

# History and challenges for Chilean education

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**LA PONTIFICIA UNIVERSIDAD CATÓLICA DE VALPARAÍSO**

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The current situation of the student movements leads us to question as a society and as a country, the way in which education is conducted under the current social-economic model.

It has been shown - from the students themselves protesting to the intellectuals and professionals who also participate in the movements - that education is currently conceived not as a model of personal and collective development but rather as a commodity. This view of education is the one that Chile's president Sebastián Piñera supports. Our future is driven by companies who rely on prevailing economic freedom and the absence of effective legislation to offer their services at whatever price they want, to the point that they have established the highest tuition in the world, surpassed only by the United States. Any analysis would conclude that the average North American income could not be compared by any means to the purchasing power of Chileans, who are then forced to borrow millions to finance their university education. That is, education in Chile is a process that creates consumers that will have to join the market almost automatically.

This view of education as a consumer good is the opposite of how it was understood before the military coup and dictatorship in 1973. In effect, the reason that the previous State ensured free education at all levels was as follows: a citizen was formed through vital primary and secondary schooling, and later would receive a valuable and intellectual education in a university; all of which he should not pay for, but receive merely because he is a member of the society that constitutes the State. Then, once graduated, with the knowledge acquired from the university the citizen should contribute to improving society in the area in which he specialized; thus giving back to society (and ultimately the State) for giving him the opportunity to study higher education.

As demonstrated this year, the younger generation, those born and raised in democracy, want to reinstate this concept of education as they do not feel part of the abusive and uncontrolled market, but instead want to recover the sense of belonging to an honest society away from the individualism of Neoliberalism.

Thus, the "awakening" fostered by Chile's youth imposes on society its biggest challenges since the return to democracy in 1990. Paradoxically, this challenge is not other than going back to be a society and leave behind the model of the "Chilean Miracle" imposed by the neoliberal technocracy since the late 70s. Indeed, the most effective way of returning to being full-fledged citizens is through an education which teaches the foundations and values on which Chilean society should be built. In response to the reality that our country has one of the highest levels of inequality in the world, according to the OECD, it is necessary that the State once again provides free education, because the intellectual development that individuals experience in the university helps to correct inequality gaps. It must also be noted that higher education should not just be aimed at a base level, but should be an opportunity for young people to become fully aware of social realities with the aim of creating an enriching cultural exchange. This is something impossible to find in the current Chilean educational system which shows such an extremely high amount of social inequality.

The transition from dictatorship has not ended yet and a real democracy will only be attained once all citizens have secured their rights, not just in education, but also in terms of public health and social security.

Salvador Allende, before his death, said "Se volverán a abrir las grandes alamedas por donde pasará el Hombre Libre"\* His famous quote is becoming reality this year, now that the youth that did not live through the dictatorship have taken to the streets with color and creativity. They are fighting for the happiness that did not come when Chile returned to a "democracy," not only in Santiago, but in almost every city in Chile. For example, in Valparaíso, one of the country's most important ports, we march through the streets, and there is a sign that reads "We live in a democracy with laws of a dictatorship." Everything depends on today's youth who want true freedom and to do away with this slogan.

\*"They will return to open las grandes alamedas (or "the grand avenues," referring to "Alameda" which is the main street through Santiago) through which the Free Man will pass."



"We live in a democracy with the laws of a dictatorship"  
 "Vivimos en democracia con leyes de dictadura"  
 Photograph by Tyanna Slobe