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Free-tuition policy in higher education in Chile: a clash of bargaining narratives

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Abstract: Chile experienced massive student protests against market-based education in 2011. In response, the Chilean president Bachelet (center-left party) proposed to make higher education tuition-free for all students from the bottom 50 percent of the income distribution in 2013. Bachelet won the presidential election partly on her alignment with the students' demands, specifically with her free tuition proposal, who was partially achieved during her presidential term 2014-2018 (Delisle & Bernasconi, 2018). Since 2011, there have been heated debates about how to finance free tuition fees and whether is a 'fair' policy. Drawing on policy system theories about reforms and free tuition fees, the narratives from 14 policymakers and experts on the Chilen free-tuition fee policy are examined.

Paper: Introduction

Chile experienced massive student protests against market-based education in 2011. In response, the Chilean president Michelle Bachelet (center-left party) proposed to make higher education tuition-free for all students from the bottom 50 percent of the income distribution in 2013. The policy emerged as a solution based on widespread support for the idea that education is a social right rather than a private good. Bachelet won the presidential election partly on her alignment with the students' demands, specifically with her free tuition proposal, who was partially achieved during her presidential term 2014-2018 (Delisle & Bernasconi, 2018) and then maintained and extended by the current president Sebastian Piñera (right-wing party) who acknowledged how popular this policy was. Since 2011, there have been heated debates about how to finance free tuition fees and whether is a 'fair' policy.

Drawing on policy system theories about reforms and free tuition fees, in this study, the narratives from policymakers on the Chilen free-tuition fee policy are examined. The case of Chile has been considered as a paradigmatic case of neoliberalism of public policies in a way such as the landscape of its higher education reflects this feature. In this context, the implementation of free-tuition fees

seems counterintuitive and deserves attention. The discussion presented here will offer some lessons to be learnt in neoliberal-driven higher education systems in the world.

Framework

There has been a long tradition of research regarding the outcomes of movements, rooted deeply in social movement theory (Amenta, Andrews, & Caren, 2019). Some authors have established that for a movement to be influential, "state actors need to see it as a potentially facilitating or disrupting their own goals – augmenting or cementing new electoral coalitions, gaining public opinion, increasing the support for the missions of the governmental bureaus" (Amenta, Andrews, & Caren, 2019, p.456). The Chilean student movement, therefore, might be considered as successful in framing state policies. Not only students took over the news but also were able to transmit their ideas and demands to different sectors and actors of the civil society and the institutional-political system (Montero, 2018). In addition to changing public agenda in education, they also attracted international attention (Bellei, Cabalin & Orellana, 2018). What is more, some students became political leaders and gained seats in the parliament. However, how politicians and policymakers translated students' demands that resulted in a free-tuition policy need some unpacking.

Although agenda setting and policy adoption are important, there is a need to investigate other aspects of political processes, 'such as changes in policy content, voting for policy changes, and the implementation of the policy' (Amenta, Andrews, & Caren, 2019, p.459). Also, the context in which policy changes emerge and the role of elites in framing policies are relevant (Kane, 2003; Almeida & Stearns, 1998).

The authors follow the idea of Allison & Haplering (1972) that the translation of social movement agendas is a result of a process of bargaining inside regularized channels among players positioned within the government. In other words, institutions play a role in structuring the dynamics of bureaucratic politics, so that certain political and political and bureaucratic actors gain uneven access to the decision-making process and yield unequal influence (Gilad, Alon-Barkat, & Weiss, 2019)

Methodology

A qualitative approach was deployed to gain a deep understanding of the phenomena (Maxwell, 1996). To address how policy makers and politicians turned the student demands into the free tuition policy in Chile, data were collected through 14 semi-structured interviews with national and international experts in higher education reforms. The participants' expertise provided a deep understanding of the reform efforts and the way they emerged and developed over time. To enrich our data documents that circulated from the government and other stakeholders who wrote about the free tuition policy were also analyzed.

Findings and discussion

Several themes emerged related to how politicians and policymakers translated the students' demands into the free tuition policy, including student petitions, new political leaders, politicians, and types of universities. The main critic that emerged in the experts' narratives was the lack of sustenance of content in the development of the free tuition policy. It was brought up by the

students, used as a campaign promise, but when it came the time to work on it and give it content, the policymakers fell short. Mainly it was not well planned on how it was supposed to be implemented overtime. Several of these experts also criticized that, through the implementation of a free-tuition policy fee, the autonomy of higher education institutions and quality standards were jeopardised.

The implementation of free-tuition fees as a policy was directly influenced by different actors. The main actors were students and their protests, who were able to gain enough support from the broader society so that to change the policy agenda. Rectors of the most prestigious universities also had a voice in policy decision making. Even though key political leaders opposed to this policy and the student movement, their voices were not strong enough to deter the momentum of the students. As a result, a gap between the students' narratives and the policy makers narratives (the latter emphasizing the irrationality of it in terms of both global trends and financial sustainability) emerged. These two narratives clashed and represented opposite ideologies that haven't been solved in the country. Implications for policies and policy analysis will be discussed at the Conference.

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