

Poor education investment could lead to long-term social challenges

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Dr. Marc Pruyne

During a recent visit to the Universidad de Chile to conduct workshops on educational leadership to school principals, Dr Marc Pruyne from the Faculty of Education sat down for an interview with Christian Silva Abuyeres from the Chilean newspaper Factor Publico. The following article (translated by Olivia Ramos-Campa and Dr. Pruyne) appeared in the paper in May.

In your opinion, what are the main education problems in Chile?

I have concerns regarding the teaching profession – here in Chile and

elsewhere in the world – especially around the recruitment of high-quality teachers and having a high-quality curriculum. This is a serious problem.

There are also other problems in Chile, and around the world, regarding the efficacy of public versus private [education](#): deciding who can afford private education or not, who should pay for it and who should not, who should be enrolled in university and who should not. From my perspective, the funding of high-quality public education, from primary through tertiary, is an absolute must.

Is it important that teachers be satisfied with their work?

It is of utmost importance. Teachers should have the power, and tools, for controlling their own profession. They should have strong unions so they can have a representative voice that can link them with the parents' groups, administrators, and with the education ministry.

How do you feel about the fact that educational professionals do not receive competitive salaries compared with 'developed' countries?

This is relative. For instance, the United States is going through a similar situation. Teachers are having their salaries cut and are being made 'redundant' because of problems not caused by them, such as the Global Economic Crisis (GFC).

In contrast, in Finland and Japan, teachers receive higher wages - hence, they get more respect and status (and can survive on their wages). The idea is that people should be aware of the importance of the teaching profession, and as a consequence teachers should have good salaries,

benefits, a strong union, and the government's respect.

The wages in Chile are very poor - it is a shame. All these problems are contingent on the importance that people and the government place on education. It has to be decided how to allocate educational resources, whether to invest in materials, schools, and teachers' preparation so that when teacher education students finish their studies they can find good opportunities.

Without actually investing in education in these ways – and public education in particular – governmental interest in educational themes becomes a matter of hollow rhetoric, and it shows a lack of respect for the profession of teaching. It is important – for all members of society – to take a stand, realise the significance of this matter and make change.

What is the correlation between a solid primary school preparation and the professional success of individuals later in life?

There is a direct connection between them, because everything starts during the primary years. That's when you start reading and writing. And it is where the first social relationships start; it is when you have friends and classmates, when you face an external authority - teachers. This is a time when positive connections can be made, and it creates the opportunity of a healthy start as a social being. It would not be a sound beginning, and lead to a good end, if you are in a school with a lack of resources with an unhappy, tired, underpaid teacher, and in a crowded classroom in bad conditions.

Which countries have the best education standards?

Australia and Canada are successful cases, because both of them have

focused on offering relatively good salaries and autonomy for teachers. This has not been, necessarily, an act of altruism or solidarity on the parts of either the Australian or Canadian governments, but because teachers' unions, other sympathetic workers, and certain political parties have struggled over the years to make this a reality.

And, it needs to be noted, teachers and academics are increasingly coming under economic attack as the GFC extends to these countries and conservative governments seek to recuperate funds from public workers.

Australia and Canada have also improved the requirements to enter teacher education courses. They look not only for scores and knowledge, but also for the behaviour to work with students coming from different cultural backgrounds and circumstances, and for skills to establish good relationships with parents. They understand that the teaching profession should have an excellent level of preparation because of the great level of responsibility on kids' futures. But again, some of these gains of the past ten years are under threat with the rise of neoliberal schemes: national testing, national curriculum, etc.

Finland is a quite successful case. For instance, teachers in Finland need to successfully earn a Master of Education qualification – and a quite rigorous course and placement apprenticeship – before they can begin teaching. They are also amongst the highest salary earners in the country (and comparatively, amongst the highest paid teachers in the world). The Finnish government has a priority on spending their resources in education, even when there is a limitation of resources, because they know that an investment in education will bring benefits for the whole society. They know that a lack of commitment will bring social problems for decades. Although, again, the Finnish education system is not without its critics, and how it will fare in the wake of the GFC is also yet to be seen.

But any government – in Chile, Australia, Canada, Japan, Finland, the US – has to decide if education will or will not be a priority and then be prepared to deal with the long-term positive or negative effects of those decisions. And it's not about a lack of resources – even given the GFC. There always seems to be enough money to wage war or support neo-liberal policies. It's about priorities and the future.

What is the relationship between democracy and primary education?

I have been a part of through the Global Doing Democracy Research Project with colleagues Paul Carr (Canada) and David Zyngier (Australia), in which we have analysed how [teachers](#) practise democracy in classrooms, how they discuss democracy, and how it functions (in classrooms, universities and societies). Sadly, analyses of our data indicate that we are not practising – or even teaching – democracy in most classrooms around the world. So Paul, David and I are trying to understand how democracy might best be taught and practised in classrooms to benefit future generations through constructing democratic tools with kids and communities, so they can they can re/produce it in societies.

Provided by Monash University

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