

CAN EDUCATIONAL TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE (ATE) BE A STRATEGY FOR TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT? REFLECTIONS FROM A CHILEAN CASE STUDY¹

¿PUEDE LA ASISTENCIA TÉCNICA EDUCATIVA (ATE) SER UNA ESTRATEGIA PARA EL DESARROLLO PROFESIONAL DOCENTE? REFLEXIONES A PARTIR DE UN ESTUDIO DE CASO CHILENO

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Resumen

En Chile, en el contexto de la ley de Subvención Escolar Preferencial (SEP), las escuelas reciben apoyo para el diseño e implementación de sus planes de mejoramiento de parte de agencias de Asistencia Técnica Educativa (ATE). Basado en un estudio de caso sobre la relación entre una ATE universitaria y una escuela básica municipal, este artículo aborda el tema del desarrollo profesional docente en Chile. Aunque el estudio de caso no abordó directamente el tema del desarrollo profesional docente, este fue destacado sistemáticamente por los participantes del estudio. Así, este artículo repasa los hallazgos del caso y analiza el papel de la ATE como estrategia para el desarrollo profesional docente en la escuela. Por último, se presenta una reflexión teórica sobre la tensión entre dos orientaciones prácticas que caracterizarían el enfoque de las ATE respecto de cómo abordar el desarrollo profesional docente en este caso y en otros similares.

Palabras claves: Desarrollo profesional docente; apoyo externo; mejoramiento escolar; política educativa; estudio de caso.

Abstract

In Chile, within the context of the Preferential School Subsidy law (SEP), schools receive support for the design and implementation of their school improvement plans from Educational Technical Assistance (ATE) agencies. Based on a case study on the relationship between a university-based ATE and a municipal primary school this paper addresses the topic of teacher professional development in Chile. Although the case study did not intend to directly investigate the topic of teacher professional development it was systematically highlighted by the participants of the study. Consequently, this paper looks back at the findings of the case study and discusses the role of ATE as a strategy for school-based professional development. Finally, a theoretical reflection is presented on the tension between two practical orientations that could characterise ATE's approach to school-based professional development in this and similar cases.

Keywords: Teacher professional development; external support; school improvement; education policy; case study.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Chilean school system has focused on fostering quality and equity in schools through targeted reform initiatives (Bellei & Vanni, 2015). Since the 1990s, Chile implemented a set of large-scale reforms in areas such as financing, infrastructure, curriculum and assessment, as well as other small-scale programmes in areas like ICT, school management and instructional support (Raczynski & Muñoz, 2007; Roman & Murillo, 2012). In this reform context, teacher professional development has been placed within and between these large and small-scale reforms and programmes (Avalos, 2003). Professional development has been targeted by policies aimed at initial teacher training in higher education institutions (Avalos, 2003; Cox, Meckes, & Bascopé, 2010), school-based professional development courses for qualified teachers (Avalos, 1998; Montecinos, Pino, Campos-Martinez, Domínguez, & Carreño, 2014) and trainee teachers (Solís et al., 2011), or as part of larger initiatives such as teacher evaluation (Avalos & Assael, 2006).

Currently, however, professional development for classroom teachers relies on the improvement plans that schools design and implement within the framework of the Preferential School Subsidy law (SEP). To help schools with their improvement plans, SEP provides resources to hire external technical support from institutions or individuals accredited by the Ministry of Education (MINEDUC), called Education Technical Assistance (ATE) agencies (Muñoz & Vanni, 2008; Osses, Bellei, & Valenzuela, 2015).

This paper is based on a case study developed in 2010. The original aim of this case study was to understand the influence of the relationship between a university-based ATE and a municipal primary school on the process of improvement and change. Despite the fact that this study did not intend to directly investigate teacher professional development, participants of the case study systematically highlighted this topic. Taking this information into consideration, the specific aim of this paper is to describe how the issue of teacher professional development was addressed and reflect on the possibility of considering ATE as a strategy for school-based professional development.

In the next section, the policy context where ATE is established as the main source of external support for school improvement in Chile is briefly addressed. Then, a review of relevant literature is presented, with focus on school improvement with external support, the role of external agents, and teacher professional development. The following section includes the research design and approach of the study, and study findings where four key topics are presented. Finally, elaborating on these findings, the paper presents a theoretical reflection on the tension between two practical orientations that characterise how school-based professional development could be approached by ATEs, and the potential lessons that it offers for this and similar cases.

2. POLICY FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT IN CHILE

Between 1990 and early 2000s, MINEDUC implemented a number of compensatory programmes for disadvantaged and underperforming municipal and private-subsidised schools (Roman & Murillo, 2012; Sotomayor, 2006). These compensatory programmes were based on the principle of positive discrimination (García-Huidobro, 1994), had a particular emphasis on quality assurance (Ahumada, Montecinos, & González, 2012), and relied heavily

on performance data from the annual national test aimed at measuring students' attainment in core subjects (SIMCE) to target schools (Meckes & Carrasco, 2010).

These compensatory programmes implemented by MINEDUC and by partner institutions, such as universities and research centres, provided instructional (technical-pedagogical) and management (administrative) support to school leaders and classroom teachers, but there were elements of their design that prevented the sustainability of their achievements (Bellei, 2013; Sotomayor, 2006). On the early 2000s, the poor performance of Chilean students in both the national test (SIMCE) and international assessments that measure language, mathematics and science skills (PISA, TIMSS) sparked social discontent (McEwan, Urquiola, Vegas, Fernandes, & Gallego, 2008). Heralded by protest from secondary students in 2006, structural aspects of the market model of education in Chile were criticised as the reason for the low levels of quality and high levels of segregation affecting the Chilean school system (Bellei & Cabalin, 2013; Cabalin, 2012).

In response to this discontent, MINEDUC introduced a law that set up a Preferential School Subsidy (SEP) (Ley de Subvención Escolar Preferencial of 2008), aimed at providing more resources to disadvantaged schools and students (García-Huidobro & Bellei, 2006; MINEDUC, 2008). Through an adjusted voucher, SEP allocates additional funding to municipal and private-subsidised schools where students from low-income families attend (Corvalán, 2012). In exchange, schools must achieve performance targets mandated by MINEDUC in terms of students' outcomes in Chile's national examination (SIMCE) and other efficiency indicators, such as attendance, enrolment, retention and drop-out rates (Raczynski, Muñoz, Weinstein, & Pascual, 2013). In order to achieve these targets, schools are mandated to design and implement a school improvement plan (PME). They can use resources allocated by SEP to hire, for example, external technical support from ATE (Muñoz & Vanni, 2008).

More recently, the Chilean government enacted a law that sets up a System of Quality Assurance of Education (SAC) for the school system (Ley de Sistema Nacional de Aseguramiento de la Calidad de la Educación Parvularia, Básica y Media y su Fiscalización of 2011). This law introduced two new government agencies: the Superintendence of Education, which audits schools and local authorities' compliance of the education legislation on finance and governance, and the Education Quality Agency, which evaluates and inspects schools and local authorities' performance based on SIMCE results and a set of other education quality indicators (e.g., school climate, participation and citizenship, gender equity, attendance, among others)².

Both legal frameworks, SEP and SAC, currently represent the core policy for school improvement in Chile, showing the commitment of recent governments with standardisation and accountability as drivers for school and system improvement. In this context, the school is considered simultaneously as the centre of change (Hopkins, Ainscow, & West, 1994) and the basic unit of accountability of the system (O'Day, 2002). In addition, the State assumes a promoting and regulatory role by centrally setting performance targets for schools, as well as a decentralising role in the design and implementation of improvement initiatives to the local level (Rounds, 1997). Furthermore, through SEP, ATE became the dominant strategy of

² As of 2012, both the Superintendence and the Quality Agency are fully operative. However, the evaluation and inspection of schools and local authorities in charge of the Quality Agency is, at the time of writing, in a trial period.

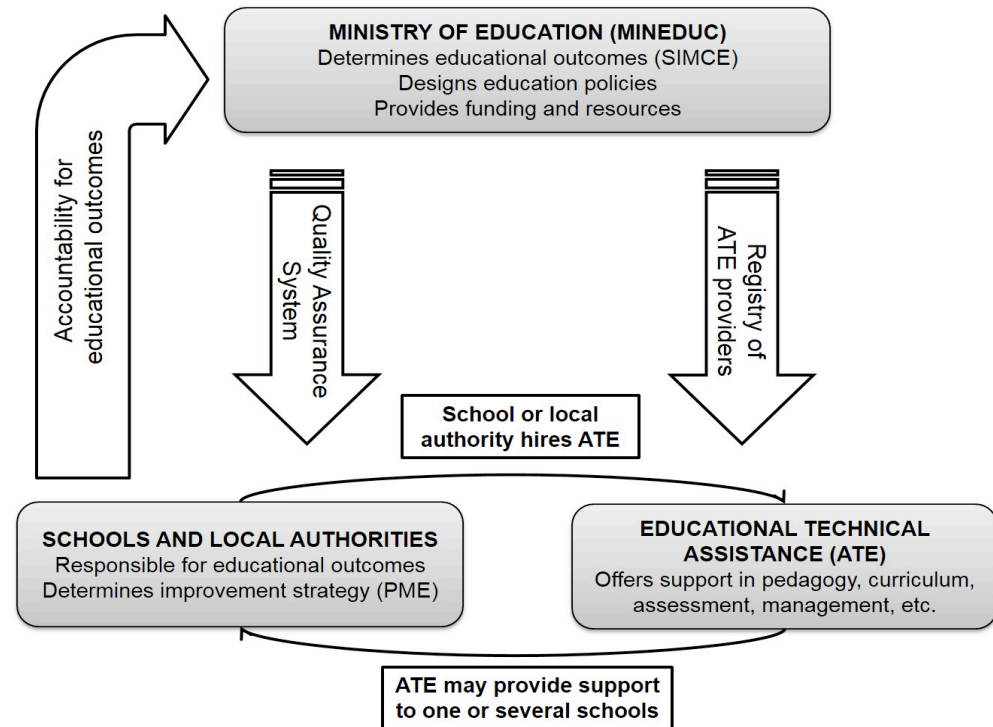
external technical support for schools and teachers to initiate and sustain improvement (Osses et al., 2015).

2.1 Educational Technical Assistance (ATE)

ATE agencies can be public or private institutions and organisations, or individuals with particular expertise in education (MINEDUC, 2010), and are accredited by MINEDUC in a national web registry that lists the services they offer (Bellei, Osses, & Valenzuela, 2010). Other than this compulsory registration, there are no further restrictions for ATEs to offer external support services to schools and local authorities.

Schools, through their local authorities, hire an ATE through a commercial contract that contains the objectives, activities and participants of the support strategy, as well as progress indicators, evaluation criteria, and expected results (MINEDUC, 2010). The external technical support from ATE is expected to be context-specific, limited in time but not brief, and appropriate to the level of internal capacity in each school (Bellei et al., 2010). Therefore ATEs operate within a market-oriented framework of external technical support, offering both short-term and long-term services linked to the schools' improvement plans (Osses et al., 2015). These services range from consultancy for local authorities, professional development for school leaders and classroom teachers, standardised tests for students, and teaching materials and ICT resources, among others. Although there is not much evidence available to show how external technical support is being delivered by ATEs or to explain why different schools will look for different support services, some authors indicate that the capacity of schools to self-assess their improvement needs could shed some light on these issues (Bellei et al., 2010).

Furthermore, it is important to note that the strategy of external technical support in Chile relies heavily on the effectiveness and improvement literature. This literature fits the need to develop policy initiatives that, by one hand, target low performing, disadvantaged schools (Raczynski & Muñoz, 2005), but by the other, assume that schools need to take responsibility for their own improvement and use the available resources to meet the required performance standards (Acuña, Assael, Contreras, & Peralta, 2014).

FIGURE 1. Relationship between MINEDUC, schools and local authorities, and ATE within the framework of SEP

Source: Author's elaboration

In summary, the provision of external support to schools can be conceptualised and framed by the relationship of three agents (see Figure 1): MINEDUC, who determines the performance standards for schools (SIMCE) and regulates ATE through its registry; schools and local authorities, who determine the improvement strategy and seek support from ATEs to implement it; and ATE agencies, who make available a range of support services and collaborate with schools in the design and implementation of their improvement plans.

3. SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT WITH EXTERNAL SUPPORT

School improvement literature has highlighted external support as one of the key strategies for initiating and sustaining improvement in disadvantaged schools (Muijs, Harris, Chapman, Stoll, & Russ, 2004; Potter, Reynolds, & Chapman, 2002; Reynolds, Harris, Clarke, Harris, & James, 2006). According to this literature, external support can be analysed based on three principles. These principles are not aimed to be comprehensive but rather represent an attempt to consider the theoretical foundations of external support initiatives, and provide a framework to understand how they operate. A brief explanation of each of these principles is provided below.

The first principle is 'the school as the centre of change'. According to this principle, external support should concentrate its activity in the school, and consequently, efforts should be made to engage teachers and school leaders in this process (Hopkins et al., 1994). Here, the external support aims at assisting schools in producing cultural change and building internal capacity for improvement (Harris, 2001; Stoll, 1999), which is a technically simple and socially complex process that requires careful consideration of the culture of the school (Fullan, 1993).

The second principle is 'combining top-down and bottom-up approaches'. According to this principle, the terms of design and implementation of external support initiatives need to balance these two approaches to be successful (Darling-Hammond, 2005). Top-down approaches are centrally imposed strategies with a narrow accountability focus, where policymakers assume that their implementation is more an event than a process (Hopkins et al., 1994). Conversely, bottom-up approaches allow schools to exert ownership and lead their own process of improvement in order to generate professional involvement and commitment to a wider notion of accountability (Darling-Hammond, 2004). The combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches would help spread reform and improvement from the local level with support from the national/central level (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009).

The third principle is 'the role of external agents for triggering improvement'. According to this principle schools need "outside consultants or experts [putting] their knowledge forward for possible utilisation" (Reynolds & Stoll, 1996, p. 98) as a way of influencing schools' capacity for change. The assumption is that, independently of the type of programme or intervention promoted, the support from external agents is critical in order to trigger a process of improvement in disadvantaged schools that lack the capacity to do it by themselves (Muijs et al., 2004; Stoll, 1999, 2009).

4. ROLE OF EXTERNAL AGENTS

The literature highlights that initiatives of external support needs to take into account the context of schools in order to provide appropriate advice and intervention to initiate an improvement process (Chapman, 2005). Ainscow and Southworth (1996) point out that instead of adopting and transferring what has worked in other settings, what is needed is a continuous search for what works locally. As a result, the role of external agents seems critical to contextualise the provision of external support to schools.

According to Tajik (2008), external agents involved in school improvement enact three broad roles: a critical friend, a technical expert and a facilitator. The critical friend role focuses on helping teachers to develop reflective skills and encourages change by questioning assumptions and practices in schools (MacBeath, 1998; Swaffield, 2005). The technical expert role refers that external agents are hired according to their particular expertise and are asked to provide a technical solution to a particular need of the school (García & Donmoyer, 2005). The role of facilitator places the change agent in between teachers, school leaders, parents and administrators, and is neither an authority nor a subordinate, being "capable of blending top-down and bottom-up approaches to change" (Tajik, 2008, p. 256).

These three approaches to the role of external agents are subject to the characteristics of the schools they are introduced to, particularly when taking into account the teachers' culture, style of leadership, the schools' performance or internal capacity or the history of relationship with external agencies (Chapman, 2005). However, research shows that no matter which of these roles external agents assume, they are critical for building capacity for change and improvement in schools, and certainly for the professional development of teachers in schools (Ainscow & Southworth, 1996; Avalos, 2011).

5. TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

It is widely acknowledged by policymakers and researchers that in the context of large-scale reforms, teacher professional development is a key factor (Avalos, 2011; Montecinos, 2008). Furthermore, international comparative and benchmark studies of high performing school systems identify initial and continuous teacher professional development as a factor associated with countries that consistently *come out on top* (Barber & Mourshed, 2007). These studies assume that teacher professional development is linked to an increase on student achievement, but this issue is far from settled with other researchers claiming that the impact on student outcomes is small, if not insignificant (Buczynski & Hansen, 2010; Darling-Hammond, 2000).

Despite the claims that teacher professional development is not necessarily linked to student outcomes, it is understood that professional development has an influence on teachers' learning and practice in classrooms with their students (Avalos, 2011). However, as Borko (2004) points out, there is still much to learn about what teachers learn, how they learn in different instances of professional development, and what the impact of this professional learning process is. According to Avalos (2011),

Teacher professional learning is a complex process, which requires cognitive and emotional involvement of teachers individually and collectively, the capacity and willingness to examine where each one stands in terms of convictions and beliefs and the perusal and enactment of appropriate alternatives for improvement or change (p. 10).

From a professional development perspective, teacher learning should take place at the school level through a wide range of activities in order to help teachers transform their practice according to the demands of "teaching and learning for understanding" (Kwakman, 2003, p. 149). Additionally, some researchers argue that using the accumulated knowledge about processes and conditions of effective learning (e.g., metacognitive awareness, self-regulation, making connections) would improve the design and implementation of professional development activities among teachers (Muijs et al., 2014). For instance, research has shown that the effectiveness of formative assessment strategies to improve student learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998) has led teachers to learn and incorporate the Assessment for Learning (AfL) framework in their practice (Wiliam, Lee, Harrison, & Black, 2004).

Despite these findings, particular conditions of the policy context and teachers' working environment (school culture, available resources, and time among others) can hinder or facilitate teacher learning and professional development at the workplace (Avalos, 1998, 2011). In the case of Chile, previous experiences of school-based professional development programmes have shown the need to consider the "balance between external orientation and internal freedom" (Avalos, 1998, p. 268) to develop workable professional development initiatives in schools.

6. METHODOLOGY

6.1 Research Approach and Design

The research approach corresponds to a mixed methods case study with a parallel design. Parallel mixed methods studies use both quantitative and qualitative data sources and analysis techniques simultaneously, based on comparison, combination and triangulation (Creswell & Plano, 2011). The qualitative component involved the analysis of a document and semi-structured interviews to the participants, while the quantitative component consisted of a questionnaire.

A case study approach provides the opportunity to deeply explore a single phenomenon or case in order to understand similar ones (Gerring, 2007), and generate hypothesis about the studied phenomena (Basse, 1999). According to Flyvberg (2006), case study research is particularly well-suited to produce context-dependent knowledge and offers a type of generalisation that provides critical evidence to build and test theory from empirical experience. By taking advantage of the empirical richness of a case, it is possible "to create theoretical constructs, propositions and/or midrange theory from case-based, empirical evidence" (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007, p. 25).

6.2 The Case: Blackwell Primary School

The case, Blackwell Primary, was a small urban municipal school in a deprived neighbourhood from a district in Chile's fifth region, catering for approximately 300 students from pre-K to eighth grade. Around 30 people worked in the school, including two school leaders, 15 classroom teachers, and a number of teaching assistants and other professionals. As part of the implementation of their improvement plan, the school wanted to change classroom teachers' practice by training them to use formative assessment strategies in order to improve their performance in SIMCE.

For this purpose, the school hired a university-based ATE agency to introduce classroom teachers to the AfL framework. The ATE professional team consisted of a programme coordinator, plus two senior and two junior advisors, all of them from the Education and Psychology departments at the university. The author had access to this case in his capacity as a former member of this ATE, which facilitated obtaining consent from each of the participants of the case study, but presented challenges related to familiarity and bias.

The external support consisted of a five-month training programme for classroom teachers, which involved theoretical sessions with a university lecturer, practical workshops facilitated by senior advisors where teachers were expected to develop their own formative assessment tools, and classroom observation where junior advisors provided feedback to teachers on their use of formative assessment tools.

6.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Qualitative data was collected from the analysis of the ATE's training programme proposal document and semi-structured interviews with six participants. The programme coordinator facilitated the proposal document, which described the background of the proposal, the outline of the activities and training sessions, and brief presentation of some team members. The aim

of the document analysis was to gather information about the initial decisions and positions about the objectives, activities and expected outcomes of the external assistance.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted with one teacher, the head teacher and the curriculum leader from Blackwell, in addition to the programme coordinator, one senior advisor and one junior advisor from the ATE. These interviews took place in the last month of implementation of the training programme, and their aim was to inquire the participants' perceptions, beliefs and expectations about the training programme, in order to understand the meaning that participants made of external assistance.

In addition, quantitative data was collected through a questionnaire that was applied to 15 classroom teachers, and it consisted of three sections (personal information; purpose of the external assistance; and role of external agents) with close-answer type of questions, plus an open-ended question to collect any comments from the teachers at the end of sections two and three. Sample items for section two and three are listed in tables 1 and 2, respectively. This questionnaire was passed to teachers and collected by one of the senior advisors, who returned these to the author.

Finally, data analysis consisted of a two-stage process. In the first stage, each source of data was analysed separately. A qualitative content analysis strategy (Schreier, 2012) was used for the ATE proposal document and the six interview transcripts, where relevant sections of the text were coded in order to build themes that were pertinent to understand the meanings associated to external assistance. Conversely, descriptive statistics such as the mean and percentages were used to analyse teachers' responses to the questionnaire items.

In the second stage, an integrated analysis of the results from the previous stage was performed, using a *case description* as analytical strategy (Yin, 2003). Topics emerging from each of the three sources were systematised, contrasted and triangulated, leading to a set of results organised in key topics.

TABLE 1.

Questionnaire items from section two: "Purpose of the external assistance"

Purpose	Items ("The external assistance...")
Culture and organisation change	Impacts the culture (values and principles) and internal organisation (hierarchy and personal roles) of the school
Improvement and sustainability	Establishes the basis for a cycle of continuous improvement in the school sustaining results achieved over time
Performance and effectiveness	Is inserted into an improvement plan designed by the school, helping them achieve their short and/or medium term goals
Professional development	Promotes professional development in the school by strengthening and updating their pedagogical knowledge and practice
Community appraisal	Identifies strengths and weaknesses to build a diagnosis of the needs of students, teachers, leaders and/or the community.

Source: Author's elaboration

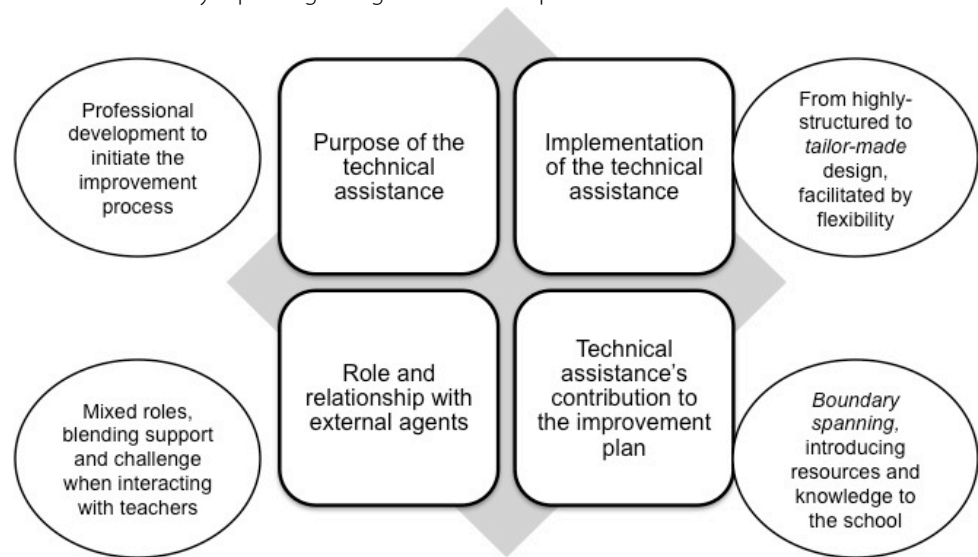
TABLE 2.*Questionnaire items from section three: "Perception of the role of external advisers"*

Role	Item ("The adviser...")
Technical expert	Diagnoses weaknesses in the work of teachers to improve it Uses his experience in subjects and teaching methods to support teachers Provides examples of good practice for teachers Motivates strategic decision-making based on information from the school Drives change in the school (by) advising classroom teachers Advises teachers to improve their practices in the classroom Leads group work with teachers effectively Models and demonstrates new skills for teachers in the classroom
Facilitator	Helps teachers to question their routines and teaching practices Helps teachers improve their practices in the classroom Stimulates teachers' motivation for change Helps teachers improve their professional knowledge Acts as a mediator in conflict situations with and between teachers Promotes collaborative work between teachers Feeds back teachers' work with practical information and resources
Critical friend	Guides teachers in reflecting about their beliefs and vision of teaching Supports the work of teachers because he cares for them and their work Motivate teachers to initiate and implement change in their school Sets a horizontal relationship with teachers without fear of losing his status Is a reliable person, able to put himself in the teachers' position Expresses his views directly and sincerely to teachers

Source: Author's elaboration

7. FINDINGS

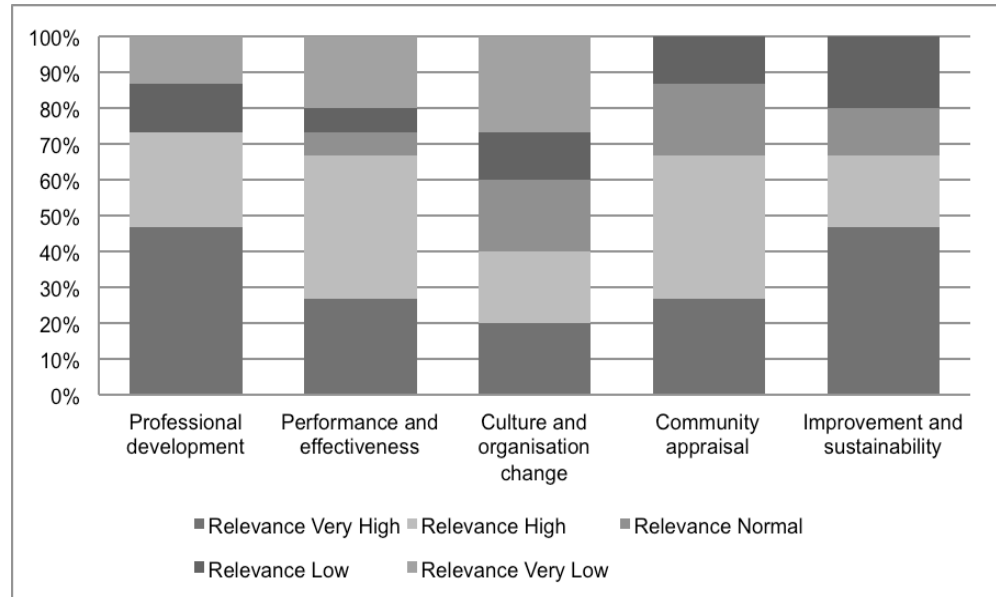
Four key topics emerged from the integrated analysis of data sources (see figure 2), which are relevant to understand the relationship between external agents and the school's staff, and how it relates to the issue of professional development. These are: purpose of technical assistance, implementation of technical assistance, roles and relationship, and contribution to the improvement plan. For each of these key topics, relevant findings are discussed below.

FIGURE 2. Four key topics regarding the relationship between ATE and school

Source: Author's elaboration

7.1 Purpose of Technical Assistance: Professional development to initiate improvement

The purpose of the technical assistance referred to the nature and purpose of external support as a strategy for school improvement. Participants perceived it as the initiation of a process of improvement through professional development activities, to promote change at classroom and school levels. Results from the questionnaire (see Figure 3) showed that when teachers were asked to rate the relevance of five statements about the purpose of external assistance, close to 66% considered *Professional Development* as highly relevant or relevant; while close to 75% said the same about *School Improvement and Sustainability*.

FIGURE 3. Percentage of answers about the relevance of five statements about the purpose of external assistance

Source: Author's elaboration

This perception from teachers about the purpose of external assistance can be contrasted with the statement from the proposal document, which stated that the aim of the external assistance project was to influence the school culture and organisation and at the same time, supporting teachers in their need to 'update and deepen their knowledge in this area [AfL]' (Proposal Document) through professional development activities. Interestingly, questionnaire data indicated that teachers only perceived the latter as a relevant purpose of external assistance.

Likewise, some participants reported a similar perception about the purpose of the external assistance during the interviews. For instance, the classroom teacher stressed the importance of professional development in terms of gaining access to more training opportunities.

I think it is necessary [to access training opportunities], and I hope that there is an investment in it and everything because we are always looking for training and courses. As a matter of fact I did last year... but I am always looking, the training thing so I do not stay behind. (Classroom Teacher)

There was a concern from the part of the teacher to not stay behind in terms of learning new ways to improve her teaching, and take advantage of the opportunity that this external assistance project offered. Similarly, the head teacher expected that the external assistance would provide support to the process of improvement in the school. She declared,

Overall it is a support for the work that has been done [in the school]. I don't know, maybe the tasks related to training or professional development... or diagnosis or assessment that can allow us to run a diagnosis afterwards, [...] it is a support for our educational work (Head Teacher).

In summary, the perception of teachers and the head teacher of Blackwell was that external assistance provided the necessary support to initiate a process of improvement, mainly through professional development activities.

7.2 Implementation of Technical Assistance: Flexible adaptations

The implementation of the technical assistance indicated how the external support was delivered in Blackwell. This went from a highly structured work plan to a tailored set of activities, facilitated by external agents' flexibility and level of expertise. Blackwell's head teacher explained that this was negotiated with the ATE from the early stages of the proposal, extending through the implementation of the training programme.

It is just we can direct the work... when we see, we explain them [ATE] what we want and they set up the package according to our needs and in the way we fix it according to what we see, so that's the guarantee we have. (Head Teacher)

In fact, in the proposal document, the negotiation and adjustment of the training programme was emphasised in order to meet the needs and interests of the school. For instance, before the start of the external assistance project, a feedback session for school leaders was planned to inform them about the methodology to be used in teachers' training sessions and the assessment criteria to judge teachers' learning.

Accordingly, the programme coordinator met with the school leaders before the start external assistance project to adjust the plan of activities, in what he called *phase zero*. He considered this to be a fundamental step before starting the project in order to settle some ground rules in agreement with the school leaders, and adapt the planning to the specific needs of Blackwell.

[The aim of phase zero was] to fit some of these things, then align the objectives, and the time is restructured and some issues are raised [...] I had to do this moderation, to go and adjust it to what the school asks for' (Programme Coordinator)

Finally, during the implementation of the technical assistance, some adaptations were made to address difficulties arising from the everyday work with teachers at Blackwell. The senior advisor explained,

[We had] analysis meetings about the course, how it was going, what could we change, what could we do and also there were chances to change the programme according to the reality we were facing' (Senior Advisor).

Hence, these adaptations before and during the training programme to the planned activities and strategies suggest that the external agents assumed a flexible approach to the implementation of the external assistance. This flexibility was necessary to address the improvement needs of the school, and the emerging difficulties in relation to the professional development of teachers.

7.3 Roles and Relationship: Blending support and challenge for teachers

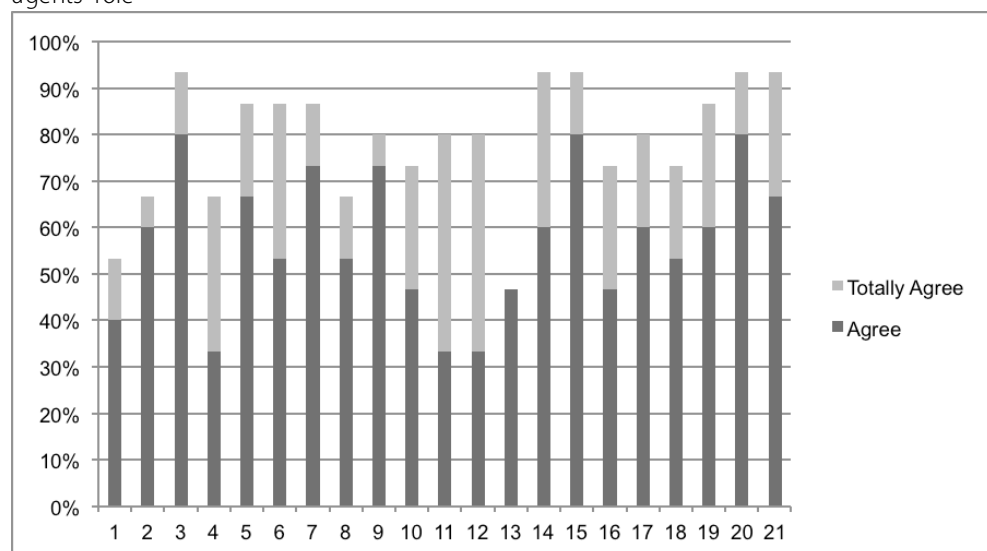
The roles and relationship with external agents proved to be a key element in the experience of external support for Blackwell. In the interviews and from the answers to the questionnaire, there was a perception of integrated and mixed roles of external agents as technical experts, facilitators and critical friends.

For instance, when teachers were asked about their level of agreement with statements about the role of advisors from ATE in the questionnaire (see Figure 4), over 90% agreed or totally agreed that an external agent *provides examples of good practice to teachers* (item three, technical expert), *promotes collaborative work among teachers* (item 14, facilitator), *expresses his views directly and sincerely to teachers* (item 20, critical friend), and *is a reliable person, able to put himself in the teachers' position* (item 21, critical friend).

However, teachers' perception of the role of external agents was not always a positive one. The initial attitude of teachers towards the presence of external agents in their classrooms was one of rejection, but this changed during the implementation of the training programme. This change of view was prompted by external agents willingness to provide help and assistance to teachers in other issues not considered in the training programme, such as lesson planning and teaching strategies. According to the curriculum leader, teachers "complained, they got angry, have been upset, but in the end [...] it has been helpful and they changed their view".

Thanks to these adjustments, teachers' attitude towards external agents improved positively and it was possible to promote openness and reflectivity, particularly during instances of classroom observation when advisors provided feedback to teachers about their teaching and assessment practice in relation to AfL. By blending support and challenge, external agents managed to establish a trustful and collaborative relationship with school leaders, and particularly teachers.

FIGURE 4. Percentage of teachers who agree or totally agree with statements about external agents' role



Source: Author's elaboration

7.4 Contribution to the Improvement Plan: Introducing resources and knowledge

The contribution of the technical assistance to the improvement plan referred to what the ATE provided to the school in order to implement their improvement strategy. The school staff showed clear ownership over their improvement plan, and considered the ATE as one of many tools that could assist them in achieving things they could not achieve by themselves.

[Deputy] And the other thing is that professionals do have ownership, they create the improvement plan and it is important that everyone knows how to design activities, it is fundamental.

[Interviewer] That means, the school has to be in charge of *driving the train*, no?

[Deputy] Sure, of course, the school has to create the improvement plan and the school incorporates the ATE in some actions, that's the perspective we have as a school. (Deputy Head)

In this sense, ATE introduced resources and knowledge from the outside to strengthen the autonomy of the school to lead their improvement plan, and facilitated the expression of the school's potential capacity for improvement. In the words of the ATE coordinator, the contribution of technical assistance consisted in 'helping the school institutionalise certain practices for improvement'. In this case, this is understood in terms of supporting the school in developing effective practice (formative assessment) through professional development, in order to ensure sustainable improvement.

However, the senior advisor considered that the challenging circumstances faced by the school implied it would continue to need external support in the future. She feels that they still had a long way to go for improving and argued that they should "go through a more deep intervention in the school" (Senior Advisor). In her opinion, Blackwell had to keep participating in initiatives of external assistance in order to improve as a school, but also to support its professionals, which she characterised as vulnerable as well.

8. CONCLUSIONS

As mentioned in the introduction, this case study was originally focused on the broader issue of the relationship between ATE and Blackwell during the implementation of an external assistance project but the issue of professional development was stressed by the participants, as the findings showed. Thus, in this section, these findings are discussed in order to offer a theoretical reflection on the role of ATE as a strategy for professional development activities within schools.

8.1 ATE as a Strategy for School-Based Professional Development

The case of Blackwell showed that the provision of external technical support from ATE to the school is dynamic and includes a variety of negotiation stages between its participants. Findings suggests that the school's autonomy to manage their improvement plan, the development of trustful and collaborative relationships between external agents and school's staff, and external agents' flexibility to negotiate strategies with teachers and school leaders were the main facilitators for implementing the AfL programme. However, the studied case

showed that the practical application of external technical support is a problematic issue, and even more so in the case of professional development initiatives.

Teachers' professional development, particularly in-service training, can be a complex enterprise to engage with. In the studied case, the professional development strategy was based on fixed a structure of theoretical lectures, practical workshops and classroom observation. However, this approach missed the fact that teachers learn "in many different aspects of practice, including their classrooms, their school communities, and professional development courses or workshops"(Borko, 2004, p. 4). The complex dynamic of the implementation of external assistance pushed advisors, school leaders and classroom teachers to engage in a different way, and it forced external agents to adapt their roles and professional development strategy. From having training sessions based on the transference of knowledge from technical experts to teachers (García & Donmoyer, 2005), there was a change to facilitators providing tools in workshop sessions (Tajik, 2008), and critical friends challenging and supporting teachers' classroom practice (MacBeath, 1998).

More specifically, the support provided by the ATE to Blackwell, in the form of a training programme on AfL, evidenced specific practical orientations that can be linked to what Chapman (2005) described as key principles of successful external support: appropriate design, context specificity, change at all levels, and sustained support. However, this case suggests a tension between two practical orientations that broadly describe the approach of external agents to school-based professional development: updating and installing competences versus building and supporting capacities.

8.2 Two Practical Orientations in Tension

The practical orientations that emerged from the case are intertwined and mixed within the dynamism of the process of providing external support to the school. Nevertheless, these two practical orientations represent distinct ways of thinking about teacher learning and their training or professional development. For instance, *updating and installing competences* could be related to teacher training where teachers incorporate or refresh standardised contents and knowledge in restricted instances; meanwhile, *building and supporting capacities* could be linked to professional development where teachers systematically reflect on their practice and learn to change and improve it (Espejo & González, 2014).

8.2.1 Updating and installing competences

In the case of updating and installing competences the role of ATE is linked to the idea of *brokering*, which implies transferring of specialised knowledge and resources from the outside to be incorporated into the school routines and teachers' practice (Harris, 2001). Similarly, the ATE as a broker is an important link between the school and available external expertise (Carmichael, Fox, McCormick, Procter, & Honour, 2006). This is particularly clear when, in response to the demand from Blackwell to set up a training programme on AfL for teachers, the ATE designed and implemented a series of activities aimed at transferring knowledge and skills from university academics to individual classroom teachers.

The dominant role of external agents in this instance was that of technical experts, sometimes in combination with a facilitator role. As some of the people from the school declared in interviews and the questionnaire, it is important that the people who are in front of the

teachers demonstrate expertise but it is equally critical that they know how to communicate such expertise. On the other hand, teachers are expected to learn and integrate this knowledge in such a way that it will *update* their professional knowledge about assessment, or in cases when such knowledge is weak or missing, it aims to *install* as new.

8.2.2 Building and supporting capacities

In the case of building and supporting capacities the role of ATE is associated with the notion of *boundary-spanning*, which can be described as a double process of buffering and bridging the external environment (Ellen, 1990). Buffering operates to filter the external knowledge and resources available in the immediate environment of the school, while bridging operates to actively seek and bring specific knowledge and resources closer to the school (Cohen-Vogel, Goldring, & Smrekar, 2010). In this sense, the ATE could move between buffering to *support* internal capacities, and bridging to *build* internal capacities in the school. In other words, the ATE would seek to activate the collective and individual potential of teachers in response to their needs and interests, as way of building and supporting the internal capacity for learning and improvement of the school (Stoll, 2009).

This role of ATE as boundary-spanner came up in the case of Blackwell in two instances. First, when school leaders demanded that the original training programme was adapted to meet their demands, and second when teachers applied their professional knowledge to the development of materials and resources to be used in classroom activities during workshops and classroom observation. Here, the role of external agents was that of facilitators, sometimes in combination with critical friend.

8.3 Final Thoughts

As a final note, it is necessary to stress that this is a first attempt to bring these ideas together regarding the issue of professional development in relation to the provision of external technical support to schools by ATE. Unfortunately, this case does not offer sufficient evidence of how ATE approached the issue of teacher professional development. However, there are hints from school leaders, teachers and external agents that, as the project progressed, they all became more concerned about the need to develop a continuous process of professional learning to address the challenges faced by the school.

In this sense, the tension between the two practical orientations just described attempts to reflect such concern and elaborates a discussion of how it can be addressed. While there still needs to be more research, theorising and reflection in order to formulate these practical orientations in a more robust way, in their current form they could prompt a discussion about the opportunities of professional development that Chilean classroom teachers have in the present policy context.

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