



With Our Eyes on the Students. City of Berlin School: Keys to a Democratic Transformation

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In order to fully understand our school and its philosophy, you will first need to learn a little bit about who we are and how we became teachers. We are both first-generation professionals. We are also the first in our families who have both studied at the school and university level in public education. Throughout our lives we faced vulnerability, endured poverty and confronted social injustice firsthand. On a personal level, everything we have achieved has to do with effort and perseverance. Professionally, we have worked across the different types of education providers that exist in Chile's educational system, both private and subsidized. Our commitment to democratic education emerges directly from the core of our personal stories and experiences.

To advocate for democratic education is to be able to listen to what our community stakeholders say about their needs to obtain greater social and emotional development. When we reflect on this, we are reminded of the

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African proverb that says that “the child who is not embraced by his tribe will burn the village to feel its warmth.” The episodes of social conflict Chile has experienced over the past three years also come to mind: despite all the lack of opportunities that this society offers (or does not offer) to our children and young people, we believe that they lack a sense of welcomeness, of feeling loved, listened and understood. If we don’t change the adult-centric educational view at every level, and don’t dedicate ourselves to embracing our student’s experiences, future generations of young people will continue to burn villages to feel the warmth of their tribe.

The Berlin City School is fifty-eight years old. It is located on Los Placeres hill, one of the largest geographical and demographic hills in Valparaíso. The school serves four- to thirteen-year-old students from early education levels to eighth grade. We work with a student population with a social vulnerability index of 92%, which in this case is representative of high level of marginalization in variables such as income, household conformation, parental engagement and health, among others.

The school currently serves 239 students. This might not represent a high percentage of the enrollment at the community level, since the Valparaíso Local Public Education Service (SLEP) has a total enrollment of 17,000 students. But when we started working together in 2017, we had an even smaller student population. In 2015, as a result of a long teacher strike, the school only had 115 students. However, enrollment has grown progressively every year since 2017. A larger student population has positively impacted the school’s financial health,¹ allowing us to continue to focus on attracting more families and students.

When Francisco started his term as the school principal, he had a clear vision of the type of education he wanted the school to offer to the community. He wanted to create a school based on the mission of ensuring students’ rights, focusing in aspects essential to build greater educational social justice for all the children enrolled in the school. This is the vision that configured our journey and its milestones.

Back in 2017 some of our first tasks were to revamp many of the bureaucratic internal processes, so that we could align our expectations to democratize the operation of the school. This meant that the sociocultural and psycho-emotional needs of students needed to become an essential asset. Hence, the way we designed our school’s Institutional Educational

¹In Chile, public and subsidized schools receive funding based on their enrollment and attendance.

Project (PEI, for its acronym in Spanish) and the Educational Improvement Plan (PME, for its acronym in Spanish) needed to be in direct relationship to the needs of the school's stakeholders.

The PEI defines a school's values and key pedagogical principles, its goals, as well as pedagogical approaches and the roles of each of the members of the educational community (non-teaching workers of the school, families and students). The PME operationalizes what the PEI declares, establishing short, medium and long-term goals, and setting the strategies to carry out the PEI. These documents are relevant because beyond being mere pointless paperwork, they offer the possibility that allowed us to plan and explore how to build institutional alignment across important domains. In our school, both documents were created with the direct participation of all the actors of the educational community: teachers, non-teaching workers, families, students and management team. Consultations, surveys, meetings, workshops and days of reflection ensured stakeholder involvement along the way. Finally, both institutional documents were ratified by democratic vote.

In this chapter, we wish to share with you some of the most relevant strategies incorporated in this democratic planning process. The following points introduce a brief description of the actions we've taken and offer a reflection on the opportunities and challenges of enacting the type of democratic and participatory path we've chosen to follow.

A) CREATION OF AN INNOVATION UNIT

Our school is determined to pursue the value of *Pedagogical Innovation* as one of the core attributes of its identity. This is expressed in the school's Educational Improvement Plan, which explains that the school is focused on promoting the design of pedagogical practices of an innovative and experimental nature that, in a collaborative and inclusive manner, encourage analysis and reflection processes to positively impact the development of student skills, attitudes and learning, promoting creativity, decision-making, and problem solving.

The desire to innovate stems out of the need to listen to all stakeholders of the school community, in order to accurately capture the way in which our students, workers and families propose to address their various needs. During the pandemic, especially under the strict quarantine implemented by the Chilean government, this permanent openness to innovation led us to reflect on how this new scenario could be seen as an opportunity, rather

than a weakness. Under the social distancing period, many of our decisions were consulted through virtual surveys open to all community stakeholders. However, with the return to face-to-face instruction that followed one of the world's longest school closures, we experienced a hostile school climate we had neither anticipated nor were prepared to address. For a while, it seemed as if the school's collective identity was suddenly replaced by a disconnected conjunction of individual beings. Little by little we are resuming our path of collective coexistence, finding ourselves again one step at a time.

This innovation core value sparked the creation of our school's Innovation Unit. This is a space in which our school develops collective agreements, protocols and projects, mainly oriented to transforming instruction and the school's curriculum. Some of the key initiatives include the *No-grade Project*; the *Socio-emotional Linking Weeks*; and campaigns to explore student interests, to shape the complementary curriculum all public schools in Chile can develop. We believe that most of these experiences and ways to enact our democratic orientation relate to the notion of distributed leadership (Maureira Cabrera, 2018, p. 2) with the wellbeing, learning and rights of our students at its core.

B) CREATION OF OUR SCHOOL'S MANAGEMENT TEAM

Another key initiative was the creation of our school's Management Team. This unit comprises a member of the faculty, the teacher that leads of the Innovation Unit, the leader of School Culture (or Climate), the coordinator of the School Integration Program (PIE, for its acronym in Spanish), and the school's leadership team: the Principal, the Safeguarding Officer, and the head of the Pedagogical Technical Unit (UTP, for its acronym in Spanish).

The mission of the Management Team is to ensure the viability of the different curricular and pedagogical processes carried out in the school. This team operates under the principles of joint decision-making and is fully committed to processes of constant evaluation and compliance, holding all stakeholders accountable to honor any agreements that might have been made. Ultimately, the Management Team will measure the impact of the actions developed during each school period.

While setting up leadership teams is a common practice in Chilean schools, our decision to expand this team intended to foster greater inclusion and participation from other relevant leaders in our community.

Through the simultaneous participation of all stakeholders, we expected to gain alignment between decisions both at the senior leadership level and in the classroom. As of 2022, a representative of the non-teaching school workers (clerks, administrative staff, classroom assistants) has also joined the Management Team.

C) VALUES AS A PATHWAY TO EXCELLENCE

In our school, students have the opportunity to recognize their peers when they think that they demonstrate commitment to our core values: autonomy, creativity, participation, perseverance, respect for others, and coexistence with the environment. Students are invited to vote in order to democratically decide which classmates should be recognized for each value. This initiative is not restricted only to students. Teachers, non-teaching workers and the management team can also participate, although our votes do not have the same weight as those of the students. The final decision falls, ultimately, on the will of the student body.

Unlike most schools in our country, Berlin City School does not participate in an annual or semester recognition of students' academic performance. The recognition of commitment to our core values is the only award our students receive. This approach is highly strategic and is meant to counter the development of an individualistic approach that competition has baked into our education system. Our aim is to seize processes of student recognition to promote attributes like camaraderie, collaboration, mutual support and learning from peers. This decision has given students without an outstanding academic track the opportunity to be publicly recognized for other attributes, such as their leadership and autonomy. Through this recognition we hope to help our students to see their own talents and capabilities and to find ways to share them with others.

D) STUDENT'S INTEREST AT THE CORE OF THE CURRICULUM

The extended School Day (JEC, for its acronym in Spanish), a national reform started back in 1997, gives schools the opportunity to receive complementary resources to fund weekly hours of instruction outside of the limits of the national curriculum (*free disposal hours is the term used*). However, given constraints such as the need to perform at high levels at national high-stakes standardized tests, many schools use this time to

focus on workshops and special support to help students improve their academic achievement, especially in language and mathematics.

In the case of the Ciudad de Berlín school, *free disposal hours* are used to implement workshops according to themes and disciplines proposed by our students. This information is constantly gathered by the school's Management Team through surveys, offering students the choice between carrying on with whatever workshop they are participating in or proposing new alternatives. After analyzing the survey thoroughly, the team summarizes the findings in a report which indicates key themes; this report proves to be extremely useful and allows us to prioritize. Finally, the feasibility of carrying out the proposed workshops is determined against the available school budget, and also in direct consultation with teachers, so that they can assess whether the proposed workshops resonate with their own interests, skills and expertise.

Currently, our school has a total of weekly six *free disposal hours*. Two of these are used for a Personal and Emotional Development Workshop, planned by the UTP Team and the School Climate team, and carried out by head teachers. The remaining four hours offer options in areas like Arts, Music, Debate, Gender and Diversity, Journalism, Environment, Gardening, Sports, among others. Also, after school activities like Football, Handball, Skating, Chess, Dance, Reading Club, and Folklore address students' interests and proposals.

This year we asked teachers, non-teaching staff and families to take part in the survey. The goal was to explore similarities and differences between student and adult preferences. Students continue to have the same interests. They continue to request personal and emotional development workshops and include new interests like a video game workshop or a board games workshop; they also expressed interest in receiving cooking lessons. Adults, on the other hand, expressed interest in generating alternatives to support student's academic achievement through more focus on reading comprehension skills, basic math operations and problem solving. Families expressed a strong desire to have English classes available from the earliest educational levels.

E) NO-GRADE PROJECT

Starting in 2017, the school worked on the design of a new learning evaluation protocol. This process was open to participation of all members of the school community. The goal was to balance the focus in learning

outcomes with process quality measures and character development metrics. This drove us to think of ways to build more on formative assessments in order to communicate both to students and to families the degree of progress in the development of abilities and/or skills included in the national curriculum.

The *No-grade project* is based on the principles of learning oriented assessment, following the guidelines of the Assessment Reform Group (Broadfoot et al., 1999). “The assessment for learning is the process of seeking and interpreting evidence to be used by students and their teachers to decide where students are in their learning processes, where they need to go and how best to get there” (Broadfoot et al., 1999).

The Chilean education system has traditionally assigned a highly relevant role to grades, using them as requisites to apply for scholarships, college admissions, and other state benefits. The grading system in Chile has a grade scale from 1.0 to 7.0 and the passing grade is 4.0 or higher. Hence, the *No-grade Project* implied the progressive replacement of the traditional system of qualification by a system of qualitative appreciation of student performance.

Our first step in this process was to implement the new approach at the preschool level which is much more open for qualitative assessments of a student’s progress. We presented the project to the families, explaining that our goal was to formulate an evaluation system “without grades” focused on and for the progress of learning and autonomy of students. We also said that our intentions were to reveal the progress in student learning, putting their individual progress at the center, focusing on what the student has achieved, what is yet to be achieved and what has not been achieved, through qualitative assessment instruments. These ideas were very well received by the community. Noticeably, all of the students from that first cohort of the No-Grade Project still remain enrolled in our school.

Another key step was the formation of a group called “School Success,” which received training on new assessment strategies. To date we continue to use systematic training, with constant support from professors from the University of Chile and the Catholic University of Valparaíso. We also collaborate with the University of Chile, participating with a group of schools that promote innovation.² And with the Catholic University of Valparaíso, we are supporting the creation of another network of schools that want to implement alternative student learning evaluation protocols.

² Network of schools for the promotion of assessment innovation

These steps have contributed to the sense of professionalization among our school's teachers. But implementing this project has not been easy. They have had to learn to navigate the national curriculum, on the subjects and grades they teach, determining the criteria through which they will capture the essential learning their students need to develop, as well as ways through which they can assess that qualitatively, in alignment to our school core values.

In spite of many challenges, we have been able to transform the national curriculum into a sequence of key learning objectives that help us to think about learning in terms of yearly expected outcomes, palpable for both students and teachers. This approach has proved to be extremely valuable, particularly with the arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic, and it enabled us to focus only on what we considered the most relevant aspects of the curriculum during the period of remote instruction.

Our new assessment system is first and foremost centered on our students and their trajectories. We work hard to provide information about student learning at each educational level, including their achievements, challenges, and preferences. Teachers are essential in collecting such valuable information and they always count on the support of the school's student support team. Collaborating together, teachers and counselors conduct interviews, focus groups, and process background information from the student's previous years, establishing the basis of each student's work over the year. This initial evaluation and assessment process takes place during the first three weeks of the school year; this information is presented to the teachers' council no later than the first week of April.³ After that point, the implementation of differentiated learning and assessment plans begins.

Feedback is a fundamental component of this approach: we foster the participation and commitment of students, allowing them to take part in the development of their evaluation approaches, protocols and tools. This opens up the floor for a wide set of possibilities, and it even allows to expand the scope to have students participating in self-assessments and peer-assessments. Improving these last elements remains one of our current concerns.

Families access information about student's progress individually and collectively. We conduct parent-teacher interviews; we also produce and

³The academic school year in Chile begins the first week of march, and typically finishes the second week of December.

send written summaries on the different activities carried out by students in the classroom. And we have one formal instance, at the end of each semester, where the head teacher meets with parents to deliver a semi-annual assessment report, which indicates achievements, challenges and opportunities for the family to engage and support their student's learning. Families highly appreciate this.

Democratizing the ways students participate in learning assessment processes remains a challenge that is far from fully mastered. Today, our students can decide for themselves what they think is the most appropriate way to demonstrate their learning. But this is much easier for our older students than for the younger ones. The development of values and attitudes such as autonomy as well as the ability to critically judge one's own performance is an important aspect of this work. We believe it supports both learning and a greater democratization within our community.

F) SOCIOEMOTIONAL LINKING WEEKS

Since March 2019, we have implemented two *Socioemotional Linking Weeks* that take place at the beginning of the school period (March), when students return from their summer vacation. This strategy attends to students' needs to adjust and adapt to the expectations of rigorous academic work after a long summer break. In these *Linking Weeks*, we all become participants in a process in which we replace formal class time for activities focused on the socioemotional well-being of every member of our school.

During these initial days, we cover a variety of topics and activities that foster emotional self-awareness, self-knowledge and generation of bonds between peers through play and teamwork. Students and teachers also have the opportunity to invest time getting to learn from our school's core values. And they also have time to remember or to become familiar with the school's rules and coexistence agreements. We also use this time to review the school's guidelines about fostering positive habits, like practicing sports or healthy eating. For instance, students learn about the type of snacks we encourage. And finally, students have the opportunity to elect their class representatives.

These activities are complemented with a full-school meeting the day before the beginning of the school year. Families, students, teachers, and leaders join together to recognize the physical space that will host our

activities during the year.⁴ We introduce the head teachers of each grade, present any relevant changes in the educational/instructional priorities and welcome everyone that is new to the community. The week culminates in a festival of collective celebrations with arts and music.

Socioemotional *Linking Weeks* have also been used as buffers against challenges like the large social manifestations that broke out in Chile in October 2019, as well as during the pandemic. This week created a safe space for students and the whole school community to reflect on what our country experienced, and to process how to adapt to unpredictability and uncertainty. This is why during 2022 we also organized a Socioemotional Linking Week right after the winter break. This strategy has helped to improve our school's climate. We see our students demonstrate lower levels of anxiety. And we also noticed a more cohesive community.

In this chapter, we hope to have portrayed some of the potential for democratic transformation that emerges when, as school leaders and educators, we are willing to see and to listen to our students. We consider ourselves lucky, because this approach has been embraced by local authorities and the families in our community. This support is essential to confront the existence of barriers and challenges that hinder the potential for this transformation. An old outdated school infrastructure erodes many of the efforts to make for the community to feel that they are in the best school available. But our vision is clear, as well as our commitment to continue to walk this democratic path alongside all the members in our community.

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⁴We have observed that familiarity with the school's infrastructure lowers our students' anxiety levels and facilitates the experience around the first week of class.

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