Rural, Poor and Mapuche

A Window into the Power of Caring Education

*Caring is the very bedrock of
all successful education.*

—Nel Noddings

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Abstract

This article goes deep into the process of turning around a marginal and precarious school, into one with high quality learning results and an ethos of caring and competence that echoes and celebrates the life, insight and work of Nel Noddings, in particular her 17 years of teaching and leadership in elementary and high schools, and her philosophical work on the ethics of caring and its implications for education.

The article gives an account of the context, process and results of the radical transformation of a rural school serving a Mapuche community in the south of Chile, which in 2007 had the worst learning results of the country. A decade later, against all the odds of territorial isolation, socio-economic poverty and cultural distance from the mainstream, the school is consistently achieving results equivalent to the average of upper middle status schools in the main cities of highly urbanized Chile. At the heart of the change is ambitious and effective teaching that both cares and is able to help students substantially grow in terms of their fundamental skills. The article examines

the forces and actors involved, the concepts, moral orientation, means and strategies through which they acted, and the time-scale of the project.

Keywords: rural schooling, poverty, caring, visible pedagogy, intercultural education, Mapuche

Ruraux, pauvres et Mapuches

Une fenêtre sur le pouvoir d'une éducation par le soin

Résumé

Cet article met en lumière le processus de transformation d'une école marginale et précaire en un lieu d'apprentissage de haute qualité doté d'une philosophie du soin et de la compétence. Cette philosophie fait écho et célèbre la vie, les réflexions et le travail de Nel Noddings. Une attention particulière sera accordée à ses 17 ans d'enseignement et de leadership dans les écoles primaires et secondaires ainsi qu'à ses contributions philosophiques sur l'éthique du soin et les implications pour l'éducation.

Une fois le contexte posé, l'article retrace les processus et résultats participant de la transformation radicale d'une école implantée dans une communauté Mapuche du sud du Chili qui, en 2007, présentait les plus faibles performances d'apprentissage du pays. Dix ans après, malgré l'isolation géographique, la pauvreté socio-économique et les spécificités culturelles en regard de la tendance majoritaire, l'école atteint systématiquement des résultats comparables à ceux de la moyenne des écoles de la classe moyenne supérieure des principales villes du Chili urbanisé.

Au cœur de ce changement se trouve un enseignement ambitieux et efficace qui se préoccupe des élèves et stimule le développement de leurs compétences fondamentales. Cet article répondra donc à des questions centrales concernant les forces et agents impliqués; les concepts, orientations morales, moyens, stratégies qu'ils utilisent; la durée et le chronogramme du projet.

Mots-clés: scolarisation rurale, pauvreté, soin, pédagogie visible, éducation interculturelle, Mapuche

Rural, pobre y Mapuche

Una ventana al poder de la educación solidaria

Resumen

Este artículo profundiza en el proceso de convertir una escuela marginal y precaria, en una con resultados de aprendizaje de alta calidad y un *ethos* del cuidado y competencia que se hace eco y celebra la vida, el conocimiento y el trabajo de Nel Noddings, en particular sus 17 años de enseñanza y liderazgo en escuelas primarias y secundarias, y su trabajo filosófico sobre la ética del cuidado y sus implicaciones para la educación.

El artículo da cuenta del contexto, el proceso y los resultados de la transformación radical de una escuela rural al servicio de una comunidad mapuche en el sur de Chile, que en 2007 tuvo los peores resultados de aprendizaje del país. Una década más tarde, frente a los obstáculos de aislamiento territorial, pobreza socioeconómica y distancia cultural de la corriente principal, la escuela está logrando constantemente resultados equivalentes al promedio de las escuelas de nivel medio superior en las principales ciudades del Chile altamente urbanizado. La esencia del cambio es una enseñanza ambiciosa y efectiva que se preocupe y pueda ayudar a los estudiantes a crecer sustancialmente en términos de sus habilidades fundamentales. El artículo examina las fuerzas y actores involucrados, los conceptos, la orientación moral, los medios y las estrategias a través de los cuales actuaron, y la escala de tiempo del proyecto.

Palabras clave: escolaridad rural, pobreza, cuidado, pedagogía visible, educación intercultural, Mapuche

Introduction

I have been a student, a teacher, and a large educational project leader in the school system of Chile for 62 years. It is my life. My professional experience began as a teacher in private schools, and then for about thirty years, involved founding and directing state-subsidized schools in poor areas of Santiago and other regions of Chile.¹

Therefore, everything I know about education and the capacity to take action in the school environment I have learned from reflection upon practice. The experience of observation and the constant feedback of trial and error and action and reflection, supported by theories, gave a name and meaning to my discoveries and questions. I deeply value the conjunction of theory and practice. Theory is not a firm ground for

action if it is not tempered by practice, and reflection about practice is enhanced by theory. Those who act on the basis of academic theories or recipes without relying on the practical experience of what they are defining will be mistaken a thousand times, since they will be, to a large extent, blind to the complexities that arise from the differences of perspective and understanding of the members of the school community, which are relevant when planning and taking action.

In 2010, I was invited by the Educa Araucanía Foundation to take charge of a small intercultural rural school in the Araucanía Region, in southern Chile. At first, I thought it was going to be an easy task. I had worked for many years establishing and leading 8 huge urban schools in the most underprivileged areas of the outskirts of Santiago: nearly 9,000 students and 500 teachers. So, a small rural school of 88 students from PK to 8th grade and 8 professionals sounded stress free.

Ten years later, I must say it has not been at all simple – from the very first day until now...

From the start, I realized that the intercultural rural school, San Francisco de Cunco Chico, could fulfil my long expected hope to prove that highly underprivileged students in a caring and rich educational environment could learn just as well or even better than any other student in the country, and, above all, feel happy and loved. It was a small, poor and rural school with 98% of students belonging to the largest ethnic group in Chile, the Mapuche people.² With 14-year-olds who could hardly read and write or manage the four arithmetical operations, the Cunco Chico school couldn't have presented more difficult educational conditions for fulfilling my dream.

Even without having had any traumatic or particularly unhappy incidents during my own 14 years as a student at school, I always knew that schools with little love were scary and unwelcoming places. Places for control more than for learning and growth. Besides that, they are places where learning results are unsatisfactory. This makes sense when one takes into consideration that a student receives, on average, more than twenty thousand class hours over his or her educational lifetime.

However, I have always thought that learning and being with others should be the most exciting and happy experience a human being could have, and that place is school. But in most cases, that is not the real experience. For, while there is both space and time, it is rarely happy or sufficiently enriching.

So, I began this challenge with three main beliefs, gradually arrived at through my four decades of experience with students and teachers:

First, that any child, independent of its social or ethnic origin, is born with what now neuroscience research has demonstrated as billions of neurons that determine the immense potential that each human being has and whose dignity establishes the right to unfold it during life, and, crucially, during early childhood and schooling years. Schooling, then, has a moral and fundamental obligation in this respect: it is the first “specialized” institution commissioned for this crucial endeavour.

Second, as Humberto Maturana, the most influential Chilean biologist states, “living systems exist in the present, as a continuously changing here and now. The past and future are manners of living in a changing present in the flow of time” (Maturana, 2005). This idea supports my belief that schools have to worry primarily about the present, that is, the crucial experience it has to offer students, at every moment of an all-important now, not for the future, but for the wholeness and richness of the present moment and experience: a good future relies on a good present.

And third, acute awareness of the decisive influence of context, about how children learn and therefore how teaching has to be organized and defined. Poverty is like a fortress without a drawbridge, wrote Albert Camus, referring to his own childhood experience in Algeria. The bridge that education has to build so that children leave behind their powerlessness rests on a highly structured and explicit pedagogy. As the sociolinguistics of Basil Bernstein more than half a century ago and the pedagogy of Lisa Delpit two decades ago so eloquently demonstrated, if the school experience is going to be a drawbridge out of the fortress of poverty, it calls for a visible pedagogy that first of all builds the basic skills and language they need for advancing in education (Bernstein, 1973; Delpit, 1997). A visible pedagogy embedded in affection and care, so that students can care about and desire learning. “See their brilliance: do not teach less content to poor...children, but instead, teach more!” (Delpit, 2006).

All three beliefs require an understanding how a human being learns; have a sociologically informed view of the context; and with that knowledge, create powerful experiences in a caring relational environment. This is what I brought as guiding principles to address the challenge of developing a small rural school.

The Story

Araucanía Region, Chile, May 2016

Sixteen 12-year-old students, boys and girls, from the intercultural rural school, San Francisco of Cunco Chico, ran out of the classroom in a mighty stampede. Literally out of their heads, they shouted proudly in the middle of the playground:

“We are at an international level!!!!” “We are at an international level!!!!”

They had just received news about their learning results in the National Standardized Tests in language, math and history, with scores high above those of their low socio-economical peers – even better – and high above the results of their peers of the “upper middle socioeconomic status (SES),” a classification of the official Chilean Educational Quality Agency responsible for learning assessments nationwide.

Nothing like this had occurred 10 years before, when the tiny rural school of 88 students was featured in the news as having the worst 4th grade school’s results in

language and math in the history of the national Education Quality Measurement System (SIMCE), at one hundred and twenty points below the national average. Those were dark days for students and teachers alike. Sadly, that group of students has continued to have difficulties in getting over their sense of worthlessness.

The San Francisco de Cunco Chico School was established in 1980 and it belonged to a large and well-known philanthropic foundation in the region. In 2007, when the results were communicated to the whole educational system, the school's outcomes meant that the 9-year-old students who had participated in the national tests didn't know how to read and write, nor did they know the basic arithmetical operations. Six years of formal education...and these were the results.

The school had at that time 88 students from pre-kinder to eighth grade, a school vulnerability index of 94%, and 98% Mapuche enrolment.³

A group of professionals and businessmen from the region, looking for a social cause that would give them an opportunity to help the poorest and most disadvantaged of the Chilean regions, their own region, knew they had found their cause when they heard the news. They discovered a school in very precarious conditions. To start with, there was no drinking water. The students had to fetch buckets of water from the nearby Quepe River during school time.

The lack of drinking water illustrates the critical physical conditions faced daily by the students and teachers. So, this group of friends decided to contact the school owners and offered to help them with its infrastructure, beginning with the digging and construction of a well. They quickly got involved and soon were building new classrooms and changing the space into something friendlier and more dignified.

When rethinking a school, it is best to start with the space, for it impacts everything and speaks for itself. In this case, it demonstrated care, respect and dignity for the whole community. Youngsters, girls and boys, silently understood that at last they were starting to be taken seriously and cared for.

Of course, space and material conditions are not enough – the sponsoring group had to manage this change in surprising but necessary ways. The first step was to ask the late Longko⁴ Zenon Manqueo, head of the local indigenous community, for permission to teach their children, and so two of them paid him a visit. He invited them into his *ruca*,⁵ offering them food and conversation around the fire. His home, like that of all Mapuche, was subject to ancient laws and ceremonies. Just like the Polish scientist Ignacio Domeyko described the Mapuche in his 1845 trip to Araucanía, “serious and very formal in his treatment, somehow thoughtful, severe and respectful of authority, dispenses to each one the compliance and affection that corresponds” (Domeyko, 2010), the man received his guests. After five hours of prolonged small talk about life, family, crops, cattle and health, showing no more than benevolence and interest to know everything relative about them, the Longko, following the tradition, should have shown his trust by “getting up from his seat, [to] approach his guests and

hug them three times, putting his head alternately to the right and to the left” (Domeyko, 2010). The authorization was given.

Hence, from then on until now, the Educa Araucanía Foundation took control of the school and hired me as Academic Director to begin its transformation.⁶ The basis of this renewal has been my deep belief that every child is born with tremendous potential, independent of the circumstances of its birth, and that the healthy and rich development of a person depends not only on his or her genes but also on the environment and the experiences they have in their lives. The school should be a caring environment, producing a very high quality and consistent set of experiences that will help to build an integrated, healthy, harmonious and strong person.

So, the staff and myself began, with a decent infrastructure and adequate equipment, to develop the curriculum in a dignified learning environment. Then we had to address a special but crucial problem in Chilean rural contexts – the geographic, social and cultural isolation of school communities, especially those of the Mapuche communities. We decided to break with their closed segregation, based on enrollment limited to four or five families, by expanding the catchment area of the school to include other Mapuche communities. Further, increasing the number of communities implies greater diversity, greater interaction, and thus greater cognitive, social and cultural wealth for each of them. The school could expand students’ social and cultural experience without abandoning their roots.

This vision, the growing reputation of the school, and the vital service of school transportation (provided by the regional government) allowed an increase in the number of students from 88 to 287. At the start, students walked to school, from a radius of up to three kilometers. Now, with special transport, students come from a radius of 10 or more kilometers. In 2007, the school had 4 multigrade classrooms and 5 teachers. Today, it has 10 classrooms with an average of 22 students, plus 62 infants in our pre-school and day nursery, and a team of more than 32 professionals and assistants. This, no doubt, has had a great impact on the children’s and youngsters’ growth and identity.

Vitally important for bringing the world to the classroom and taking their world to the outside, the school needed subject-specialized teachers. This meant, given the school’s special circumstances, from kindergarten to 8th grade, specialist teachers skilled in Mapudungun (the Mapuche language), art, music, physical education and English, and, for the junior school, additional teachers specialized in language, math, science and history.

Constructing an Inclusive Pedagogy: Support, Learning and Culture

However, the goals of the school could not be achieved without pedagogical, effective and stable leadership, able to lead a team towards a strong professional community,

learning and working together. The vision had the challenges of creating robust learning experiences by creating a systemic intercultural environment; integrating Mapuche knowledge into the curriculum; developing a high quality and relevant curriculum in all the areas, with a focus in language (reading and writing) and math; offering extracurricular activities in order to explore interests and talents and strengthen or develop new capacities; and, last but not least, managing a pedagogy that makes the student the protagonist of his or her own learning. And, above all, there was the belief that the success of all of these actions depended on the emotional bond between teachers and students. In the words of Nel Noddings, “our efforts must, then, be directed to the maintenance of conditions that will permit caring to flourish. Caring relations provide successful pedagogic activities. The caring teacher strives first to establish and maintain caring relations, and these relations exhibit an integrity that provides a foundation for everything teacher and student do together” (Noddings, 2005).

Students at the school are classified by the Chilean Ministry of Education as belonging to a low socioeconomic status. This group has both the lowest level of parental education (an average of 8 years of schooling) and family income (less than US\$ 240 per month) (Agencia de la Calidad de la Educación, 2013), together with a high index of educational vulnerability (IVE of 94%).⁷ The challenge was and is to overcome these familial and contextual conditions and to build a foundation for learning and growth. To do so, I and the leading team identified four inter-active pillars of support, which over time became increasingly effective in encouraging self-esteem, resilience and sense of achievement, reinforcing their learning and growth, and taking into account the very special circumstances of their culture and economic condition.

These four pillars are:

- *Individualized knowledge and progress-monitoring of each student.* This means weekly follow up of each student’s situation in order to prevent difficulties that could affect learning or coexistence due to emotional, economical, family or health problems. The purpose is to anticipate problems and attend to students immediately before the difficulty deepens.
- *Life Project:* When 14, at 8th grade, our students finish junior school and have to enrol in a secondary school in the nearest city. This means they have to travel far every day or enrol in a boarding school and share life with more than 40 new schoolmates. A cosy close-to home environment is over, while dropping out is a new and ever-present risk. So, they have to be prepared to be builders and managers of their own future.

At 13 years old, all students are invited to dream: who would you like to be when 25 years old? Then, the school staff tutors each student personally over two years with the purpose of defining and scaffolding their way to accomplish

their dream. This reinforcement of social and emotional skills, together with scholarships and follow up, has an impact at the secondary level – for the main indicator of the school’s success is that all our students complete their secondary education.⁸

- *Roots Project*: This pillar consists in recovering the student’s Mapuche identity and culture, by retrieving their mother tongue (Mapudungun) and reinforcing their cultural identity through the curriculum and extracurricular activities. Students are expected to commit themselves to the value principles and ancestral worldview of their people: that is, being “norche” (a person who is just and keeps his word) and “lifche” (a person who is transparent, with a clean mind and heart), by using their “newen” (physical, psychological and spiritual strength) to pursue the “kümegen” (good integral living in relationship with the social and ecological environment) and reach, along their lives, the greatest aspiration, “Kimche,” that is, wholeness in wisdom.
- *Early educational intervention*. Since 2017, a nursery and infant school (62 infants) has been in operation and it is hoped to create powerful experiences for babies and infants with a pedagogy that is compatible with their development. Our experience and our reading of pedagogical and neuroscience research has shown that Montessori’s educational philosophy and methods are the most appropriate for developing healthy and rich intelligence. Montessori’s classrooms are places, as Nel Noddings suggests, “in which students can legitimately act on a rich variety of purposes, in which wonder and curiosity are alive, in which students and teachers live together and grow” (Noddings, 2005). Even more, in a Montessori environment, children and teachers alike live and model a caring relationship for others, nature, objects and ideas.

We respect and integrate the Mapuche culture with this particular educational philosophy that through a caring relationship will strengthen children’s executive functions⁹ and autonomy and ability to develop an integrated self.¹⁰

These axes were not fully defined at the start, but were developed as the school year-cycles unrolled between 2010 and 2017 and the leading team and teachers reflected and learned from their actions’ results. The end result of this “knead and rise” process was a model that was labelled “Model for a XXI Century Intercultural Rural School.”

Model for a XXI Century Intercultural Rural School.

The Process¹¹

Schools are systemic creatures. If there is going to be a fundamental change, then it should involve the whole system, not isolating particular parts as many of the educational assistance agencies and educational consultants do. For it is a living system where teachers and students live and learn. We abide by this insight – that in schools everything is interrelated and, thus, at Cunco Chico’s school everything matters: from early morning school arrival to the afternoon farewell, from the first words of welcome to complex discussions, from the playground to bathrooms. What drives and orders the infinite daily actions is a genuine care for children, but how does this care manifest itself in the orchestration of actions that are systemic and effective in terms of learning and growth? And how did this understanding get transformed in actions and ways of doing that created capacities in persons and the organization and transformed learning opportunities and results?

At the core of the model presented above is “ambitious teaching,” and indeed the heart of the change process is the transformation of teaching, from weak and

ineffective to powerful and influential. The change-strategy is based on an array of means beginning with a careful selection of teachers. Time and energy was spent every year to include the best teachers available for the project, where actual teaching to whole-group classes was observed and then reflected upon as part of the selection process (Harris, Gunrai, Clarke & Harris, 2006; MacBeath, Gray, Cullen, Frost, Steward & Swaffield, 2007). Although apparently straightforward, teacher selection (whether available in the region or elsewhere) has been the most demanding and difficult task of the process overall. The remoteness of the school, the lack of teachers with a profile that would respond to the particular requirements of this challenging project, and the generalized and recognized weakness in teacher training in many Chilean Schools of Education have made this assignment arduous and many times frustrating, although highly rewarding.¹² It has taken the school years to consolidate a team of teachers with the necessary skills and attitudes that this ambitious and high quality teaching demands. Teachers' rotation was often high and their permanence not guaranteed. Thus, the vulnerability of context includes the fragility of "professional capital" in the area.

Second, the most fundamental strategy for improving teaching consisted of systematic class observation and feedback to every teacher three times a year on average, and five or more times in cases of novice or new teachers or a subject or grade defined as focal (because it is evaluated nationally, has specially challenging group characteristics or circumstances, or due to other criteria).

As Academic Director, it was part of my role to carry out these observations and give oral and written feedback. I focused first on the class setting and disposition of the group and materials: is it all adequate for what is going to happen inside? Then, I focused on the classroom's norms and the socio-affective ambience, and third, and fundamentally, on the actual teaching, or defining features of the flow of exchanges and interaction between teacher and students. How is the balance between teacher talk and students' work and talk? Are students interested? What types of questions does the teacher ask? Which of these are generative or elicit thought processes that go beyond the "serve and answer" type of exchanges? Are the generative ones pursued by the teacher? Is the teacher or are the students making connections with topics learned before, current events, other school subjects or existential questions? Is he or she careful about not privileging the most attentive and able? In these reports, I placed particular attention on the "pedagogic content knowledge"¹³ used by the teacher, and how this included, or not, awareness and adequate pedagogical answers to the inter-cultural dimension at stake in working with the national curriculum's contents with Mapuche children. For example, when teaching about hours and minutes, what connections were established with the Mapuche language and concepts for time keeping? Could the conditions of city living be explained without starting from their rural community organization and their social and political roles? My observations would be followed by dialogue and reflection with the teacher and the school principal,

who would later receive a written report with evaluative descriptions and recommendations about the class in order to follow up, later, with the teacher on how to work on the recommendations.

The following are some excerpts from reports to the school principal about teachers' classes:

History teacher. 8th Grade: "Sofía has to make sure, beforehand, that students can handle the vocabulary of the questions she makes or the text she's using. Also, she has to take advantage of the concepts that are inserted in the texts that she delivers, in order to explain them again or use them again and again in different contexts. The concepts are too abstract for them, hence, it's never enough the amount of times she needs to go back to them, so students can make strong connections. For these students, nothing that is taught in school is going to be learned elsewhere."

"I suggest to place other challenges than just ask typical alternative questions at the start of the class. In History class they are studying about the Roman Empire's social classes. It would be more interesting to ask them the relation between those social classes and today's social classes, work in pairs answering that question and then discuss with the whole class. She has to use more challenging or connected with real life, questions."

"Sofía writes today's class goal: 'Identify the social characteristics of the Roman Republic'. She starts reviewing what they did in the previous week. Good work. The students participate and they show that they understood. She should take advantage of always comparing or connecting what they are studying with today's life, and specially with their Mapuche life. For example, she could start asking: Who enforces the law in their communities? And in the city?"

"She finally does an activity where she presents different cases and the students have to write and justify to what social class they belong. She asks to do it individually and not in pairs, missing an opportunity for discussion. The students need to verbalize concepts and issues in order to internalize what they are learning. It's richer, in all senses, to discuss with a partner than doing it on their own."

"She should mix intellectual work, with concrete, ludic or virtual or visual activities. Many students need that."

"There is no world map, nor map of Chile in the classroom. Sofía, as the history teacher, should not accept not having these maps in the classrooms."¹⁴

A third dimension to improve teaching focused on careful selection of teacher professional development courses that offered education and training possibilities in

deficit areas or required enhancement, identified in the class-observation and reporting back exercises referred to above, or more comprehensively, as needs of the whole school and its teaching base. The Foundation behind the school was supportive in this and the school, as a whole, could benefit from programs and opportunities with highly qualified educators and experts of the country. Thus, the school that once counted among the most marginal and educationally poor in Chile has systematically developed first-class professional educational knowledge by substantively expanding the pedagogical and content repertoires of its teachers.

Further, to quote Nel Noddings, “On this last, the matter of competence, it might be said that caring implies competence. By that I mean that teachers in caring relations are continually pressed to gain greater competence. The caring relation is essential as a starting point and a continuous framework of support, but it is not enough by itself to ensure competent teaching” (Noddings, 2005). “They must have large repertoires at their fingertips and the artistry to use them well” (Noddings, 2005).

How did the leading team manage to improve teaching, attaining artistry and large repertoires in Cunco School’s teachers following these class observations? On the one hand, there is a delicate interaction between the observations, reporting-back and reflection with each teacher; and on the other, training and professional development opportunities are proposed to respond to needs. Consequently, after extended mutual conversations, special training courses are identified that reinforce what has been discussed and agreed upon as needed. Examples: Classroom management? Specialized course on tips about how to use time effectively, organize classroom activities, and engage students: “Teach like a champion,” from Doug Lemov. Mathematics teaching? Singapore method. Early childhood pedagogy? Montessori’s answers and methodologies. Literacy Teaching? Matte Method from Aptus, a Chilean institution specialized in supporting schools working in challenging contexts. Reading Comprehension and Reading Stimulation? Read First Method, *Crece con todos* Foundation. Language routines? Astoreca Foundation. Music Reading? Color Music Method. Science? Inquiry-Based Science (ECBI). Evaluation, *Valua* method. There is one common feature about these proven and successful courses with highly successful teaching practices. None, unfortunately, come from Universities or Schools of Education, which raises many questions about the nature of their relationships to schools and actual teaching practices.

Finally, evaluation of all that matters for the children’s growth and analysing that data is undoubtedly a key tool in what got mobilized to transform teaching. Evidence of learning in each child and each classroom, its evolution and the relations of this evolution with intra and extra-school factors is the basis for action at school, at the classroom and individual levels. Contrary to conventional criticisms in the field of teaching about standards-based national evaluation instruments, of which Chile has ample and its policies are used a lot (for better or worse), we at the Cunco Chico School use the

information from national tests about our students' performance in a constructive way, linked to the search for ever better teaching and learning performance.

All of these crucial actions needed a strong and sustained leadership that was hard to find in the locality. As Academic Director, I travelled once a month, for three days, from Santiago to Temuco in order to work with the school principal and teachers. The project needed a leader that could understand the philosophy that inspired it, and have the professional and organizational knowledge, as well as the moral purpose, to inspire and lead students, teachers and parents. Between 2007 and 2013, we had three different school heads, who, although they contributed to start the improvement trajectory, were not able to make coalesce all the strands of the project. In 2014, I was able to find in Santiago an exceptional teacher prepared to go to Cunco Chico to be the new leader of the school. Claudia Pizarro incarnated the mission and educational principles of the project like nobody else: she brought powerful professional capital from Santiago (pedagogical, didactic and organizational knowledge), was willing and able to learn from the Mapuche rural context and its children and communities' educational needs, and ready to abandon the city for a poor and isolated corner of the Araucanía region. Her moral purpose, which sustained her in Cunco Chico in quasi-heroic conditions, was an example that over the years propelled the transformation of the teachers and the culture of the school.

The Results

The school has many achievements, but it is worth highlighting two of them, especially as they are pillars of the school mission: first, the wealth of two cultures or how students' potential unfolds when based on intercultural integration in their learning opportunities; second, their results in the national standardized tests in the key school curriculum areas.

Over the years and cutting across different programs, all our students have been developing knowledge and capacities in Chilean and Mapuche cultures. Our model, since the start, sought to connect the students to different opportunities far away from their territory in order to show their world to the world and, at the same time, learn from the "other." They have participated in many events and regional or national contests where they have shown their capacities in different areas.

The cultural richness of our students and their impact over the last six years can be illustrated by the following examples:

In music, earned by merit, the school choir was invited year after year as the only rural and Mapuche school choir from the region to the Children's Choral Encounter at the Municipal Theatre of the City of Temuco. They sang Mapuche and Chilean songs. Likewise, for 3 years, supported by the Papageno Foundation, children (starting from second grade) learned to play different classical music instruments, such as the violin,

flute, viola, and guitar, at the same time as other Mapuche musical instruments, participating in the Papagenitos Orchestra Encounter at the end of each year.

In sports, they have learned, in addition to those required in the national curriculum, the Palin or Chueca, a Mapuche stick and ball game that originated in southern Chile and southwestern Argentina, together with other Mapuche table games, inviting nearby rural schools to participate in friendly competitions and being recognized by the Regional Department of Sports and Culture.

In art, they participated in a national contest promoted by the Mustakis Foundation in 2014, winning the second and third prize for creating toys inspired by the Greek myths. In poetry, one of our students participated in the first Student Literary Contest (2018), convened by the Faculty of Sciences of Education of the Central University and the Swedish Chilean Institute of Culture. Her poem, “A verse to Lucila,” a homage to Chilean Literature Nobel Prize laureate Gabriela Mistral, was published in a Mapudungun and Spanish special edition, and she was invited to Santiago, as a special guest, to recite her poem in the competition’s final ceremony.

In 2015, in reading, one of our fourth graders won the first national live reading contest, receiving his prize at the National Library in Santiago and the honor of being invited to be part of the jury the following year.

In 2014, in the National Week of Science and Technology, in a drawing and a comic strip competition about the future, four of our students won the second and third place in their categories, and in the Interscholastic Robotics Tournament at Valparaíso, one of our students won the fourth place nationwide.

These opportunities and the recognition of their talents have deepened our students’ sense of achievement and their closeness to the world that only yesterday seemed so far away. It is an eloquent example of what a caring teaching school can do to the student’s awareness and self-esteem.

These results, the product of intercultural dynamics, could be dismissed as special cases if there had not been a marked improvement in more conventional areas of the national curriculum, as measured by standardized national assessment instruments, thanks to a sustained improvement of teaching.

The following two tables show the evolution of student performance in national tests, from the well-remembered dismal starting point in 2006 to 2017.¹⁵ In 2006, fourth graders, as noted, had the worst national results in the Language test, with 152 points on the SIMCE scale. As Table 1 shows, just over a decade later, in 2017, they obtained 283 points, a difference of 131 points, equivalent to 2.6 standard deviations on the SIMCE scale, reached by, as the gradient of the graph shows, an actual leap in the initial years, and then sustained and substantial growth along the gradient (with some slight declines in particular years). After five years, the school’s fourth graders had reached their national reference group, and in year seven (2013), the national average; then, after a slight decrease, they advanced in 2017 by more than 20 points (almost half of a standard deviation) above the national average, to practically reach the

average results of the schools of the *upper middle* SES category, two rungs above their own SES.¹⁶ Table 2 data portrays the same trajectory of growth for mathematics: starting at an even lower point in 2006 (126 points), the 4th grade students of Cunco Chico reached the average of their own SES group in 2010 (226 points), and two years later got close to the national average (256 points in 2012); they then continued improving, and in 2016 surpassed the score of the *upper middle* SES group (with 282 over 278 points, respectively).

Table 1

Language 4th Grade SIMCE Results 2006–2017

Comparisons with national and socio-economic groups. ()*

Source: SIMCE reports, different years. Ministerio de Educación, Agencia de la Calidad de la Educación.

Table 2

*Mathematics 4th Grade SIMCE Results 2006–2017**Comparisons with national and socio-economic groups*

Source: SIMCE reports, different years. Ministerio de Educación, Agencia de la Calidad de la Educación.

It is easy with this kind of accounting to lose sight of what really lies behind these numbers and their evolution, for it requires a fundamental change in the key competencies at stake, true “infra-structure” to continue growing as school learners. I think these scores can be described in another way that helps in getting to their substantial meaning. As mentioned, SIMCE categorizes the students’ results in terms of criteria that define, with some precision, what a student at a given level of achievement can do. To illustrate the serious disadvantages facing rural school, Table 3 shows, both for Reading and Mathematics, the percentage of the school’s fourth graders that are at the different levels of SIMCE’s three categories of achievement: *insufficient*, *elemental*, and *adequate*.

Table 3

Average percentage of students who obtained an insufficient, elementary or adequate level of learning in SIMCE 4th grade (2017), according to schools' urban/rural and SES conditions.

Classification of schools, Urban/Rural and by SES	READING			MATHEMATICS		
	Insufficient	Elemental	Adequate	Insufficient	Elemental	Adequate
School San Francisco de Cunco Chico	26.7%	20.0%	53.3%	20.0%	46.7%	33.3%
Urban national average	33.0%	28.3%	38.7%	38.9%	39.0%	22.1%
Rural national average	37.6%	29.2%	33.2%	47.1%	37.2%	15.8%
Total	33.7%	28.5%	37.8%	40.1%	38.7%	21.1%
Urban low SES	45.3%	28.6%	26.1%	53.6%	33.9%	12.5%
Rural low SES	39.2%	29.5%	31.3%	49.1%	36.4%	14.6%
Total low SES	42.9%	28.9%	28.2%	51.8%	34.9%	13.4%
Urban high SES	10.5%	21.2%	68.3%	11.0%	36.7%	52.3%
Rural high SES	14.2%	16.3%	69.5%	8.8%	43.0%	48.2%
Total high SES	10.5%	21.2%	68.3%	11.0%	36.7%	52.3%

Source: C. Gómez, V. Orrego, and M. Sánchez, *Educación rural en Chile y factores claves de un modelo exitoso*, Santiago: Elige Educar.

The table allows comparison of the different percentages with the national average for the urban and rural schools, and also with two SES categories, which are combined with the urban/rural condition. For both competencies, reading and mathematics, the results of Cunco Chico School are *better* than the urban national average, and both the low urban and low rural averages: a greater percentage of its students are in the *adequate* category, and lower percentages are in the *insufficient* and *elemental* categories. Only the upper SES categories, both urban and rural, have a better distribution.

In sum, against all odds, education, when reconfigured with respect to the needs that children set in their culture, has the power to break the socio-cultural reproduction of poverty and exclusion in the most challenging of contexts.

Throughout the precedent account of the context, process and results of the Cunco Chico case and the power of education, I have not touched upon nor questioned a permanent condition of this type of private endeavour in publicly funded education in Chile, which refers to their instability, and the more or less ever-present risk of regression to precariousness and loss of already conquered levels of functioning. An inner frailty that is not due to the students' poverty and surrounding social conditions, nor to the dramatic shortage of the required professionals in rural areas of the country, but to governance and leadership factors. It is of course a crucial dimension, which all along the development I have described has seen a debate between educational and economic criteria at the heart of the Foundation responsible for the project. Paradoxically, this started to take place when good learning results were interpreted as having achieved the main goal of the whole project, and that attention could be diverted to new undertakings, not realising that the risk of regression is always present in conditions as challenging as those of Cunco Chico. In a way, and in Noddings' terms, as soon as the caring diminished, results faltered.¹⁷

Conclusion

I started this article with Nel Noddings' epigram defining caring as the bedrock of all successful education. Throughout the description and interpretation that I have tried to articulate is the intention to do justice to the power of education in contexts of exclusion and poverty. I see her fundamental insights rooted in a caring education as providing a profound and inspiring justification of the Cunco Chico educational project's story.

If I look back and consider the model we arrived at, with its four pillars – *Individualized knowledge and progress-monitoring of each student, Life project, Roots project, Early educational intervention* – and with high quality ambitious teaching at its centre, and ask about both the path that led to it, its fruits, and its constituent parts, what do I see? I see the coupling of two principles put forward by the vision of Nel Noddings in every idea and motif sustaining the march and inspiring every meaningful action of the construction: a caring relation and competence. Care in Cunco Chico meant understanding not only poverty, but also the isolation of the rural condition and the exclusion of Mapuche culture. The goal is to make students and their families part of a new “we,” founded on mutual respect and a recognition of cultures and knowledge, with the school becoming a truly new learner of its surroundings and their novelty and richness, and with its students becoming enthused by joining the outside world empowered with one of the most legitimate and recognized of its keys: “official”

valid knowledge. The school's achievement is based on the competence of teachers and the school itself, built step by step and resorting to the array of tools and processes that I have attempted to characterize, under the overarching conceptual framework of "visible pedagogies" and their truly transforming power.

Perhaps as a tribute to Nel Noddings, *caring visible pedagogies* is the most appropriate label for the path trodden by San Francisco of Cunco Chico School.

Notes

1. There are three types of schools in the Chilean educational system: municipal schools, financed by a per student subsidy granted by the state and run by municipalities; private subsidized schools, financed by the same per student subsidy and run by private owners or foundations; and private fee-paying schools, financed by fees paid by parents and managed by private owners or foundations.
2. The Mapuche are an indigenous group located in south-central Chile and southwestern Argentina. They constitute a wide-ranging ethnicity composed of various groups who share a common social, religious and economic structure, as well as a common linguistic heritage. Their influence once extended between the Aconcagua River and the Chiloé Archipelago, later spreading eastward to the Argentine pampa. The Araucanian Mapuche were settled in the valleys between the Itata and Toltén River at the time of the arrival of the Spanish colonizers in 1536. Today, with a population of 1,745,147, the Mapuche people make up over 80% of Chile's indigenous population and about 9% of the total Chilean population. (They are concentrated in the Araucanía, although many have migrated to Santiago for economic reasons). "The Mapuche people are one of the most well known native ethnic people in the country, both for their social and demographic weight and for their strong sense of cultural identity, which historically has found forms of resistance and adaptation to the dynamics of border contact with Spaniards and Chileans" (Memoria Chilena, Biblioteca Nacional de Chile).
3. JUNAEB (the National Board of School Aid and Scholarships) uses the National Equity Allocation System (SINAE) to measure school vulnerability in preschool, basic and secondary education. The system classifies students into 3 levels called "priorities," according to conditions of poverty and risk of school failure.
4. Longko in Mapudungun means "head." Lonco or Lonko is the ancestral authority of a Mapuche community.
5. Ruca = hut.
6. Special acknowledgments go to the 2010 Board of Directors of the Educa Araucanía Foundation: Ignacio del Río, Pedro Hepp, Alicia Alamos, Mariana Castillo, Josefina del Río, Ernesto Laval, and Ignacio Errázuriz, who, thanks to their generosity, made

possible the creation of a rural education model that has the potential to lift the country's rural children out of poverty and a lack of opportunities.

7. Vulnerability is a dynamic condition that results from the interaction of a multiplicity of risk factors and protectors that occur in the life cycle of a subject, and that are manifested in behaviours or acts of greater or lesser social, economic, psychological, cultural risk, environmental and/or biological, producing a comparative disadvantage between subjects, families and/or communities (JUNAEB, 2013).

8. This goal has been fully accomplished through lowering the dropout rate from 39% to 8% since the start of the Life Project in 2014.

9. Executive function and self-regulation skills are the mental processes that enable us to plan, focus attention, remember instructions, and juggle multiple tasks successfully. These skills are crucial for learning and development. Children aren't born with these skills—they are born with the potential to develop them. These skills are learned at home, in early care and educational programs. Executive function and self-regulation skills depend on three types of brain function: working memory, mental flexibility, and self-control (Harvard University, 2019).

10. "For the brain, integration means that separated areas with their unique functions, in the skull and throughout the body, become linked to each other through synaptic connections. These integrated linkages enable more intricate functions to emerge—such as insight, empathy, intuition, and morality. A result of integration is kindness, resilience, and health. Terms for these three forms of integration are a coherent mind, empathic relationships, and an integrated brain" (Siegel, 2012). "These integrative processes can be proposed to be at the core of emotional well being and psychological resilience. The ongoing dynamic of integration may be fundamental to the evolving mechanisms within the life of an individual, dyad, family or community's continual movement toward mental health" (Siegel, 2001).

11. This essay concentrates on educational philosophy and practice rather than other aspects such as resources available to the institution. Suffice it to say that resource uncertainty may have influenced the timing of different programs but not the overall philosophy described here. Almost all rural (private and public) schools face severe resource constraints that continue to the present and this school is not an exception.

12. "The country currently has a relatively high shortage of qualified teachers, particularly in rural schools, public schools and in schools that receive students from disadvantaged backgrounds" (OECD, 2015, p. 1). "As the reform movement developed in the middle 1990s, an appraisal of contemporary initial teacher education gave rise to great concern about its quality and suitability....The teacher education curriculum was poorly articulated, overcrowded and fragmentary" (OECD, 2004, pp. 127–128).

13. Lee Shulman's famous and influential conceptualization of PCK (Pedagogical Content Knowledge) as a defining knowledge of the teaching profession, I find illuminating and central (Shulman, 1987; Shulman, 2004).
14. As Academic Director, I sent a monthly report of 10 or 12 pages to the school principal with the observations about the school, its infrastructure and equipment, the team of teachers and managers, the students, the observations of classes, learning outcomes and key issues.
15. The Chilean national learning outcome assessment system (*Sistema de Medición de Calidad de la Educación*, SIMCE) has carried out yearly census-based assessments of the fourth and other school grades since 1988 and publishes the results at both the national and school levels. The assessment system is recognized in the country and internationally as being reliable, credible and rigorous (Vegas & Petrow, 2007; Santiago, Fiszbein, García Jaramillo, & Radinger, 2017). It moved from normative to criterion-referenced assessment in 2006, and Chile's participation in international surveys (PISA, TIMSS, ICCS, and others) has created links between SIMCE and international assessment associations and agencies such as IEA, Boston College, ACER (Australian Council for Education Research) and ETS (Educational Testing Service) (Meckes and Carrasco, 2010).
16. SIMCE classifies schools in terms of 5 socio-economic categories, according to average income and educational level of parents: *low*, *middle low*, *middle*, *upper middle*, *upper SES*. In the table are reported just two of these 5 categories: the *low SES* group, which corresponds to Cunco Chico's School, and the *upper middle SES* group, which is a category two rungs above (*middle low*, and *middle*) that of the school.
17. SIMCE results in 4th grade, both for language and mathematics, after a decade of consistent improvement, dropped substantially in 2018. In language, from 283 to 262 score points, and in mathematics, from 270 to 220.

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