

Three things teachers can learn from the Chilean student movement

Jo Williams*

As a teacher I've been very influenced by the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, and his argument that any and all collaboration and action in education needs to be aimed at understanding the world in order to change it. In 2014 my family and I spent a year living in Chile, providing an opportunity to engage directly with the student movement there as a living example of Freire's ideas about the connection between teaching, learning and social change.

* Jo Williams is a former secondary music and drama teacher, now working in teacher education at Victoria University.

For ten years secondary and university students in Chile have been mobilising regularly through mass street protests, school and university occupations and other social action, to demand a free and fully funded public education system for all Chileans. Their political action has played a major role in forcing some significant educational reform, and driving a nationwide debate not only about education, but bringing the neoliberal model into question and reasserting the view of education as 'public good'.

Thinking about what I learnt from my conversations with student activists and first-hand involvement in the movement, led me to consider the implications for my work with preservice (student) teachers, here in Australia.

The Chilean student movement

During our year in Chile, it would have been impossible not to engage with the mass social movement of students and teachers fighting against the neoliberalisation of their education system. As a critical educator, I was inspired by streets filled with active, politically conscious and organised young people, and moreover by participating alongside them in the struggle for a more just and fair Chile.

The Chilean context is framed through having been a pioneer of neoliberal experimentation and 'innovation', including in the field of education, where early reforms 'decentralised' education funding and rapidly deepened inequalities. In the 1980s, the Pinochet regime enacted the LOCE (*Ley Organica Constitucional de Educaci3n* – Organic Constitutional Law of Education), which decentralised the administration of education, handing more than 300 local municipalities management powers over kindergarten, primary, and secondary schools, while retaining overall national regulation, in particular over curriculum and quality control (Chovanec and Benitez, 2006). The LOCE also introduced a voucher funding system; encouraged competition between schools for enrolments, promoting the idea of parental choice; and drastically reduced teachers working conditions and wages. Those reforms led to a deeply inequitable and highly segregated education system (Cabalin, 2012; Cavieres, 2011).

Against this backdrop, the Chilean student movement came into being [in 2006 when secondary students protested](#) for better access to public transport and against expensive university entrance exam fees (Chovanec and Benitez 2008). Within months mass protests and hundreds of [school occupations](#) had occurred, with broad support in the community. The demands quickly broadened to more general concerns of educational equity and quality; opposition to the LOCE; and for greater student consultation in educational decision-making. Making some gains, the movement bubbled along until the next significant re-emergence in 2011, when again mass marches and occupations were held around the country.

The [student-led movement](#) was largely credited as responsible for the fall of the conservative government in the November 2013 elections, and for forcing the significant reform program that the new centre-left government embarked on upon winning office. A number of student leaders were also elected to parliament in the 2013 elections.

Under political pressure from the students and their growing support amongst the population, the new government introduced reforms that claimed to provide free primary and secondary education for all students; a gradual end to the public funding of private schooling; and the removal of most elitist selection practices (Vargas, 2014).

2014 saw a continuation of mobilisations nationally, drawing up to 100,000 students each time and a strengthening of the movement's key political demands to include improving education workers' conditions and wages; abolishing student debt and democratising the education system. Not a day went by when there weren't numerous articles about the education reform and/or the actions and demands of the student movement. The streets were full of political graffiti and street art profiling the students' demands and advertising their events.

This struggle continued in 2015 with [Chilean teachers undertaking a month-long national strike](#) against the teacher workforce reform. Student-teacher alliances were developed as secondary and university students offered solidarity to striking teachers. An approved corporate tax reform bill worth US\$8.2bn was to fund free higher education from 2016, and discussions around the second wave of reforms focused on the teaching workforce. However the students rejected the reforms, arguing that the fundamental nature of the corporatised and competitive education system remained untouched, and that any real change in terms of equity and quality was unlikely. They continued to mobilise and clarify the deeper tensions that exist between the reforms, the neoliberal education system, and the aspirations of the students and their supporters.

Implications for teachers

For me, the Chilean student-teacher movement demonstrates the significance of social, political and cultural action in the process of learning - what Freire refers to as *praxis*. The question then, is what lessons can we draw from this example for our teaching and learning here in Australia?

1. The school of life is the most important classroom

The Chilean student movement illustrates Dewey's point that the school of life is the most important classroom and that students engaged in social action are the most authentic learners. Freire understood the idea of *praxis* as the possibility of understanding, which becomes real only through social action, and without which social contradictions remain hidden or barely understood. The *praxis* of the Chilean education movement has crystallised an understanding of neoliberal education that reveals its contradictions and exposes its weaknesses. Neoliberal education, despite the inclusion rhetoric, is fundamentally undemocratic. Without 'talking back' to neoliberalism, pedagogy is restricted to sorting and controlling students. The students' mass democratic action revealed this to a general national public and created the basis for an alternative vision and project that is not just utopian. For us as teacher educators, it follows that the basis of any liberatory *praxis* is the need to strengthen our, and our students' individual and collective capacity to fight back against an inherently unjust system, and a recognition that the learning environments we create should be based on fuelling and nourishing these processes.

2. The importance of re-examining and re-imagining curriculum

The Chilean students re-examined and re-imagined every aspect of the school curriculum as part of their attempts to understand the socio-political and cultural meaning of the content and its impact. In doing so they developed an approach to teaching and learning that aims to replace a functional understanding of literacy with a commitment to developing critical literacy – or as Freire puts it, a capacity to *read the word and the world*. For us as teachers this means grounding our practice in critical dialogue and a fundamental problematising of the world.

3. Seeing and nourishing students as citizens

Students are also citizens, and need to be nurtured and supported to be democratic actors. For the Chilean students, ten years of political action and collaborative reflection have provided a powerful basis for authentic learning and active and critical citizenship in an unjust world. Students have built upon spontaneous protest, to plan and lead mass mobilisations of tens of thousands of students. They have occupied schools and universities and organized rosters for security, logistics, food provision, cultural events, classes and guest speakers, communication and organising meetings. They have held public meetings, organized conferences, planned [cultural and musical events](#) and held debates on key issues facing the movement. They have negotiated with police, developed effective (multi)media communication strategies, formed alliances with teachers, academics, parents, unions and other social organisations, and participated in numerous student representative organisations.

Moreover, the students have navigated ten years of political engagement, moving from anger and discontent around specific student-based issues, to sophisticated and complex critique of the neoliberal system and the ways it serves to reproduce inequality in Chile. This has involved the development of and participation in a range of democratic processes and structures, and cycles of reflection and response to successive government and policy changes.

Conclusion

Such an approach would involve a privileging of grassroots and community knowledge and a rigorous, ongoing critique of the neoliberal system and its impacts; and asking *why*, where all too often the question is limited to an inevitably restrictive *how*. It would be grounded in solidarity and critical consciousness, centred on students' lives, realities, hopes and questions, and seek to model democratic potential and collective reimagining of ourselves and our role in making the world a better place for all.

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