



# Educating the “Crystal” Generation: How Teachers Perceive Students. A Descriptive Study at a Regional State University in Chile

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## Abstract

This study explores faculty perceptions regarding the characteristics of new generations of students at a Chilean state university. Through surveys and interviews conducted with 199 academics, significant generational differences were identified that affect the pedagogical relationship. Faculty members perceive the current generation as more independent, informed, and diverse, yet also more distracted, emotionally fragile, and less disciplined. They highlight an increasing disconnect from traditional content, limited classroom participation, and a decline in reading habits. Additionally, respondents reported less respectful interactions with faculty and a rise in conflicts, including instances of censorship and verbal aggression. These findings illustrate a crisis in pedagogical authority and the emergence of new forms of student communication and organization, driven by access to technology and social media. The study concludes that today's educators face unprecedented challenges in creating effective learning environments, requiring strategies that incorporate emotional support and the management of sociability. The research underscores the need for a collaborative and continuously updated approach within a context of rapid change that is reshaping intergenerational relationships in higher education.

## Keywords

faculty attitudes; generational differences; higher education; student behavior

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# Educar à Geração "de cristal": percepções docentes sobre os estudantes. Um estudo descritivo em uma Universidade Pública Regional do Chile

## Resumo

Este estudo investiga as percepções dos docentes sobre as características das novas gerações de estudantes em uma universidade pública chilena. Por meio de questionários e entrevistas realizadas com 199 professores, identificaram-se diferenças geracionais significativas que impactam a relação pedagógica. Os docentes percebem a geração atual como mais independente, informada e diversa, porém também mais dispersa, emocionalmente frágil e menos disciplinada. Destacam-se ainda o crescente distanciamento em relação aos conteúdos tradicionais, a participação restrita em sala de aula e a diminuição dos hábitos de leitura. Os participantes também relataram interações menos respeitadas com os professores e um aumento nos conflitos, incluindo episódios de censura e agressões verbais. Esses achados revelam uma crise na autoridade pedagógica e o surgimento de novas formas de comunicação e organização estudantil impulsionadas pelo acesso à tecnologia e às redes sociais. O estudo conclui que os educadores contemporâneos enfrentam desafios inéditos para criar ambientes de aprendizagem eficazes, demandando estratégias que integrem apoio emocional e gestão da sociabilidade. A pesquisa ressalta a necessidade de uma abordagem colaborativa e constantemente atualizada diante de um contexto de rápidas transformações que estão redesenhando as relações intergeracionais no ensino superior.

### Palavras-chave

atitudes docentes; diferenças geracionais; ensino superior; comportamento estudantil

# Educar a la Generación "de cristal": percepciones docentes sobre el estudiantado. Un estudio descriptivo en una universidad estatal regional de Chile

## Resumen

Este estudio explora las percepciones del profesorado respecto a las características de las nuevas generaciones de estudiantes en una universidad estatal chilena. A través de encuestas y entrevistas realizadas a 199 académicos, se identificaron diferencias generacionales significativas que afectan la relación pedagógica. El profesorado percibe a la generación actual como más independiente, informada y diversa, pero también más distraída, emocionalmente frágil y menos disciplinada. Asimismo, destacan un creciente distanciamiento respecto de los contenidos tradicionales, una participación limitada en clase y una disminución en los hábitos de lectura. Los participantes también reportaron interacciones menos respetuosas con el profesorado y un aumento en los conflictos, incluidos episodios de censura y agresión verbal. Estos hallazgos evidencian una crisis en la autoridad pedagógica y la aparición de nuevas formas de comunicación y organización estudiantil impulsadas por el acceso a la tecnología y las redes sociales. El estudio concluye que los educadores actuales enfrentan desafíos inéditos para crear ambientes de aprendizaje efectivos, requiriendo estrategias que integren apoyo emocional y gestión de la sociabilidad. La investigación subraya la necesidad de un enfoque colaborativo y permanentemente actualizado en un contexto de rápidos cambios que están reconfigurando las relaciones intergeneracionales en la educación superior.

### Palabras clave

actitudes del profesorado; diferencias generacionales; educación superior; comportamiento estudiantil

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## Introduction

One of the most significant phenomena of late modernity is the emergence of young people as a social category and identity. Factors such as the massification of schooling, increased life expectancy, mass media, and, more recently, digital technologies have contributed to the construction of youth as an identity and subculture with an unprecedented degree of autonomy from adults in human history. While this is evident in many countries, in Chile—after more than four decades of neoliberal policies applied to education—it has deeply impacted the identities and mutual experiences of educational actors. These transformations are introducing new demands in all institutional spaces that engage with youth, particularly those seeking to educate them.

This is clearly reflected in teacher–student relationships, the central theme of this study—an area that remains marginal in university research (Gallardo & Reyes, 2010; Gehlbach et al., 2012; Martín Criado, 2022). The institution selected for this study, a regional state university in Chile, is no exception. The students referenced here belong to what several authors, including Twenge (2023), Seemiller and Grace (2016), and Fernández Muñoz et al. (2024), identify as Generation Z or the “Crystal Generation,” born between the late 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century. According to Garcés (2022), this generation is described as “sensitive, creative, and highly intuitive... yet also a generation misunderstood due to the difficulty in communicating with them.”

Of course, when we speak of “generations,” we are referring to a socio-cultural construct that often relies on certain empirical generalizations, thereby overlooking much of the heterogeneity inherent in all social constructs (such as social class, youth, gender, etc.). This occurs simply because such conceptualizations are tools built upon imperfect homogeneity that obscure internal diversity and ambiguous boundaries—yet without which it is nearly impossible to think socially. This epistemological and existential dilemma of the social sciences was instrumentally addressed by Max Weber through the notion of “ideal types” (1997).

Students entering universities bring with them customs, traits, and identities shaped by their families, peer groups, and the high schools or institutions where they were previously educated. Although they share some characteristics with their teachers, their initial differences tend to become more pronounced over time—as this study will show—and such disparities affect not only coexistence but also reflect, in part, the outcomes of their secondary education experience. Examining this impact is the main contribution sought in this research.

According to Morin (1999), education is one of the most complex human activities. Within it, the teacher–student relationship and communication have become increasingly critical in recent decades (Dávila-Cisneros et al., 2024). This has occurred in a context of growing policy consensus around learning as the central goal of education. Foundational thinkers such as Lev Vygotsky, Jean Piaget, Benjamin Bloom, Paulo Freire, and David Kolb have all emphasized the learner as the primary subject of pedagogical concern. Thus, understanding the learner has become a fundamental requirement for teaching at all educational levels (Delgado Martínez, 2019).

For this study, among the various ways to approach the topic, we chose to explore teachers' perspectives. Traditionally, understanding students has been considered the teacher's individual responsibility. Aside from admission and academic statistics or informal anecdotes, there are few opportunities to gather and analyze this daily experience systematically. The lack of such information undermines both collective learning among faculty and institutional capacity to implement tailored measures—for instance, programs for onboarding new student cohorts or conflict management strategies, which tend to be particularly recurrent and costly in public universities.

Mutual perceptions between teachers and students are key determinants of their behaviors. This study begins by describing these expectations from the perspective of the educational institution's most essential component: the faculty. The information gathered is also relevant for guiding institutional policy on student relations, adjustment mechanisms, professional development, conflict prevention, and first-year student induction. More importantly, as we have noted, its greatest value lies in the recognition that understanding the learner is a prerequisite for effective learning.

Our central research question is: What characteristics do teachers perceive in their students? From this, we derive two complementary questions: What changes do they perceive compared to previous cohorts? and How do these changes impact the formative process?

## Theoretical Background

We begin by briefly reviewing the significance attributed in the literature to teacher–student communication, before analyzing emerging challenges to that relationship, such as the redefinition of the teacher's role, contextual changes, and, in particular, generational differences.

## Teacher–Student Relationship and Teaching Practice

Research into the importance of teacher–student communication spans several decades (Bruner, 2006; Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968; Vygotsky, 1995). This body of work unequivocally establishes that education is fundamentally a communicative process, with all the complexities that entail—including the role of expectations and mutual understanding between the actors involved.

Little of this was relevant during the rise of mass schooling in the Industrial Revolution. At that time, the teacher functioned as a leader and gatekeeper of adult knowledge, alongside parents and religious figures, and enjoyed unquestioned authority and deference from students. Education during that era resembled, to some extent, Foucault's (2010) depiction of the prison in *Discipline and Punish*.

Although early educational pioneers such as Pestalozzi (1746–1827), Froebel (1782–1852), Vygotsky (1896–1934), and Bilbao (1823–1865) anticipated alternative models, the education received by the first generations of mass-schooled children followed an authoritarian, disciplinarian, teacher-centered approach. In less than a century, this model gave way to profound transformations, including the shift toward student-centered learning, the rise of the active learner, and the repositioning of the teacher as a facilitator or guide. These changes also displaced the teacher's focus from mere content delivery to pedagogy and didactics, turning the educational process into a far more complex activity than that which characterized the early stages of mass education.

## The Expansion of Schooling in Chile the Past Fifty Years

Over the past fifty years, a global trend has become especially visible in Chile: the country has experienced substantial educational expansion, evident in daily life. While issues of access, dropout rates, and quality inequalities persist, various international organizations recognize Chile's leading role in Latin America, noting that it is "approaching universal education" (El Mercurio, 2023; OECD, 2022).

In 1960, only 2% of children attended preschool (compared to 49.8% today), and just 14% completed secondary education (now 93%). Whereas only 4% of Chileans aged 20 to 24 had access to higher education in 1960, today over 50% of that age group have reached this level. Among those aged 18 to 24, more than half are enrolled in higher education, and in the next age cohort (25 to 34 years), the figure reaches 34% (Rodríguez, 2012).

This massive expansion of access to education has contributed to what we previously described as the emergence of youth as a social category with

historically unprecedented autonomy. The significance of this educational expansion lies not only in the number of individuals affected, but also in the differential treatment of populations based on their birth cohort: young people benefit disproportionately.

Using OECD data, Sapelli (2019) shows that in Chile nearly all young people complete secondary education, while this achievement declines significantly among older cohorts, with less than 40% of those over age 55 having completed that level.

## The Loss of Teaching Status: The Crisis of Pedagogical Authority

Teacher–student interaction in Chile has been affected by global changes—such as technological development—as well as national-level transformations that have significantly redefined the roles of both teachers and students. Throughout the 20th century, the teacher’s role has experienced a relative decline, inversely proportional to the increasing centrality of the student. In recent years, this decline has become critical (Bellei & Valenzuela, 2013), particularly undermining what Bourdieu and Passeron (2019) defined as the *pedagogical authority* of the teacher—understood as a necessary condition for teaching (p. 42 in Araujo et al., 2024). As Martín Criado (2022, p. 16) notes, the idealized version of school or university—of masterful professors and studious learners— “never truly existed, at least not in a generalized way.”

One major factor contributing to this decline was the Chilean military dictatorship, which inflicted enormous damage on the teaching profession. Between 1972 and 1981, teachers’ salaries were not adjusted for inflation for over a decade and actually decreased by 15% to 30%. At the same time, their workload increased (Polomer, 2016). Additionally, the decentralization of school administration handed educational institutions over to municipal employers who were not always adequately prepared for managing local educational systems.

Another contributing factor was the rapid expansion of the teaching workforce. The 1964 educational reform—aimed at addressing Chile’s low schooling coverage—led to extraordinary progress but also required an urgent increase in the number of teachers. This led to the implementation of accelerated training programs for emergency-trained teachers (Bellei & Pérez, 2016). In subsequent decades, the shortage of qualified teachers continued to be addressed through provisional teaching certificates granted to individuals without formal pedagogical training, as well as the proliferation of less rigorous training programs (Rufinelli & Rojas, 2007).

Furthermore, between 2000 and 2008, enrollment in teacher training programs increased by 200% (Hormazábal et al., 2020). This expansion was accompanied by low admission selectivity and financial incentives such as the State-Guaranteed Student Loan (CAE), turning teaching degrees into a more accessible option for students from historically excluded social sectors entering higher education for the first time.

## Changes in Students: Generational Differences

Since the massification of schooling, adult hegemony or leadership has been gradually displaced by peer interaction. Schools—where children and youth spend much of their time surrounded primarily by peers—have contributed to the emergence of youth as a distinct social actor (Patiño, 2009). Over time, this actor has acquired its own classic traits: slang, musical tastes, clothing styles, and youth-specific attitudes. Today, young people establish relationships not only with their peers but also with institutions, local actors, social movements, and even global discourses (Barragán, 2020), a process that has been observable in the developed world since the 1960s and in Latin America since the 1980s.

The acquisition of these traits occurs through social modeling, mass school enrollment, neighborhood dynamics, and mass media exposure, all taking place alongside other societal processes such as the increasing participation of women in the labor force, technological development, and improved living standards. These dynamics now appear to influence young people from an early age and within the home, contributing to the emergence of new generational differences (Strauss & Howe, 1992; Twenge, 2023).

This ongoing spiral of change has not stopped, and university professors perceive today's students as markedly different from previous cohorts. This phenomenon is increasingly relevant for defining the teacher–student relationship, precisely because generational differences grow more pronounced each year.

At least three factors contribute to this growing gap:

1. **Increasing age difference:** At the start of the 20th century, global life expectancy did not exceed 40 years (Dattani et al., 2023). By 2019, the UN reported it at 72.6 years. Additionally, the average age of first-time parenthood is increasing, widening the generational gap between parents and children.
2. **Expanded access to education and digital technology:** As noted earlier, school massification benefits newer generations, especially in countries where universal schooling is relatively recent. Even more impactful than education itself, however, is access to digital technologies. Prensky

(2001) popularized the term *digital natives* to describe this phenomenon. At the university examined in this study, all students own smartphones, and 80% have permanent internet access, while the rest connect regularly to wireless networks. This connectivity enables students to remain constantly connected to one another, to digital social networks, and to a wide array of information sources—granting them unprecedented autonomy, independence from adults, and collective organizational capacity.

- 3. Exponential growth of knowledge:** The rapid and massive production of knowledge further contributes to generational gaps, making it increasingly difficult for older generations to stay up to date. This phenomenon goes beyond mere data accumulation; it represents an unprecedented reality: never before has humanity produced so much knowledge, so quickly (WB, UNESCO, OECD).

It is estimated that in recent years, human knowledge has been doubling every two years—and soon, it may do so every 24 hours (Varghese, 2020). Among its many consequences, this innovation has also introduced an unprecedented level of obsolescence. Much of this new knowledge refutes, expands upon, or redefines previous knowledge, thereby generating a social paradox: for the first time in history, being older may itself be a source of ignorance in many domains.

This paradox has an unexpected and far-reaching effect: it undermines the legitimacy of traditional institutions—those historically built and controlled by adults, such as the church, the state, and political parties—by eroding their authority and credibility.

Simply put, the new generations—as previously discussed—not only possess the technological tools to remain connected and informed but also enjoy a degree of autonomy that frees them from traditional adult control. The combination of this autonomy and the decentralized, networked structure enabled by technology has contributed to the weakening of grand narratives (Lyotard, 1991) and the proliferation of new identities.

There is a clear link between these changes and the fact that a generation of former university students has recently come to power in Chile. These individuals began their political careers in student federations, most notably led by Gabriel Boric, a former president of the country's most influential student union. However, the success of this generation is mainly independent of the university as an educational institution (Brünner, 2003); many of today's political leaders began their activism during high school mobilizations and were closely involved in or led the so-called "Penguin Revolution" of the 2000s, named after the black-and-white uniforms worn by secondary students.

The recent emergence of professor–student conflicts—both in Chile and globally—has become increasingly visible (Haidt & Lukianoff, 2018; Rizzacasa, 2023), even within universities that top international rankings. Student demands now target curriculum content and course rigor, and radical movements have arisen around issues such as race, gender, history, and religion (Bruni, 2017)—areas where faculty traditionally held unquestioned authority. These shifts reflect a profound transformation in pedagogical authority.

The traditional, orderly society has disappeared. Each new generation is born into and lives within a world markedly different from that of the previous one. Social interaction has moved toward levels of heterogeneity and plasticity that weaken shared expectations, norms, and customs in all areas of life. This is precisely the state of anomie that Durkheim described as characteristic of periods of social change. The digital society bears little resemblance to the orderly analog world in which mass education systems were established in the late 19th century. It is increasingly different from the society that gave rise to traditional schools and teachers during the industrial era.

The collapse of grand narratives and the rise of multidirectional communication via the Internet—managed by ordinary individuals with smartphones—has dismantled the hegemonic role once held by adult-dominated political and economic elites. These elites now look to the school and university as some of the last institutions where adult generations may reclaim a degree of control. As Naím (2013) puts it, “never has power been so volatile, so difficult to sustain.”

Thus, today’s school operates in an environment saturated with external influences that far surpass it in their capacity to socialize, inform, entertain, and connect. Educational institutions are under more pressure than ever, yet they are also weaker than ever in their ability to meet these demands. At the center of this paradox stands the teacher, upon whom the cumulative burden of these transformations now falls.

The most critical and revealing manifestation of this fragility appears in the recent forms of student mobilization—both in secondary schools and universities—which now unfold with a level of autonomy and violence that breaks with previous patterns. Unlike past decades, these new mobilizations are largely disconnected from traditional political and ideological affiliations. They have taken on unprecedented characteristics, such as the emergence of the so-called “white overalls” movement: secondary students engaged in violent street actions using Molotov cocktails, barricades, and arson, taking over emblematic high schools in Santiago and across Chile. These changes are difficult to explain without considering transformations in how this generation manages impulses, emotions, and perceptions of the world (Peña, 2023).

The dramatic expressions of these shifts can also be observed—albeit often with more restrained violence—in U. S. and European universities (Campbell & Manning, 2018; Furedi, 2016; Haidt & Lukianoff, 2018; Kipnis, 2017; Stanger, 2019; Strossen, 2018). This phenomenon is rapidly spreading across Latin America as well (Burgos & Hernández, 2021; Henríquez, 2021).

In an effort to explain this, Haidt and Lukianoff (2018) highlight what they call a “culture of safety” prevalent in U. S. universities, which gives rise to three major untruths: the fragility of young people; an institutional—not merely personal—tendency to magnify the problems students may face; and a culture of victimhood. These factors reinforce one another and often act as self-fulfilling prophecies, fostering an inability to cope with difficulties, an intolerance for disagreement, and a tendency toward extreme responses—frequently justified as battles for justice or the protection of violated rights, as previously described.

## Methodology

An ex post, qualitative-quantitative design was adopted, using a structured survey and 17 informal interviews with faculty members at a regional state university. This institution originated from the Pedagogical Institute of the Valparaíso campus of the University of Chile. Since the implementation of market-driven education policies in Chile starting in 1981, the university has expanded its academic offerings to include non-teaching programs. Nevertheless, it continues to maintain a strong identity component associated with teacher education.

Data were collected using a self-administered questionnaire developed in *Google Forms* and made available on the university’s Integrated System platform, where the academic staff regularly log in for digital registration purposes. Self-administered surveys, such as the one used in this study, are known to carry a higher risk of nonresponse compared to other techniques. To mitigate this, care was taken to avoid overly technical language, lengthy questions, or explanatory notes that could complicate responses. Despite their limitations, self-administered surveys help detect the presence and extent of one or more traits in a given group.

To design the questionnaire items, twelve informal interviews were conducted with faculty members and two department heads. After the survey was administered, five additional interviews were carried out. These interviews helped, among other things, to refine the questionnaire's language and ensure that respondents could distinguish their current students from previous cohorts where applicable. Both the structured survey responses and the limited depth of the informal interviews represent methodological constraints of this study.

A total of 211 questionnaires were received, of which some were discarded due to errors, resulting in a final sample size of 198 valid cases. Although this is not a probabilistic sample, the high number of responses provides strong representation of the broader population (Mandujano, 1998). The random selection and sample size yield a reliable approximation of the university's total faculty, which comprises approximately 800 instructors.

## Results

### a. Final Sample and Respondent Characteristics

Out of a total of 198 valid cases, the average teaching experience was 14.8 years, with considerable variability (range of 51 years;  $\sigma = 11$ ). Notably, 36.4% of respondents had 20 or more years of teaching experience. The age distribution reflects a relatively older faculty, with an average age of 48.4 years, close to the median; thus, 50% of the teaching staff are aged 48 or older.

### b) General Perceptions of Students

Survey responses indicate that faculty members perceive significant differences between the current generation of students and previous cohorts. A recurring theme among interviewees is the greater independence perceived in today's students: they handle more information, hold more opinions, have distinct preferences, and are more heterogeneous in various respects, requiring greater effort to maintain their attention.

Among all respondents, 72.4% believe current students are more intelligent than those from 15 or more years ago. However, 62.8% consider them less prepared for university life (noting poorer study habits and less discipline), and 70.4% describe them as more emotionally fragile or unstable. Furthermore, 57.8% perceive them as more prone to aggression. These perceptions suggest a degree of consensus among educators regarding the need to strengthen emotional and affective support as part of the pedagogical response.

### c) Participation

When asked about classroom engagement, 46.2% of respondents stated that students occasionally participate, while a significant portion (28.1%) reported that students rarely or never engage verbally (e.g., by asking questions). 56.8% described this generation as less participative overall. A mathematics professor remarked: "They are incredibly passive." Moreover, over one-third (36.2%) of students are

perceived as permanently distracted, rarely maintaining attention for extended periods. In comparing the current generation with previous cohorts, 51% of faculty described today's students as less focused and more easily distracted.

**Table 1**

*Concentration of Current Students Compared to Those Enrolled Between 2000 and 2015*

<b>Concentration level</b>	<b>f</b>	<b>%</b>
No difference	32	16,2
Less concentrated	101	51,0
More concentrated	28	14,1
Don't know / No response	37	18,7
Total	198	100,0

Source: Authors' own compilation

## d) Responsibility

Interviewees frequently mentioned the continuous use of mobile phones during class—primarily for social media or web browsing (Balaguer, 2010)—as a pervasive habit, especially among disengaged or unfocused students, which negatively impacts both interest and motivation. One professor noted: "Asking them not to use their phones or to step out of the classroom to use them causes irritation."

Respondents consistently described this behavior as bothersome and detrimental to class quality. Regarding task completion, only 12.1% of faculty reported that students regularly submit assigned work. 50.5% of respondents believe today's students are less responsible than previous generations.

Interviewees indicated that students often view grading as the sole motivator for completing tasks, yet many still fail to meet deadlines. Some students assume that professors are obligated to provide second chances. The reasons students offer—according to the interviews—include: long commutes, parenthood, financial issues, illness, or job obligations. One professor described a typology of student excuses in this regard. Two professors shared that they have mitigated many of these responsibility issues by conducting all assignments during class time, eliminating the need for out-of-class tasks.

**Table 2**

*Responsibility of Current Students Compared to Those Enrolled Between 2000 and 2015*

<b>Responsibility Level</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>%</b>
No difference	20	10,1
Less responsible	100	50,5
More responsible	39	19,7
Don't know / No response	39	19,7
<b>Total</b>	<b>198</b>	<b>100,0</b>

Source: Authors' own compilation

## e) Reading Habits

42.2% of respondents reported that reading is largely absent among their students. According to them, students rarely read course materials, articles, or books—except for brief messages or digital snippets on their phones or the web. Interviewed faculty stated that these students “do not read,” “dislike reading,” or only read very rarely. No significant gender differences among teachers were observed in these perceptions. When asked to compare the current generation to previous cohorts, 55.3% of respondents stated that students today read less than those from earlier years.

**Table 3**

*Reading Habits of Current Students Compared to Those Enrolled Between 2000 and 2015*

<b>Reading Frequency</b>	<b>f</b>	<b>%</b>
No difference	26	13,2
Read less	109	55,3
Read more	21	10,7
Don't know / No response	41	20,8
<b>Total</b>	<b>197</b>	<b>100,0</b>

Source: Authors' own compilation

## f) Attitude Toward Professors

Survey responses reveal that 84.9% of faculty believe students are not cordial, with 56.3% stating they are less courteous than previous generations. This is a relevant finding regarding the social skills of a generation that lived through pandemic confinement and whose social interaction has primarily been mediated by digital

technologies. It also underscores the importance of the teacher's interpersonal skills in these contexts.

A strong correlation was found between reading habits and several other variables: ability to concentrate ( $r = 0.88$ ), cordiality in interactions ( $r = 0.84$ ), and demandingness ( $r = 0.75$ ), all with high statistical significance ( $\alpha = 0.001$ ).

This variable stands out both quantitatively and qualitatively. Interviews suggest that reading is more common among students from selective or private schools, or those with parents who are readers or professionals. No significant differences were observed based on the respondent's gender or faculty. Reading, in this context, appears to be one of the many cognitive and cultural skills affected by educational inequality, which the secondary system often fails to address.

**Table 4**

*Cordiality Toward Professors Among Current Students Compared to Those Enrolled Between 2000 and 2015*

Cordiality Level	F	%
No difference	26	13,2
Less cordial	111	56,3
More cordial	24	12,2
Don't know / No response	36	18,3
Total	197	100,0

Source: Authors' own compilation

Additionally, 88.5% of respondents agree that students today are demanding, although no clear generational difference could be concluded from the data.

## g) Teacher–Student Conflicts

Interviews revealed that while relationships are generally respectful or even affectionate, particularly within the classroom or during assessments, new generations are seen as more emotionally sensitive and less tolerant. This shift is associated with a greater potential for tensions and conflicts.

According to the survey:

- 11% of respondents reported being censored by a class,
- 4.5% experienced verbal aggression,
- 11% were prohibited from teaching in a given program, and
- 17.6% faced collective complaints from entire classes.

This area is rarely investigated, yet it is described as deeply important. One professor referred to it as "the dark side of the force," noting that it is a difficult topic for faculty to discuss openly.

Faculty report a cultural shift in how conflicts arise: the authoritative, strict professor has been replaced by a defensive, cautious one, fearing collective student backlash. This new dynamic includes what Martín Criado et al. (2022) describe as "group rituals of denigration": censorship, blacklists, and public shaming on social media. According to participants, one of the most concerning aspects is the unpredictability of conflict.

An interviewee recounted a classroom incident in which a seemingly harmless word he used offended a student. Although it did not escalate, the professor experienced anxiety for several days, fearing collective rejection from the class.

Other interviewees recalled a recent university-wide student mobilization, triggered by complaints of mistreatment against several professors. The movement, described as violent, involved graffiti, social media posts, building occupations, and even press coverage. Despite the intensity of the protests, the internal investigations were eventually dismissed due to a lack of evidence. However, ironically, all students possessed the means to record and document any misconduct (e.g., smartphones).

Another professor commented, "They're very fragile; they get stressed easily. They tend to victimize themselves over any comment they perceive as unfavorable." This sense of unexpected victimization makes it difficult for some educators to feel secure in their teaching roles, especially when emotional reactions arise suddenly and become disproportionate to the context.

## Conclusions

Castells asserts that "power is based on the control of communication and information" (2012, p. 23). The data presented here support the perception that teachers today have lost the control that underpinned formal education in past centuries. As Durkheim noted, the anomie that accompanies such radical transformations (2020) makes it challenging to establish new normative structures that can "regularize" behavior.

Since the emergence of mass schooling—state-funded and designed as a tool for the socialization of new generations in urban, industrial, and democratic societies—the independence of younger generations from their parents and other adult authority figures has deepened. Literacy, once a monopoly of religious and imperial elites, is now imparted universally from early childhood. Schools

themselves have become powerful agents of socialization, where peer influence often outweighs adult authority in the transmission of culture and integration. This process has been exponentially intensified by digital technologies, which are massified, hyperconnected, and boundaryless—erasing the relevance of classroom walls, national borders, linguistic barriers, and age distinctions. As a result, teachers today find themselves in a Sisyphean struggle, daily pushing the metaphorical boulder of students’ distractions, stimuli, and restlessness—a condition we have referred to as the drama of the teaching profession.

A historically defining feature of Chilean public universities—including the one in this study—has been their role as spaces for youth political engagement. These institutions have long served as platforms for a wide range of values, discourses, and demands, expressed through protests, sit-ins, and demonstrations. As in many countries, numerous political parties and leaders in Chile have emerged from student movements (García Monge, 2006; Jocelyn-Holt, 2022). The university examined here has been deeply shaped by both pedagogical training and student activism.

Today, however, these mobilizations appear to have changed. They are more anarchic, less predictable, and often characterized by histrionic emotional expression, driven more by emotional contagion and shared affect than by the ideological or class-based solidarity of previous generations (Lyons, 2023).

In the globalized world, youth behavior and unrest increasingly resemble one another, across vastly different contexts. In 2024, for example, Columbia University in New York faced a prolonged student occupation over the Israel–Gaza conflict, which ultimately led to the resignation of its president. Meanwhile, at the opposite end of the continent, the rector of the University of Chile installed a bed in her office at the Central Campus in downtown Santiago to prevent a much smaller group of protesters from occupying the building. Both cases reflect a pattern of violent disruptions in universities across the Western world, all led by students.

Perhaps the most concerning consequence of these movements is the normalization of a culture of safety and self-censorship. All interviewees expressed concern over the need to avoid saying anything that might offend students or challenge beliefs perceived as “correct”—even when it is unclear what those beliefs are. This creates a *de facto* censorship that undermines the freedom traditionally associated with academic life.

Undoubtedly, participation in social and political life is part of democratic citizenship and should be cultivated—even in formal education. However, universities face serious limitations in managing conflict, protecting themselves from damage, and maintaining institutional continuity. While the unwritten history of student movements includes important gains and achievements, it also

includes many mobilizations that have caused more harm than good, with costly consequences such as lost classes, canceled projects, diminished academic quality, and reputational damage.

In sum, the evidence gathered suggests that students are perceived as embodying traits commonly associated with Generation Z: sensitivity, intelligence, emotional fragility, self-referentiality, and a high degree of digital fluency and reliance on social media. These perceptions reflect a certain degree of consensus among faculty members in the technical-pedagogical discourse: effective communication requires more than teaching strategies and curriculum implementation. It also necessitates the development of emotional and affective support, as well as skills for managing sociability (Guzzardo et al., 2021)—areas in which newer generations seem to need more guidance. While they tend to be innovative, creative, and technologically skilled, they are often individualistic and face communication challenges. As Chun et al. (2017) argue, “They lack the skills to solve problems (...) and this generation is not capable of focusing or analyzing complex problems that require long-term goal setting.”

Paradoxically, this same “Crystal Generation” is the one most often at the center of recent acts of social rebellion. A striking example is Chile’s 2019 social uprising, the largest and most violent in the country’s history. Despite the many peaceful demonstrations, the scale of the protests and levels of violence and vandalism surpassed anything seen during the Pinochet dictatorship or any subsequent democratic government. The initial spark came from high school students jumping metro turnstiles (Calderón Poblete & Pérez Rodríguez, 2020). Political parties, government officials, and authorities were either overtaken by events or failed to act. Order was only restored with the Covid-19 lockdown, after several months of unrest.

None of the classical theories of popular revolt applied: it was not led by the working class, or by any particular social class, nor were there identifiable political leaders. Diverse and scattered demands, with no concrete political proposals, fueled the movement. All familiar interpretive frameworks were overwhelmed. These findings reinforce the notion that successful teaching today requires more than didactics. Emotional support and social skills development are essential, especially considering how students today struggle with sustained attention, group work, and emotional regulation.

The study also highlights the need to deepen the understanding of conflict, a topic that many respondents find difficult to discuss openly, but which at times has significantly disrupted institutional functioning. The complexity of this phenomenon shows the limitations of purely quantitative approaches such as the survey that supports this study. What has been achieved here is a preliminary approximation, a modest contribution to a larger and more intricate issue.

Ultimately, the most important conclusion is a long-standing but often forgotten lesson: the Sisyphus of this story—the teacher—cannot continue struggling alone to push the boulder uphill. His only chance to break Zeus's curse is to collaborate with other Sisyphuses, building collective strategies to face the challenges of education today. As Paulo Freire once said: "No one educates alone."

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