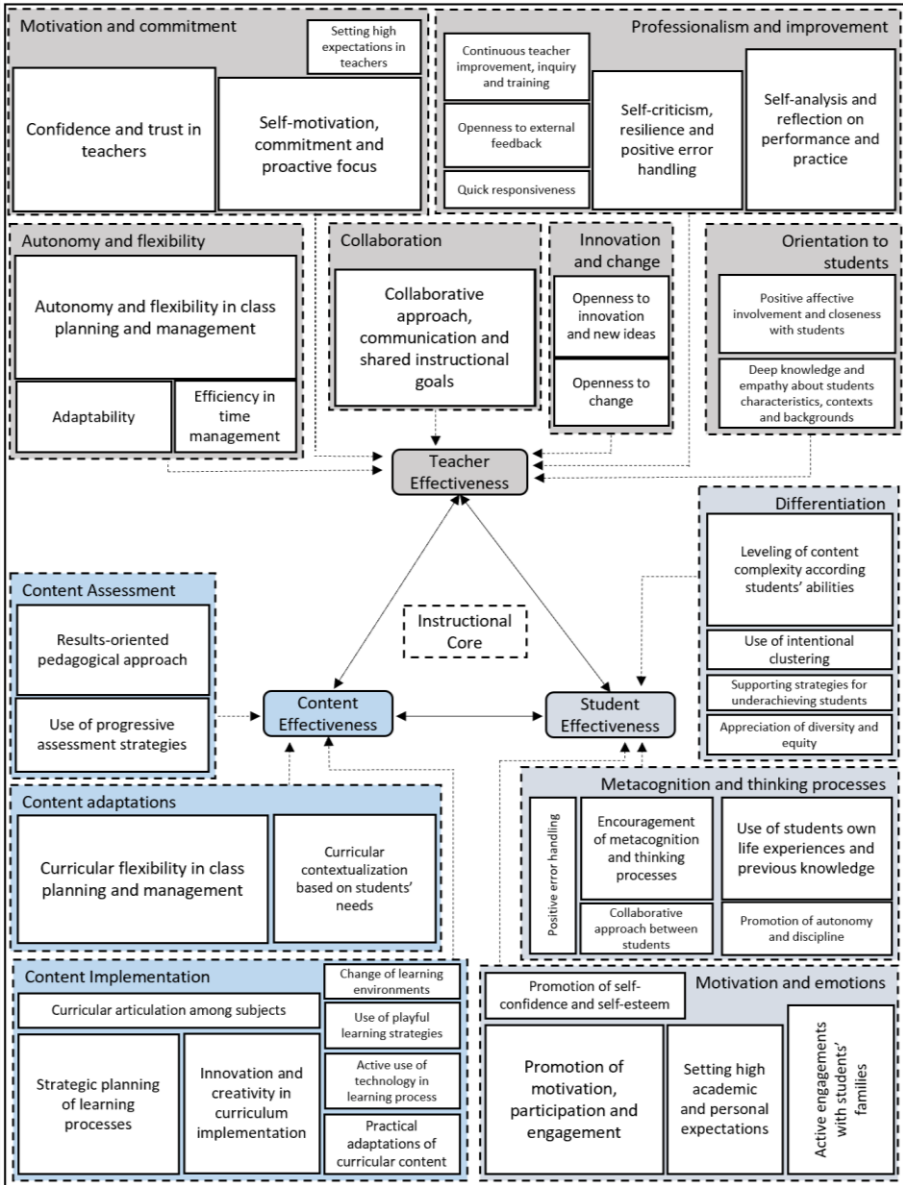


Figure 5. Thematic map of the data analysis.

Discussion and Conclusions

As with previous similar studies in Chile (Bellei et al., 2004; 2014; Education Quality Agency Chile, 2017a), it was possible to detect several school characteristics which were linked, by the informants, to the positive school effect among pupils. The constituent elements of the Instructional Core model were used to analyse and categorise those factors, contrasting those categorisations with the theoretical characteristics described as belonging to effective schools by the existing literature.

The analysis revealed that the beliefs and cultural values shared by the school's community were more crucial to explaining the school's success than concrete practices, contributing to evidence refuting the 'best practice' approach to explaining a school's positive development (Aubert et al., 2008; Flecha, 2014). In this sense, it was not possible to observe structural practices shared among all staff but, instead, a wide range of different successful educational actions and approaches were employed, dependent on the situated context and the technical background and experience of each teacher. Despite these differences regarding practices, it was possible to identify the existence of a strong shared cultural structure based on values and beliefs about the importance of their role in the school and their educational goals, especially regarding students' social vulnerability. This structural positive school culture has been underscored as a key aspect of effective schools (Ainscow et al., 2012b; Sammons & Bakkum, 2011; West et al., 2005). Such a heterogeneous approach is not common among public schools in Chile, which usually use standardised strategies, externally imposed, to confront the hostility and inequity of the education system (Portales & Heilig, 2015). It was, consequently, these multiple values and beliefs that shaped practices and pedagogical approaches, not vice versa. This may be one of the reasons why interviewees indicated the flaws and failures encountered when the educational authorities tried to create 'manuals' to transfer their 'effective practices' to other schools (see for example: Education Quality Agency Chile., 2017b).

Another important finding was that most of the informants portrayed the school's success factors as being strongly interrelated. This complexity of interconnection among internal success factors is concordant with existing

research (MacBeath & Mortimore, 2001; West et al., 2005) and the holistic approach proposed by City et al. (2009) in the Instructional Core model, suggesting that school effectiveness is not just a check-list of characteristics or a ‘recipe’ to be followed, but a multifaceted process. In the case under study, all informants perceived teacher autonomy as one of most important success factors explaining their outstanding results. However, all informants repeatedly connected this feature to other identified success factors. In this sense, teachers and leaders explained that one success factor cannot exist if the others are not present within the school. This could be another explanation of the shortcomings experienced when transferring ‘best practices’ from this school to others.

These are interesting findings considering the failure to successfully scale ‘best practices’ elsewhere (Elmore, 2016). It is important to understand the Chilean education context to comprehend why this school developed its particular internal actions. According to Bellei (2016), Chilean public schools are immersed in an aggressive educational market, where they must to compete with subsidised and private schools while facing the additional challenges of insufficient resources, large class sizes, high proportions of vulnerable or at-risk pupils, the threat of closure and decontextualised regulations and accountability systems. Numerous scholars have remarked upon the lack of equity in educational opportunities between privileged and vulnerable students, above all in societies where competition between public and private schools is promoted (Ball, 2017; Francis & Mills, 2012; Reay, 2017; Stephens & Gillies, 2012). Thus, it is important to emphasise that in the case of this Chilean school, effectiveness occurs not because of, but despite, the national policy context and educational structures.

Informants also explained that these success factors have altered over the years, reflecting the ongoing nature of the educational process (Fullan, 1992; 2020). For example, the way in which teachers currently understand some success factors, such as autonomy, trust or commitment, is not the same as 10 years ago, when the school’s goals were based on students’ personal development more than academic achievement. In parallel to the improvement that the school has experienced, the way in which these success factors are perceived by the staff has also gradually changed. Therefore, the contextual, cultural, historical and environmental factors of this school are

critical to understanding and explaining its current outstanding results (Ainscow et al., 2012a; Cohen & Ball, 2001). In this sense, the current circumstances of the school are the result of a 20-year process of systematic trial and error based on a strong and sustained cultural belief among all the school's members that the school can make a difference and add value to its students, despite their vulnerable backgrounds and all the complexities faced by Chilean public schools. Thus, the staff of this school have focused their efforts on factors that they can control (Sammons, 2007), such as teaching, leadership and school culture, understanding that the external context and public policy environment are largely beyond their influence.

The interconnection between success factors and the role of internal school actors was also remarked upon extensively in the interviews. Although there were no direct questions regarding internal relationships in the interview schedule, school staff underscored how all actors in the school collaborate in order to achieve expected goals. An example of this was the high value placed by teachers on the decisions and actions undertaken by the leadership team, and, as a response, the trust, respect and commitment of the school's leaders towards teachers. This corresponds with existing research demonstrating that leaders in effective schools are capable of inspiring not only their teams and pupils, but also families and the school community as a whole (Muijs et al., 2010). For instance, when informants explained the existence of high expectations regarding student outcomes, they tended to immediately connect this to the high expectations of teachers set by the leadership team, inducing a cyclical culture of high expectations. As Muijs et al. note (2010, pp.153): “a key leadership role that emerged from the case studies was motivating staff, which was more important than might be the case in more advantaged schools. As has been found in other studies, staff had to work harder to keep these schools successful than those working in less challenging contexts”.

However, it is important to note that the extra efforts made by teachers in order to meet these high expectations and make up for contextual challenges produced unintended consequences. Problems such as stress, disruptions to family life and adaptation issues for new teachers were observed. Also, in this case, collaboration tended to remain internal, as more extensive collaboration with other external actors was limited by the hostile policy

environment. As Sammons and Bakkum (2011, see also Ainscow et al., 2012b) remark, this school could benefit from a more open collaborative approach, engaging external support in order to sustain improvement in the long term. These elements only serve to highlight the fact that equitable education requires supportive structures and policies, not only local actions, to ensure sustainability (Escudero et al., 2013; Ainscow et al., 2012b). Indeed, “a good, fair and equitable education is more democratic than the existence of isolated ‘oases’ of quality in single schools or experiences” (Escudero et al., 2013, pp.219-20, authors’ translation).

Teachers also described a wide range of opportunities to use their discretion and professional judgement in the decision-making process, not only in their classrooms but also in whole-school decisions. This element is key to understanding almost all the success factors presented. According to Lipsky (2010), one of the most important obstacles in the implementation of education policies is the lack of coherence between the interests of leaders and teachers. Teachers tend to perceive education policy as restrictive of their role, due mainly to standardised accountability measures (Hjørne et al., 2010; Hupe & Hill, 2007). Repeatedly during this research, teachers compared their own context to the reality of other public schools, explaining that their peers were trapped by their jobs. Bovens (2010) termed this the accountability trap, in which the main goals of classroom actors are guided not by teachers’ unique understanding of students’ contexts but by impersonal standardisation of education processes established by external actors (Brodkin, 2008; Murphy & Skillen, 2015). In this case, teachers enjoyed total discretion to use their own professional judgement when making decisions about their practice and their students, particularly critical in disadvantaged contexts.

Considering the low number of studies on school effectiveness using case-study approaches in Chile, this research contributes a deep analysis of a successful Chilean public school, providing interesting findings with regards to internal success factors and the interactions among them, which could explain the positive school effect. Further research could explore perceived success factors in a wider sample of public schools throughout the country, similar to other research in Chile (e.g. Bellei et al., 2014), or use statistical measures to correlate some of the success factors identified with quantitative

school outcomes in a larger national sample, following Dobbie and Fryer's (2013) example. In particular, it would be illuminating to investigate whether the success factors identified in this research are shared (or not) by other similar outstanding public schools, in order to identify initial patterns and support the development of better and more equitable education policies. It is important to end by highlighting that the promotion of school effectiveness among public schools in Chile is not only a technical concern, but a social justice imperative

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