Education in Argentina: past, present and future tendencies

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Education as a state policy in twentieth century Argentina

State intervention has marked the Argentine Educational System since its origins. At first, the action of the State was aimed at disciplining the diverse schooling experiences that existed in the Argentine territory. Specifically, since the second half of the nineteenth century, the Direcciones de Escuelas of the different provinces and – later – the Consejo Nacional de Educación established a number of norms that regulated the finance, structure and institutionalisation of the school system: every school was brought under the control of one of these national or provincial agencies. (Newland, 1992)

In the Argentine case, the strong participation of the State in educational matters responded to political and social processes that took place between 1860 and 1905. During this period it was agreed that educational policy should be aimed at bringing schools under the direct control of the State. At the same time, by applying this policy, the State successfully disciplined the corporations of educators (both religious and secular) who had been in charge of the education of children until that time.

During the first decades of the twentieth century the State had a “quasi-monopoly” over the provision of education in Argentina. The National State and the provincial states (but especially the National State) assumed total responsibility for schooling, excluding the civil society from any participation in these matters. Even though some educational activities were partially left in the hands of the civil society, the State kept a strong control on these activities. For example, most private schools during the first half of the twentieth century were not allowed to award educational credentials and they were thoroughly inspected by state personnel.

The consolidation of this model of educational policy did not require a legislative consensus, since Argentina did not have a national law of education until 1993, when the Ley Federal de Educación was passed. Instead, educational policies were based only on a few parliamentary regulations, like the Ley de Educación Común of 1884, which ruled that public education should be free, compulsory and not religious. Although this law was specifically aimed at primary education, its ideological influence was so important that its principles were even applied to secondary schools.

Since the end of the nineteenth century, the Argentine State had promised to offer quality public education to all the inhabitants of the Argentine territory. Through schooling, the life conditions of each and every one of the Argentines – rich or poor, native or immigrants, men or women – was to be improved.

1 The first part of this article is based on the paper “Educational Reform in Argentina: Past, Present and Future Tendencies” by Gvirtz and Narodowski, Contemporary Educational Issues in the Americas, Symposium Books, University of Oxford (mimeo)
In order to attain this objective, it was necessary to redistribute and make generally available a good –knowledge – that had traditionally belonged to a small portion of the population. In this way, the Argentine State guaranteed, through the public school system, equal educational opportunities to all of the population, proclaiming a principle of justice based on merit. Following this premise, every person was placed at the same starting point, independently of his or her social origin. Each individual should have access to the different levels of the educational system according to their own merits (Puiggrós, 1990).

Meanwhile, private schools were left outside of the realms of State control and they were allowed to include religion in their curricula. However, for decades these institutions were "incorporated" into the official educational system. As a result, students from private schools could obtain educational credentials, but only after they were examined by teachers of public schools.

The State successfully displaced the Catholic Church from the public school system. In this way, the Catholic Church was given the same rank in educational matters as any other religion that was officially accepted by the State. The teaching of the Christian doctrine, that had been compulsory in the schools of the colonial period and during the first decades of independence, became an extracurricular activity.

The Catholic Church seemed to accept the rules of the game and demanded its participation in education but within the regulations imposed by the State. It was only between 1944 and 1945 that the Church’s demands were heard and the teaching of religion was reintroduced into public schools. Then, forty years later, and following decentralisation of curricular design, religion has been included as a compulsory subject in the official curriculum of a few provinces.

**Accomplishments of the educational policies of the State in the twentieth century**

As an example of the efficacy of the disciplining power of the State, four educational policies that were central to Argentine education during the first half of the twentieth century will be presented. These are: basic education, teacher education, the regulation of the teaching profession and the regulations related to school textbooks.

1) **Basic education:** this level of education was established as one of the priorities of the State since 1860, and this had two main consequences. The first effect was the massification of enrolments, which resulted in Argentina being amongst the top countries in the world in terms of the population’s literacy in 1930 (Tedesco, 1986). The second consequence of the priority given to basic education was a school culture aimed at the homogenisation of the population through the transmission of certain knowledge. Primary schools were positioned as central agents in the construction of national identity and this resulted in a high degree of cultural and regional homogenisation amongst primary institutions (Gvirtz, 1991).

During the first sixty years of the twentieth century the National State played the principal role in the development of the educational system, especially in primary education. Meanwhile, most of the provinces did not have enough financial resources to expand the primary level of education, nor the political resources to discipline the schools in the search for a uniform culture.

2) **Teacher education:** during the nineteenth century the State made an effort to disarticulate school education as a corporative activity of educators, by trying to remove from the collective body of teachers the unlimited capacity they had to make decisions regarding the education of children.

However, it was only fifty years later that the so-called “normalismo” appeared as a political and pedagogical force which originated from the State and was put at the service of the public schools. The corporation of educators lost its independency and became a central element in the educational policy of the State. The normal schools developed into fundamental institutions in the construction of political and professional identity (Puiggrós, 1990).
The teaching profession in Argentina became a secular apostolate at the service of the Patria (Nation). An extremely strong identity – the teaching profession – produced (and at the same time was produced by) another strong identity: the public school.

3) **The regulation of the teaching profession:** The educational policies aimed at regulating the teaching profession did not establish clear rules and were generally designed to favour those teachers that were in some way or another connected to the group that was in power at any given time. Furthermore the political or ideological stance of educators, or their positions in unions, could be a motive for dismissal, loss of labour rights or appointments in schools that were far away from urban centres.

This conflictive situation reached its peak – as judged by teachers themselves – during the first and second of Peron’s presidencies, between 1946 and 1955 (Narodowski & Gvirtz, 1998). A great number of educators denounced the interference of the government in the hiring of teachers, favouring Peron’s followers, while discriminating against presumed or real opponents. After the fall of Peron, in 1958, the *Estatuto del Docente* (Teacher’s Statute) was established. This statute replaced the regulations that had been passed during the Peronist government and became a national law, placing the labour rights of teachers under the tutelage of the State.

Thus, although the regulation of the teaching profession was established much later than other educational policies, it finally became another dimension of the educational policy of the State. It was under the realm of the State that teachers were able to find protection from the arbitrariness of different governments. In this way, stability in the teaching post became an important accomplishment that protected teachers from the political instability of the country.

According to recent research (Gvirtz, S. 1994; Morduchowicz, A. & Marcón, A., 1999) one of the central features of the *Estatuto del Docente* is that it only rewards job permanence. This statute does not include any type of economic incentive or benefits for in-service training or for the quality of the teacher’s work. Instead, it is only the number of years in teaching that is considered for an increase in the teacher’s salary in Argentina.

4) **School textbooks:** As part of the vigilant action of the State, the *Consejo Nacional de Educación* was created at the end of the nineteenth century with the aim of legitimising the knowledge that should circulate in the public schools. Textbooks were a central element within this concern. One of the specific functions that the *Consejo* was given was to “choose and prescribe the textbooks which were adequate for the public schools, favouring their edition and improvements and ensuring their uniform and permanent use…” (Law 1420).

Since the end of the nineteenth century to 1940, two objectives were salient in the rulings related to textbooks: to guarantee the universal provision of books for all of the school population, and to control the contents of the textbooks that were to be used in schools (Narodowski & Manolakis, 2002).

In the late 1930s the *Consejo Nacional de Educación* conducted a study of the textbooks for compulsory education. Implicitly, it was assumed that in the textbooks that were used at the time some values that threatened society and the ‘Argentine way of life’ were being transmitted. The proliferation of school textbooks generated a great ‘danger’: diversity was threatening homogeneity and could result in deviations. This concern dominated the regulations related to textbooks until the 1950s. Although some regulations considered didactical, methodological and administrative issues, it was the ideological concerns that were salient.

The policies described above, which centralised most educational power at the national level, endured more than one hundred years of state policies, and only started to be deactivated, (and, as will be shown in the next section, replaced by other state policies) in the late 1950s.
The privatisation of educational space

Extremely important changes have occurred in Argentine education during the 1950s and especially during the 1960s. In this period, as some recent publications have shown (Morduchowicz, A., 1999; Narodowski, M., Nores, M., 2000), an increasing privatisation of the educational space has started in Argentina.

Empirical evidence shows a significant growth in private enrolments since the late 1950s – for example in the primary level (Graph No 1). 1941 represented the lowest percentage of private enrolments. Since that year, a period of sustained expansion started in which the annual growth rate of private enrolments was almost three times higher than the annual growth rate of the public system for the same period (1.6%). The number of students in the private sector increased considerably from fewer than 289,000 pupils in 1967 to almost 717,000 in the mid 1990s – 40.3% growth in absolute terms.

It is important to point out that the expansion of the private sector in school education in Argentina stopped in 1994. In that year the private sector represented 21.34% of total enrolments at primary level and 25% when all levels are considered, with some significant peaks of more than 50% and up to 65% in urban districts with a high-middle class population, such as Vicente López and San Isidro. In that same year, in Buenos Aires City, 50% of the students went to private institutions. However, if only teacher-training institutions are taken into account, enrolments in the private sector were even higher.

![Graph No 1](image1.png)


In addition, it is interesting to point out that there is a direct (and very strong) relation between public enrolments and percentage of the population with “ Unsatisfied Basic Needs” (Narodowski & Nores, 2000). This means that public schools in Argentina mainly cater for the most economically disadvantaged sectors of the population. (Graph No 3)
Graph No 2
PARTICIPATION OF INSTITUTIONS AND TEACHERS OF THE PRIVATE SECTOR
PRIMARY LEVEL


Graph No 3
PUBLIC ENROLMENTS VS. NBI (UNSATISFIED BASIC NEEDS).
REAL AND ESTIMATED VALUES*.

(*) Non linear OLS estimation.
Source: Nores, M. & Narodowski, M., 2000
The data also shows that private enrolments are concentrated within the families with the highest incomes. Thus according to official data the following conclusion can be drawn: for every ten students that study in private institutions, nine belong to the most economically advanced sectors. This situation especially affects the big urban centres, where the increase in private schools has had the most significant impact.

Finally, another notable feature of the process of privatisation that has occurred in Argentine education is that the State subsidises private schools in two ways. In the first place, some schools receive direct subsidies from the State that permit, at least in theory, a reduction of the fees paid by students. In some cases, like in many escuelas parroquiales (Church schools located in economically disadvantaged areas), fees are dropped to an insignificant figure or sometimes even eliminated, offering education at no cost for students’ families. On the other hand, the State gives “indirect subsidies”, when it does not charge any (or some) taxes to private schools.

This process of privatisation that took place during the last forty years of the twentieth century has not been external to the State. Rather, the State continued to finance an important portion of private education through subsidies, which were not awarded by competitions or bids, nor were they subject to evaluation. The sums that are awarded are not small: for example, in 2001, 19% of the total economic resources that were destined for education in Buenos Aires City were directly transferred to the private sector without using any public mechanisms to decide which schools should benefit from the scheme.

Since the 1980s, strong criticism has appeared in the press and in public opinion towards the increasing privatisation of education and towards the deterioration of the public school system. It was quite clear that the State was having serious difficulties in sustaining an efficient provision of educational services. The sense of educational crisis and a call for educational reform were rapidly increasing. It was only in the 1990s, however, that educational problems were given a central position in the political agenda and a reform of the system was initiated. This reform, as will be shown in the next section, was aimed at redefining the functions of the State in education. Through decentralising processes and by giving more autonomy to schools, the State would act as an agent for control, rather than as a provider of educational services. These policies had some unpredicted results, which will be analysed in the conclusion.

**Educational policy in the 1990s: redefining state responsibilities for education**

At the rhetorical level, the educational reform that was implemented in Argentina in the 1990s strongly promoted the modernisation of administration at the macro and micro-policy levels. It is here argued that most of the postulates used to justify the reform were not accomplished due to the centralising and hyper-regulatory practices of the National State. In addition, it is argued that due to the same reasons the tendency that has been present since the 1960s – the movement of the most advantaged sectors of society from the public to the private system – has not been brought to an end.

Argentine educational policy in the 1990s has been based on seven principles:

a) An increase in public investment in education.

b) The decentralisation of macro-political decisions in education from the National State to each one of the 24 provinces.

c) The reform of the structure of the system.

d) The strengthening of educational institutions.

e) The design of common basic contents.
f) The promotion of in-service training for teachers.

g) The creation of a national system of evaluation.

a) Even though some research has suggested that increasing investment in an educational system does not imply its improvement, the problem of educational investment has been permanently present in the governmental agendas of the 1990s, especially in Argentina. The *Ley Federal de Educación* in 1993 established that total public investment in education should be doubled in five years, at a minimum rate of 20% per year starting in 1993. In addition, this should guarantee an increase in enrolments at the primary and secondary levels.

As can be seen in Table 4, through the 1990s investments in education grew both at the basic and higher education levels (except for higher education in 1991). However, the growth in investments in higher education is greater than in basic education. The accumulated annual rate is almost double for higher education. Thus, it can be said that at the governmental level there is a greater interest in higher education.

### Table 4: Total public investment in Education, Culture, and Science and Technology (1980-1990).

*In million pesos.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Basic Education</th>
<th>Higher Education (including Universities)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>5425</td>
<td>1214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>5618</td>
<td>1192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>6222</td>
<td>1546</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>7051</td>
<td>1837</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>7525</td>
<td>1949</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>7252</td>
<td>2185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>7365</td>
<td>2240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>8214</td>
<td>2272</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>8445</td>
<td>2465</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>9136</td>
<td>2641</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Var. % 99/80** 68.4 % 117.5 %

**Var. % 99/91** 62.6 % 121.6 %

**Accumulated annual rate 99/91** 7.8 % 15.2 %


Comparing investments in the different jurisdictions during the same period shows that, starting in 1991, the provinces increase their investments in education. However, since 1992, provincial expenditures have gradually started to decline, while they start to increase at the national level (Table 4).

### Table 5: Public investment in education, culture, and science and technology by governmental level (1993-2000).

*As a percentage of total expenditures.*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>National</th>
<th>Provincial</th>
<th>Municipal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>48.3</td>
<td>49.6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>61.9</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>21.9</td>
<td>76.1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>22.5</td>
<td>75.5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>22.8</td>
<td>74.9</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>23.1</td>
<td>74.3</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>23.4</td>
<td>73.2</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>23.4</td>
<td>73.6</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>22.8</td>
<td>74.2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


b) Since the 1960s the national state has started to withdraw from the provincial jurisdictions. Two laws were passed – the last one in 1991 – transferring all schools administered by the national state to the provinces. These laws were designed to redistribute the roles and responsibilities for education between the Nation and the provinces and to organise a federal educational system. The *Ley Federal de Educación* (1993) also aimed at the federalisation of the system. However, by early 2002 some jurisdictions had yet to pass their own laws of education.

'Decentralisation' can be defined as the delegation of the capacity to operate and of real power for decision-making. Meanwhile, ‘de-concentration’ is the delegation of certain functions to organisations that are not autonomous, but rather kept under direct control of the central power (Hervia, 1991). Thus, the changes that occurred in Argentine education in the 1990s are closer to a ‘de-concentration’ of certain functions than to a decentralisation. Some researchers (Llach, 1999) refer to this process as the ‘provincialisation of education’, which intensified the problems related to the financing of public education. This was partly due to an increase in expenditures in intermediate bureaucracies.

Meanwhile, other processes were taking place in the private sector. The *Ley Federal de Educación* placed public and private schools at the same level: both were defined as “public schools”, but with different “types of administration”. However, these schools not only have different types of administration, but they are also subject to different rules. Private schools that do not receive subsidies from the State are not subject to restrictions imposed by provincial authorities (e.g. they do not have to comply with the official school calendar).

Private schools were included within the transfer of educational services from the Nation to the provinces. However, while the public schools had to adapt to the modalities, plans and structures of the provinces, private schools only had to adapt their structures, since the provinces were forced to accept the different characteristics (extracurricular subjects, optional services, school uniforms, etc.) of the institutions that they received.

Finally, the provinces were required to maintain the subsidies to private schools that were benefiting from this scheme at the national level. The provinces were not allowed to reconsider each specific case according to their particular educational needs.

c) One of the most significant changes introduced by the *Ley Federal de Educación* was the design of a new structure for the Argentine educational system. The new configuration extended compulsory education from seven to ten years. Initial Education has been made compulsory in its last year, and the seven years of primary education have been replaced by General Basic Education (EGB), which consists of nine years of compulsory instruction divided into three-year
cycles. Finally, Polimodal, a post-compulsory level that lasts three years, has replaced a five-year secondary education.

These changes resulted in operational difficulties in public schools, since most of these institutions were either primary or secondary schools. Even in the case of schools which catered for both the primary and secondary levels, these were generally offered in separate buildings. These buildings needed to be refurbished, and in many cases classrooms had to be added in parts of the buildings that were unsuitable for this kind of room. The extension of compulsory education implied an increase in enrolments and, thus, the need for larger facilities.

On the contrary, the new structure of the educational system did not cause many problems for private institutions. Since most private schools already offered primary and secondary education (and in some cases also initial education), the adaptation to the new structure implied a new format that did not have an effect on the fundamental nature of institutions. Furthermore, private schools were not affected by the expansion of enrolments, since the middle and higher sectors of society normally continued in the educational system until they finished secondary education.

The new structure was implemented differently in different provinces. Therefore, various ways of organising educational trajectories coexisted in the 24 Argentine provinces that used to have the same educational structure. In the first place, some jurisdictions still maintain the traditional division into a seven years primary school and a five or six years secondary school (Buenos Aires City). Others divide educational routes into two sets of two cycles each, annexing the third cycle of EGB to secondary education. Finally, a third position, in compliance with the Ley Federal de Educación, establishes three cycles of General Basic Education and a three-year Polimodal (Province of Buenos Aires).

d) Another of the central proposals in the educational reform of the 1990s was the strengthening of educational institutions. Until the 1990s, every strategy for educational change in Argentina had concentrated on changing the curricula and on reforming teacher education. Schools were considered to be a group of teachers that had to execute the directives of the national or provincial states. The system was hierarchical, rigid and organised in a clearly vertical structure. Supervisors received the orders from the central organisations, which held the monopoly for decision-making. Then, the supervisors would transmit these orders to school principals. These would then instruct the teachers, who had to execute the orders. The supervisor and principal of each school not only transmitted orders, but they also had to control the execution of these mandates. They observed lessons, they read students’ notebooks, and inspected teachers’ plans. They were the guarantors of the compliance to the orders of the central powers.

The reforms of the 1990s were aimed at changing this hierarchical and vertical structure of the educational system. These reforms proposed a certain degree of autonomy for schools, so that some decisions, like selecting some of the contents of instruction, could be made at the institutional level. In return, schools were required to present to the authorities their own ‘Institutional Project’.

The ‘Institutional Projects’ were proposals for change designed in each school. All of the actors involved in an institution were required to participate in the design of the Project. They were divided in groups and had to decide on such aspects as the management of the school, the administration of resources, the assessment of students, the relations with the community, etc.. They were encouraged to base their decisions on the priorities and problems of each particular school, but they had to respect the general guidelines established by the National State.

Consequently, the sequence and organisation of curricular contents and the rhythm and method of teaching would vary from one school to another according to their institutional differences. In this sense, the existence of these Projects implies a de-politicisation of school practices: principals and teachers are no longer seen as members of the state apparatus, subject to political control. Instead, they are seen as professionals, subject to local and communitarian control.
However, the legal frame has not been changed (e.g. teachers are not chosen at the school level – by the principal. They are appointed at the central level and imposed on the school). Supervisors and principals were not assigned new roles, and an information system that would allow schools that perform well to be distinguished from schools that do not perform so well has not been established.

In addition, current literature has shown that even though the design of Institutional Projects has been made compulsory for schools, this has not been followed by processes that encouraged real autonomy in schools – which were accustomed to a vertical structure (Andrada, 2002). In this context, Institutional Projects became another bureaucratic document that the central administration required from schools. Far from fostering the participation of teachers and teamwork, Projects were in most cases written by principals with the sole objective of presenting the documents to their superiors.

Both the National State and the provinces invested great amounts of money in publishing a number of documents (some consisting of four volumes of more than 1000 pages each) that were meant to teach the principals how to design an Institutional Project. However, since the overall legal frame was not altered, schools did not gain much real autonomy. The traditional model of administration overpowered the principle of school autonomy and with it, the Institutional Projects.

e) Argentine educational policy in the 1990s included the implementation of a new curricular reform. This reform has its particularities when compared to past curricular changes.

As has been mentioned above, until the 1990s programmes and curricula for different educational levels were designed with great detail by national or provincial states. Teachers had to restrict their lessons strictly to the contents included within these documents and they also had to follow the sequence that was established. Some curricular documents even defined the activities that the teacher should perform in the classroom in order to transmit the contents. The curricular design of Buenos Aires City in 1981 was one of the clearest cases of ‘curricular hyper-prescription’ (De Titto, 2002).

The curricular reform of the 1990s not only changed the contents that had to be taught, it was also aimed at redesigning the relation between the National State, the provincial states, teachers and contents. The general proposal of the curricular reform, following the provincialisation of educational services, was to leave in the hands of the provinces the responsibility for curricular design. On the other hand, in order to guarantee minimal common contents for all Argentine students, common basic contents (CBC) were designed. These were to be used as guidelines for the design of provincial curricula.

The National Ministry of Education produced these contents, which were then approved by the Consejo Federal de Educación (formed by the ministers of education of each of the Argentine provinces). Common basic contents were designed for Initial Education, General Basic Education, Polimodal and for Teacher Education.

Even though these contents were supposed to act as guidelines for the design of the actual curricula in the provinces and then in the institutions, in practice, they became the new curricular design used by schools. A number of reasons can explain this situation:

1. The contents were not defined for each year, but for three-year cycles. As far as different readings of “minimum” contents could be done, they could be seen as being quite flexible. However, so many contents were considered to be “basic”, that it became almost impossible for schools to teach anything other than the basic contents.
2. Once the basic common contents were approved, they were not sent to the provincial educational authorities. Instead, the CBC were distributed directly to all schools in the country.
3. At the same time, some provinces did not modify their curricular designs because they thought that they already complied with the CBC, whilst those that did change their curricula took several years to do so.

4. When public school teachers received the CBC in their schools, they followed the traditional logic of the Argentine educational system, considering this document to be the curriculum that they had to follow.

5. Publishing companies could not adapt to each of the provincial markets. Consequently, they published the same textbooks – based on the CBC – for every province.

6. Due to the harsh criticisms that were being made on the traditional educational system, the private schools wanted to lead the reform, so they appropriated the CBC as the contents that they should transmit.

In summary, the CBC were taken as the new curricula in Argentine schools. As a result of the slowness in defining the details of the curricula in the provinces and in schools, the new textbooks performed, in some ways, this function and became a guide for teachers when planning their lessons.

f) In-service training for teachers was another of the strategies used in the reforms of the 1990s for attaining real change in the educational system. New contents, a new structure, and new roles for the schools required teachers with new capacities. A massive scheme of in-service training was planned to include all of the 650,000 teachers in the system. The scheme was co-ordinated by the Red Federal de Formación Docente Continua (Federal Net for Continuous Teacher Training), which had been created by the National Ministry of Education.

The massive scheme was based on a credit system. The number of credits that each course would award participants depended on the length (in time) of the course, and not on what the teachers actually learnt. In order for a course to be part of the credit system, it had to be authorised by the Red, but the authorisation system was far from being clear and transparent. Consequently, the courses that were offered to teachers were not related to the needs of the reform. Instead it was the lobbying capacity of the teachers who attended the courses, or of the institutions that offered them, that determined the inclusion of a given course within the scheme.

Since the public schools never became the ‘agents of change’, teachers attended courses to improve their individual careers, not considering the needs of the school in which they worked. The School of Teacher Training of Buenos Aires City offered courses such as tango, folklore, and handicrafts for teachers of any discipline, and awarded many credits to those who attended. The criteria for selecting the lecturers who taught in this school were not transparent, even though many of these lecturers were respected professionals. It can be said that teacher training has been one of the weakest aspects of the reform.

g) One more principle that was central to the political agenda of the 1990s was the creation of an evaluation system. Before the reform – and for more than 100 years, the State had tried to guarantee the performance of the Argentine educational system by regulating teaching methods through a unified curriculum and through the daily control of principals and supervisors over teachers’ work. After the reform, the State intended to guarantee the performance by evaluating what pupils had learnt. The National System of Evaluation (SINEC) was created within the National Ministry of Education.

Consequently, evaluation programmes are periodically conducted to assess the learning that takes place in schools, municipalities, or provinces. This, of course, allows for comparisons to be made.

Differently from what happens in other countries – such as Chile for example – in Argentina no rankings of schools are published. Thus, the evaluation system did not introduce a competitive element in the Argentine educational system. Paradoxically, even though the tests were conducted to samples of students, the National Ministry awarded prizes to those schools that had
obtained the best results, saying they were the best schools in the system. However, it was quite clear that the Ministry could not know that these were the best schools in the system, since not all students nor all schools had been evaluated. At the same time, some schools that had obtained good results became sites for internships or technical assistance for other schools, which in some cases had not been evaluated.

The culture of evaluation, which was initially resisted by teacher unions, has been established in Argentine education. However, it has never been very clear, from the state policies, what kind of use should be made of the results of these evaluations, and this resulted in technical problems in the evaluation system.

On the other hand, the National Ministry of Education has retained the responsibility for conducting the evaluations. This has implied that the usual defects of the state bureaucratic administration, such as lack of transparency and limited federal participation, have been transferred to the evaluation system (Llach, 1999; Narodowski, Nores y Andrada, 2001).

**Institutional weaknesses in Argentine educational policies**

Argentine educational reform in the 1990s was carried out by the political party that was in power at the national level, and which also controlled most of the provinces at that time: the Peronist Party. In 1999 the opposition (the Radical Party) got to power while a profound economic crisis was emerging in Argentina. This, plus the problems and costs of implementation of the reform itself, implied an important shift in the course of educational policy.

In the last years, far from developing and improving the principles of the reform of the 1990s, educational policies have been aimed at restoring the educational system of the late nineteenth century with its reforms of the 1960s. Thus, some of the principles of the reform of the 1990s are being redefined by the traditional system. Other principles of this reform are gradually being abandoned, and they are clearly outside the current political agenda.

What seems to be clear is that the continuity of the educational policy of the early twentieth century has been resistant to the efforts to "modernise" or reform the educational system. This reveals Argentina's institutional weakness in macro-political administration.

Furthermore, there are two current tendencies that seem to confirm the resistance of the traditional educational system to change. In the first place, the definition of two separate (and very different) educational paths – public and private – seems to be deepening. Even though there has been in the last years a decline in private enrolments, this is a consequence of the economic crisis. It is very probable that public schools become an educational site catering only for those who cannot pay for their education. On the other hand, the private education circuit would be legitimised as the 'circuit of quality', available for those who have enough economic resources to have access to it.

Secondly, although the process of *provincialisation* has been established, there has been at the same time a re-centralisation of educational functions in the provincial level. Public schools and subsidised private schools have a quite limited degree of autonomy. The centralised power, previously held by the National State, is now in the hands of the provinces. Thus, the power to make decisions has not been displaced from the central levels to educators, families or other social or economic agents.

As has been shown, some of the central elements of the educational policies of the 1990s had a problem of temporal consistency. Common basic contents were being used as the new curricula, and the national evaluation system, instead of replacing the surveillance methods of supervision, became an addition to traditional mechanisms of control.
Some unsettled challenges and debates

Beginning the second half of twenty-first century's first decade, it seems obvious that in Argentina, as in many of the Southern Cone countries, the reform impulse gave way to a more realistic understanding of the problems and difficulties that educational systems find to renew its pedagogical practices and to improve their students' standards of awards (Palamidessi, 2006). If we consider the Latin American region as a whole, the reform period has shown, on the one side, significant improvements in schooling\(^2\), and, on the other side, discernible progress in institutional management matters\(^3\), clear problems to reach minimum levels of equitably distributed quality and to retain the poor and disadvantaged sectors in the educational system (Opperti, 2005). In this context, a noticeable generalization of a prudent feeling can be perceived, as well as a more plural and long-term vision about State and societies' capacity to reinvent their educational traditions.

Certainly, the political directions seem to be changing and a revaluation of a strong and central role of the State is gaining new support in the countries of the region. At the same time, the belief in a significant association between a higher decentralization in curricular decisions and an improvement in education quality has been called into question. In this new scenario, some countries have undertaken processes of discussions and revision on policies and curricular frameworks\(^4\), considering the need to establish minimum common contents in accordance with the real possibilities to reach those contents at schools. Whereas, other countries maintain their definitions and regulations while they concentrate in analyzing improvements and working on more delimited problems.

Perhaps, it should be necessary to carry out modest and medium-term analysis, to understand which were the changes effectively put into practice and in which sectors, by questioning, for instance: Which of the aspects of new frameworks and directions were more productive? Which of the aspects didn’t show enough progress? Which policy instruments and strategies have helped

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\(^2\) The average of education years of economically active population aged 15 or more years, residing in urban areas of 18 countries in Latin America was 9.2 in 2002, and raised 1.2 years basically between 1980 and 2002, which shows attendance but not whole instruction years (it does not represent syllabus completion but numbers of years attending the school), in a quantity of years that are equivalent to the scope of compulsory education in the region. Calculated by Opperti (2005) on CEPAL data (2004).

\(^3\) Basically, referred to the set of initiatives aimed to provide schools with more leeway and autonomy so as to improve institutional and pedagogic management.

\(^4\) In Bolivia, for instance, after ten years of reform process, a National Pedagogic Congress was held with several social actors, with the purpose of evaluating that program and set out the Bolivian Education Strategy for next decade (2005 - 2015). As a result of that Congress, the eight-year basic education implemented by the reform was ratified (grades 1° to 8°). Likewise, it was suggested to include two-year compulsory education - known as pre-kinder and kinder - in urban, suburban and provincial urban areas. Regarding secondary level, the need to intensify the transformation under the format of an integral technical-social high school diploma, was put forward.
the undertaking of new roles of local and institutional levels in curricular subject? Were there any improvements with the inclusion of competencies as curricular specification?

Faced with a necessary revision of the changes already implemented and particularly those where there was no progress, a definite pending matter is teacher education, a point that, while being undoubtedly part of all the issues, was not central in the education reforms of the region.

**Emergent Problems in today's Teacher Education**

In Argentina, at the present time, there is a clear imbalance between the education that teachers receive and the increasing complexity that practice demands from them. With the increasing poverty and social exclusion processes, school had to assume new functions: social support, attention to diversity, cover of food needs, parents’ orientation, etc (Redondo, 2004) having to face a still not solved tension between teaching and social assistance and support.

At the same time, a society in which changes advance at a vertiginous pace, with a new youth culture, technological modernization and a school that has lost the monopoly of knowledge transmission, implies for teachers a new scenario of increasing complexity that shows a gradual loss of teacher identity, that cannot find its place in this deep transformation of the school mission.

Within this reality, the teacher education institutes do not train teachers with the required qualifications to face the new social reality. In addition, teachers feel a social devaluation of their function in a context where the multiplication of knowledge and information sources is unheard of in history. Both for the school and the teachers it is extremely difficult to live together with these young people that are so different, who bring their own social identities to school, with knowledge and cultures very different form the one the school distributes: “the new generations bring cultures that are diverse, fragmented, opened, flexible, mobile, unstable” (Tenti Fanfani, 2000)

This new scenario, organized around the information and communication technologies, forces teachers to face new challenges which they that cannot give proper answers.

In our country, there are clear signs of structural problems in teacher training and their profile. Among others, we can point out 1- an inadequate title assignment, 2- an excessive number of graduates for basic education and a shortage of teachers with the needed training for secondary level, 3- the lack of training in communication technology and 4- a great number of teacher training institutes with an enormous heterogeneity in their quality.

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5 A great number of teachers are considered as substitute teachers and remain in that situation for years.

6 According to the 2004 Teacher Census, in the last decade, while the number of teachers with pedagogical training increased, the percentage with adequate preparation as the education level grows actually decreased.

7 According to an investigation carried out among 2440 argentine teachers, half of them do not have a PC at home, only one third has Internet access, 63% of the lowest socio economic levels never use a PC, and
On the other side, there have been changes in the career choice process: the middle and lower socio economic levels have chosen the teacher career, changing substantially the reason for their choice, not as a vocation but as a working opportunity with a secure income in a scenario of high unemployment.

We believe it is time to understand teacher education as a priority, as one of the central points of any reform policy that pretends to be sustainable.

Conclusions

At present we have a New National Law of Education in our country as a new wave of reforms. It is clear that we still have unsettled challenges in quality and equity in our educational system.

Maybe its time to think less about the specific contents of an educational reform and to think more about the macro-political styles that sustain it.

We believe that, unless we focus on government styles, reforms won’t be successful. This means working less on financial models and more on distribution models.

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more than 7 out of each 10 teachers never uses e-mail while two million teenagers have access to Internet and 55% of them are daily online (Source: La Nación, 26-02-06)

8 According to the 2004 Teacher Census, there are 1104 training teacher institutes in the country.
Bibliography


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