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« Some political effects of school choice in Catalonia (Spain) and O'Higgins region (Chile) »

ABSTRACT. - The regulation of school markets is compared in Spain and Chile. In both cases a big sector of private-dependent schools was actively promoted by an authoritarian government years ago, and some democratic administrations have increased educational expenditure later on. The initial conclusions of this analysis highlight the crucial role of the second (agenda setting) and third (cultural definition of the situation) dimensions of power. Roughly speaking, the political agenda has been set in the midst of long-term conflicts between two parties: namely, teachers' unions and some parents associations often claim to defend public education, whereas educational foundations and some religious movements claim to campaign for free education. As to the cultural assumptions on the right to education, it seems that a taken-for-granted hierarchy of school esteem provides a sound legitimation to the current institutional arrangements, but the public realisation of segregating trends also plays a role in the always contingent equilibrium of forces.

The regulation of school admission policies is a bone of contention in many countries, because some political interests rely on school markets whilst others are afraid of their potentially dividing impact. Apart from the many related cleavages that trigger 'cultural wars' in the United States, a quick overview can also mention recent intense debates in Belgium, Britain, Chile, France, the Netherlands and Spain. Among all these cases, Chile and Spain illustrate regimes based on the weak regulation of free, state-run and many subsidised, private-dependent schools. Although both sectors are submitted to common norms with the aim to foster equal opportunities for all, the available evidence unveils many areas where these prescriptions are not enforced due to powerful open and hidden interests in maintaining competition. Any introduction to the matter should also be aware of the authoritarian political projects that institutionalised this arrangement some decades ago in each case.

The first section locates this analysis within the state of the art as portrayed by the Seminar Call for Papers (Felouzis and van Zanten, 2009). The second one summarizes and re-orders some theoretical contributions about power and political agency that make sense of a more specific hypothesis. In the third section we describe the main societal features of education in Spain and Chile that frame our argument and underpin our comparative approach. The fourth one presents our initial findings on conflict, the hierarchical effect and the perception of segregation in these countries. Finally, the discussion section tentatively sketches some key relationships between these empirical conclusions and the former theoretical framework.

Mapping school markets

For the last decades, both scholars and policy-makers involved with education policy have devoted increasing attention to school choice. Nowadays, a useful state of the art pinpoints the following four initial conclusions and main issues for further debate (Felouzis and Zanten, 2009).

- School markets are political constructions. In other words, rather than an optimal institutional design that contributes to reducing transaction costs and fostering organisational effectiveness, the origin of school markets seems to be the success of a particular political project (Ball, 1997; Ball *et al*, 1998). Even more, governments have played both an active role in pro-choice policies as well as in attempts addressed to make markets work for all social classes (Crozier et al, 2008). The general account highlights how market behaviours are

stretching in many diverse education systems through complex formal and informal ways (Butler and van Zanten, 2007).

- A class analysis of family choice strategies is quite consistent with the available evidence. Generally speaking, middle-class parents are prone to calculating the relative advantage of their choice, whereas working-class and minority parents more often comply with the social norm that prioritises the closest educational institution. Although these strategies interact with school marketing, admission and selection policies in intricate ways, the common outcomes of this interaction hardly modify this bias (Zanten, 2002; Reay *et al*, 1997).

- Regulation raises particular political effects in different school markets. For example, in Sweden local authorities are very effective at regulating choice so that the distribution of resources, the composition of intakes and the main outcomes keep and even improve an equitable pattern. However, in Britain current policy configurations do eventually restrain the capacity of authorities for standardising the admission policy of the more prestigious schools (Fletcher-Campbell, 2007).

- Finally, school markets cause important consequences for school systems. At least, their impact on learning via the peer effect and their significant contribution to school segregation are noticeable (Olmedo and Santa Cruz, 2008). Besides, some evidence suggests that social cohesion is also at stake for many reasons: segregation may be a potential trigger of 'ethnicised' local conflicts (Felouzis *et al*, 2004), and school differentiation may stimulate middle-class families to fly away from heterogeneous neighbourhoods (Maurin, 2004).

Power relations and school choice

This paper is focused on the third issue, political effects. Although we cannot elaborate on it much deeper, here we will briefly sketch the theoretical rationale and the basic tenets of our leading analytical hypothesis, which takes issues of power and political agency into account.

Often, researchers, policy-makers and activists have turned to international comparison looking for a sound general rule on the pros and cons of school choice and school markets, but univocal receipts are not available until now. Generally speaking,

empirical findings have almost demolished two ideological beliefs. On the one hand, proponents of choice policies expected them to improve academic quality and citizens' participation by stimulating inter-school competition and giving a higher voice to parents in school governance. However, it is very difficult to underpin any of these propositions with evidence coming from comparison between OECD countries (e.g., PISA, TIMSS, IEAL); rather, these data highlight other factors of school-systems performance than their pattern of admission policies (e.g. average parents' education level, public expenditure or composition effects). The hypothesis is less and less reliable if Latin American countries are observed, because in this world region (formal and informal) choice and poor performance have coexisted for decades. On the other hand, critics of choice policies argued that a fixed allocation based on rigid intake areas was the fair solution, because it halted competition and guaranteed an equitable social composition to all schools. However, in the most extreme case of this institutional arrangement, France, researchers have found out notorious signs of inter-school competition and aggravating segregation for the last years.

Therefore, a widespread conclusion states that regulation based on choice or intake areas eventually brings about particular outcomes in different school markets. Let us repeat that choice is quite divisive in such countries as New Zealand or Britain but appears to have contributed to social cohesion in others like Sweden (Fletcher-Campbell, 2007). Coherently, it is not plausible to for the main factors in particular institutions such as la "*charte scolaire*", vouchers or subsidies conditioned to compliance with standard requirements. On the contrary, our attention should move to power relations underlying all these arrangements and qualifying them in significant ways. Precisely, an overview and a systematic comparison of recent developments in Spain and Chile shed light on the role of power relations in school admission policies in two countries where choice is institutionalised under a regime of "weak" regulation (see below).

In essence, power consists of some social agents' capacity to impinge on others' actions by means of explicit mandates, agenda setting, and the cultural framing of available options. As to school markets, explicit mandates establish different admission policies that follow three main orientations: free school admission, regulated choice, and tight coupling of schools with their catchment area. Secondly, since states inscribe this policy issue in their discursive elaboration of the 'general will', school markets become a political guideline that influential actors recall in order to privilege or exclude some issues in the political agenda. For instance, most pro-choice discourses seldom

understand quality as transparent admission criteria but emphasize the alleged, quality-related benefits of school effectiveness. Finally, some policy orientations cannot be easily introduced into the scope of debate if political agents believe that markets are inevitable, that traditional schools have some privileges, or conversely, that a certain regulation is necessary (Lukes, 2005; Jessop, 2007).

Furthermore, any agent may draw on violence, cultural arbitrary imposition, money, labour power, expert knowledge and so on in order to influence others. But these resources also imply their own political costs: for example, unions and movements must be sure of a significant support to strikes or marches, lobbies need information and privileged channels of influence, adverse news may be a credible threat until they become routine, and open conflict always entails the risk to lose. Interestingly, welfare regimes have followed strong lineages of path dependency due to the equilibrium of these forces in certain countries (Korpi, 2001), and the key role of analogous balances of power has also been highlighted with regards to pro-choice (Ball, 2007) and anti-choice (Felouzis *et al*, 2004) policies of school admission.

In the end, the big picture reveals that "social limits of possibility are not independent of beliefs about limits" (Wright, 2006: 41). Educational and sociological research should not only inquire how do these policies work, but also why do subtle strategies privilege or seclude the topic in public debate and how are cultural assumptions institutionalised. A well-grounded sociological point states that policy- makers, educators, families, students and activists do precisely fashion these beliefs by means of their political resources.

In the following paragraphs we will try to underpin this interpretation with qualitative and quantitative evidence coming from several researches carried out in Spain and Chile. To us, in the last judgement school admission is not a technical problem that sophisticated best practices can solve, but a web of social interests that now and then challenge the contingent equilibrium consolidated in a particular setting.

School choice policies in Spain and Chile

Despite a number of differences, Spain and Chile share certain commonalities that underpin some cautious comparison of their recent societal and educational changes. From a historical perspective, in both cases authoritarian governments have actively promoted private-dependent schools at the same time as their school enrolment rates climbed during the 1960s and 1970s in the former, and during the 1970s and 1980s in the latter.

Their education systems are divided into two comparable 'sectors' composed by state-dependent and private- dependent schools (with a small third one embracing a few private independent institutions). Public schools are run by autonomous governments in Spain and municipalities in Chile, and private- dependent schools are subsidised by the state in each country. Certainly, similar distributions and institutional arrangements are not strange in the OECD (notably, in Belgium) and Latin America (with the exception of Cuba and Uruguay), but these two countries may be singled out for the authoritarian influence in the original definition of these school system.

Although their levels of human development are different –Spain (HDI_{2006}= 0.949) being in a better position than Chile (HDI_{2006}=0.874)—, some key indicators of their educational development are not far away from the North American and Western European average. For instance, regarding primary-to-secondary school-life expectancy, Chile scored 11.7 years and Spain 13.1 years in 2006; actually, the Chilean value is almost equal to the Latin American average (11.8 years) and the average of North America and Western Europe (12.4 years) would be the mid point between the Chilean (-0.7) and the Spanish (+0.7) values (UNESCO-UIS, 2008). In the same year only 14,4% of students achieved levels four or five of the PISA examination in Spain, while the figure was 14,5% in Chile (the OECD average was 27,3%). However, Chile had a major proportion of students at the first level or below (36,3%) than Spain (25,7%), the OECD average being 23,1% (OECD, 2008).

The regulation of the two school sectors has been a permanent bone of contention in Spanish politics for the last century, and its controversial connotation has not declined since the democratic transition. Roughly, all the main education reforms affecting the 'agreements' (*concerts*) that regulate the conditions of public subsidies to private-dependent schools have triggered open and intense controversies. In 1985 the Act on the Right to Education established that these agreements were conditional to catering

for the immediate intake area and implementing co-education, and was actively opposed by the Conservative party and the Catholic Parents Association. Noticeably, in 2006 the Organic Act on Education emphasized their compulsory commitment to the immediate intake area, implemented stricter control on their margin for charging fees, and required a municipal representative to sit in their council. It was also actively opposed by the Conservative party and some religious movements, although some associations of Catholic schools eventually accepted a compromise with the government. For all this period these private-dependent schools have been allowed to draw on several informal selective admission practices, mostly due to extremely light surveillance of their financial policies.

In Chile, the authoritarian government overhauled the traditional public educational system by means of a quasi-markets decree passed in 1981, and finally promulgated by the dictators' final act in 1990. Afterwards, democratic governments have equilibrated the balance with some targeted programmes that have basically favoured the most vulnerable municipal primary and secondary schools. Although political conflicts on this issue did not surface for fifteen years, the secondary students' marches brought the issue to the front page in 2006. Actually, a few years before some requisites had already been imposed that asked private-dependent schools to enrol a proportion of students with special education needs, but more recently these students are also favoured by a surplus subsidy delivered to their school.

Finally, let us highlight that the basic analogy concerning fees also entails an important difference. In Spain, they are understood as a necessary exception to the free school principle— and their relative amount is much lower, whereas in Chile they constitute a taken-for-granted principle— and their amount ranks from low to really high levels. From the angle of school choice policies, a comparison of Spain and Chile is likely to provide evidence on educational markets that were created at the same time as a politically powerful private-dependent sector was consolidated, and have been weakly regulated with a relaxed tolerance for some advantageous informal practices. Therefore, any eventual commonality with respect to our general inquire on power relations may be significant, but overall, we must mention too that the implementation of relatively stricter controls in Spain is likely to qualify admission in this country compared to the more 'liberal', Chilean contrasting example.

Conflicts, hierarchies and segregation

In this section we will portray an exploratory analysis of the second and the third faces of power relations involved in school markets in Spain and Chile. To start with, the outcome of conflicts about school preferences and selection has defined the agenda of the issue in these countries. Besides, people also seem to recall social hierarchies and divisions in order to judge the two school sectors.

Spain: a conflictive agenda

The requisites of the 'agreements' (*concerts*) whereby the government and autonomous communities regulate private-dependent schools were the bone of contention in the eighties as well as they are nowadays. On the one hand, some teacher unions, Progressive pedagogic associations and left-wing political parties traditionally claim for a stricter surveillance or even a nationalisation of the sector. They supported the 1985 Act on the Right for Education, marched to obtain a sufficient budget for the 1990s comprehensive reform, complained against the 2002 Conservative Act on Quality, and have split with regards to the 2006 Act on Education (Valiente and Rambla, 2009, forthcoming).

On the other hand, twenty years ago religious and laic associations representing private schools learnt to compromise with governmental policy in exchange for ad-hoc, local advantage (Bonal, 2000). For all these years they have been officially allowed to charge a fee, and implicitly, to select their students in personal interviews. In the nineties, their schools were the first ones to pilot experimental, comprehensive programmes which were simultaneously delayed in neighbouring state-run schools due to budget shortcomings. The recent extension of public subsidies to their infant education courses was not only very helpful for their financial situation, but also reinforced their position compared to smaller state schools where children arrive from a variety of nursery schools. If a bigger school can provide subsidised courses for one- and two-year olds, and avails of tolerated informal margins to select its intake since the age of three (i.e. the first official course), it can also promise a place in a 'selected' primary programme and a smooth transition to compulsory secondary education (Benito and González, 2007).

This interest group influences on mayors, mobilises middle-class voters, and sits in local, regional and state school councils. This strategy has been so profitable that some high- reputation public schools have emulated its tactics. As a rule, private-dependent schools have seldom been required to comply with their catchment area in

some municipalities, some effective informal entries to the desired public schools have become a custom in some localities, and most private-dependent and a few state-run schools have been successful at opening new classrooms so that the families who fly away from neighbouring, segregated schools find a 'safe' refuge (Villarroya, 2007; Rambla, 2006; Síndic de Greuges, 2007).

Spain: a taken-for-granted hierarchical effect

When individuals speak about their colloquial images of schools, they depict an abstract map of schools that sidelines the importance of social relations and reflects a true hierarchy between middle-class experienced choosers and working-class families who are prone to understand schooling as an external, inexorable reality.

Those families who rely on the first view are actually imposing their position to those others who prefer proximity as a criterion. Their explicit reasoning and the probable emerging conflicts have a noticeable effect in many localities, since some schools are eventually attributed a high social esteem, while others are not, regardless of their pedagogic work, their facilities or their implication in the community.

Actually, although choice was not such a burning issue as it became ten years later, in the nineties many stratagems were already recorded in some municipalities located in Catalonia and Castilla- La Mancha (Rambla, 2006). Certainly, they are the norm nowadays (Benito and González, 2007).

Spain: rampant segregation of foreigners (at least)

For a long time, due to scarce official sources, research findings could only report scattered evidence of segregation of slow performing students in public schools in Spain (Villarroya, 2003). Some of them suggested that the two sectors were polarising in terms of this variable (Bonal, Rambla and Ajenjo, 2004). Recent wide-scale analyses of PISA data also show that class origin is biased in favour of private-dependent schools (Calero and Escardíbul, 2007).

After elaborating a new source by crossing the Census and School Statistics in Catalonia, new findings underpin this diagnosis at least with respect to fore¡gn- born students (Valiente and Rambla, 2009, forthcoming).

- A decreasing trend of Hutchens unevenness is significant, with an important reduction between 2001 and 2004, and a steady trend later on. Coherently, the Dissimilarity Index shifted from 55% in 2001 to 46% in 2006, that is, at the end of the period a smaller number of 'foreign students' should move to a different school in order to get an even distribution.

- For all these years, within-district segregation has been much more intense than between-district segregation. Thus, it is not reasonable to attribute the divide to the ongoing urban sprawl; on the contrary, many 'foreign students' are enrolled in certain schools at the same time as their presence is much lower in other, neighbouring schools.

- On the other hand, from 2001 to 2006 isolation indexes show a rampant phenomenon. The raw isolation index (I) depicts a curve moving upwards, and the corrected isolation index (IC) replicates the same net outcome controlling for the total amount of newcomers. Noticeably, more and more 'foreign students' have become concentrated in a few schools where they can hardly meet autochthonous mates. In 2006 they were 12% of students, but most of them attended schools with a 25% of students born in other countries.

Chile: revisiting an old conflict

Explicit conflict was clandestine in the eighties when the dictatorship imposed choice as the new institutional arrangement. In fact, the inclusion of this precept in the last act promulgated by this government did not set an easy context to enact this political cleavage during the political transition (starting the day after the education act was passed in 1990).

At a more local level, recent ethnographic work has documented the pervasive advantage of private and private-dependent schools in shaping the rules of the game in a municipality located in the O'Higgins Region. Since these schools are favoured by much bigger budgets than their alleged municipal competitors, and they are also allowed to expel undesired students at will, they can simply skip most educational and urban conflicts. Their better position with regards to these tensions is even greater in labour relations, because their legal regime actually empowers head-teachers with a great autonomy to manage human resources (Frias, 2009, forthcoming, pp. 294-6). Actually, before the recent reforms, private-dependent schools were officially induced

to exclude students with special education needs so that they could achieve higher grades in the periodic SIMCE, or survey of academic quality (Valenzuela, Belleï and Rios, 2008).

Since 1990 democratic governments have increased educational expenditure and improved municipal schools, but they have not challenged the main assets of the private sector. The main teachers' union (*Colegio de Profesores*) has attacked this state of affairs, but its resources (membership, authority) are not powerful enough in the radically business-friendly frame of Chilean legislation. However, secondary students' demonstrations in 2006 shook the whole country with their vindication of educational rights. Actually, these students complained at many obstacles that hindered their entrance to universities, one of which was the uneven endowment of municipal schools compared to private-dependent and private- independent institutions (García Huidobro, 2007).

Chile: a taken-for-granted hierarchical effect

A sharper hierarchy seems to pattern the social esteem of schools in Chile compared to Spain. At least, two strands of initial evidence point at this conclusion.

First, explicit resignation is much more visible in our Chilean ethnography than it is in many other countries. Generally, researchers have found out a bias between strategic choosers and customary adherents to proximity. Besides Spain (Rambla, 2006; Benito and González, 2007), similar conclusions may be stated for Britain (Ball, 1997; Crozier *et al*, 2008) and France (Zanten, 2002). However, in Chile our findings report a wide array of working- class families who aim to become strategic choosers. Although in many popular neighbourhoods the traditional preference for the closest educational institution is quite important, significant groups of our interviewees from these areas had calculated their alternatives. Instead of simply mentioning the social norm, some parents said that they had to adapt their preferences to the only school they could afford. Even more, others did actively enact self-deception mechanisms to cope with the frustration of unattainable private-dependent schools (Frias, 2009, forthcoming, pp 263-8)

Second in Chile most parents declare to public opinion surveys that their offspring would rather attend socially homogeneous educational institutions. This is a striking

pattern compared to the United States, where most respondents prefer homogeneous schools (Valenzuela, Belleï, Rios, 2008, p. 9).

Chile: exacerbating school divides

There is certain scholar consensus on the high degree of segregation that divides Chilean schools (Narodowsky and Nores, 2002). Furthermore, recent researches even report an increasing trend. Their poignant conclusions may be summarised by a list of well-grounded propositions:

- Basic indexes score high grades of segregation for socially vulnerable students with regards to international standards. This index also records the main rampant trend of segregation (Valenzuela, Belleï, Rios, 2008, p. 22). Conversely, the population with a high socio-economic status reflects even higher indexes of social segregation in the Chilean school system than their poorer compatriots (Valenzuela, Belleï, Rios, 2008, p. 22).

- The data also show that vulnerable students are much more segregated in private schools than they are in municipal schools; even more, they are also more segregated in those institutions funded by private fees than they are in those ones that receive some kind of public funds (Valenzuela, Belleï, Rios, 2008, p. 25). The index of segregation experiences a dramatic and significant increase with the number of private- dependent schools that cater for a locality (Valenzuela, Belleï, Rios, 2008, p. 48).

- In a big sample of Chilean municipalities, the index of urban segregation is associated with a more-than-proportional increase of school segregation. Even more, logistic models reveal that the effect of private-dependent enrolment is persistent beyond the effect of many indicators of housing segregation (Valenzuela, Belleï, Rios, 2008, p. 40).

Discussion: agenda and legitimation effects

The former comparison of school-admission policies and contentions in Spain and Chile highlights three main conclusions, which also make reference to the faces of power consisting of agenda setting as well as the cultural definition of alternatives.

A first general observation is that educational conflicts between public and private schools are very significant in both countries. Although they have not been so periodic in Chilean democracy as in the Spanish case, the students' movement has recently produced a revival of an old contention. Actually, the dictatorship imposed choice and transformed this measure into a banner of its political legacy.

These conflicts also reproduce an analogous pattern in the education policy networks, since in both countries private schools and associations are quite good at lobbying, and Left-wing forces are prone to mobilise their supporters in order to defend public education. An important consequence of the resulting balances has been the inclusion of strict inspection in the agenda of central and autonomous Spanish governments. A similar one has been the new significance of preferential subsidies as a tool for educational redistribution in Chilean politics.

A second comment is focused on cultural hierarchies of school esteem and family strategies insofar as researchers have once again noticed two common patterns of strategic interaction in our countries. As to school policies, private-dependent schools are often successful when imposing their selective practices; on the other hand, as to family strategies, the influence of middle-class skilled choosers is prevailing. Significantly, these patterns produce a recurrent effect on political preferences too, because school markets are widely taken for granted despite periodic political strife.

Notably, the strength of market-driven assumptions is likely to modify working-class beliefs and preferences into explicit frustration. Although research reports find out a traditional, customary kind of social action among popular classes in many countries, in Chile an important share of these groups exhibits an instrumental, rational kind of social action in the school market. When facing the final unequal outcome, either they have to adapt their preferences by dismissing the value of unachievable possibilities or they transform their own former perceptions of school esteem. Thus, our Chilean ethnography maybe has detected an unknown effect of these schooling regimes featured by two main institutional sectors and a loose surveillance.

Our final point alludes to the twofold connection between school markets and social segregation. From the former to the latter, the connection is established through the polarisation of classes as well as ethnic majorities and minorities. But a reverse link is probably at stake too, since segregating trends may induce the political agents to re-open conflict in this type of two-sector schooling regimes which are translated into a

political cleavage. At least, the making and the implementation of the 2006 Organic Act on Education enacts this process in Spain; and the sequence of minor reform, students' protest and major reform hints that something similar is happening in Chile

Conclusion

Our tentative conclusions are summarized by stating that school markets probably provoke important political effects. This is a reliable finding in Britain, where policy change was dramatic in the eighties (Ball, 2008), that may be replicated in two political transitions from authoritarian to democratic rule. The former discussion highlights the persistence of school-choice conflicts in Spain and Chile since the seventies, when two different dictatorships controlled the countries. Actually, they settled and actively promoted big sectors of private-dependent schools that have become central pieces of the current educational regimes. Afterwards, successive political alignments and balances of power have introduced the issue into the official agenda or have constrained its relevance in public opinion.

The naturalisation of a school- esteem hierarchy brings this macro-political equilibrium to everyday life. The landscape of family strategies does not differ from other countries, except for the long-term influence of the more selective private-dependent institutions. In Chile, the culture of market competition also seems to have trickled down to informal working-classes, although they are not objectively benefited from the current situation. Finally, segregation may be influencing back on political strategies, at least this is a reliable possibility according to our evidence.

We cannot develop the policy implications of this conclusion any longer in this paper but simply make a final plea. Briefly, let us state that these findings also provide an argument for methods of institutional design that are quite aware of power relations. Certainly, institutions may make a difference but they are the outcome of deeply engrained political conflicts. Hopes of neutral problem- solving by means of reforms or experimental programmes may prove futile unless they take these conflicts into account.

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