
Discourses and Policies on Educational Quality in Argentina, 1990-2010

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ABSTRACT This article analyses the relationships between different notions of education quality and policies on primary and secondary schools implemented in Argentina during the last two decades. The authors focus on three moments: (1) the emergence of the discussion about quality (at the end of the 1980s) in Latin America and in Argentina; (2) the enactment and implementation of the Federal Law of Education (1993); and (3) the enactment of the Law of National Education (2006), along with the implementation of some key policies.

Introduction

This article analyses the relationships between different notions of education quality and policies on primary and secondary schools implemented in Argentina during the last two decades. The concepts of educational quality that have informed changes can be seen as combinations of elements of the prevailing global discourse – mainly framed by multilateral organisations like the World Bank and regional bodies like the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean – and of (changing) local discourses of quality.

Argentina is a federal country, but education and other areas have been traditionally organised in a very centralised manner. The relatively high levels of literacy, education attainment and social democratisation that the country had achieved by the mid twentieth century were reversed to a significant extent by the joint effects of the last military dictatorship (1976-1983) and the economic crisis of the 1980s. During the last two decades, the reconfiguration of the educational system, including its adaptation to new challenges posed by local and global forces, has been an important issue in the public arena.

We consider the concept of educational quality as an ‘empty’ or ‘floating signifier’ which means different things to different people. The vagueness of the concept has been pointed out by different authors in the fields of comparative education and education planning (Pedró & Puig, 1998; Casassus, 1999; Santos Guerra, 2003; Myers, 2006). We analyse the reform policies and how the discourses of the national government, local academics and international organisations have addressed the concept of educational quality. We focus on three moments: (1) the emergence of the discussion about quality (at the end of the 1980s); (2) the enactment and implementation of the Federal Law of Education (1993); and (3) the enactment of the Law of National Education (2006), along with the implementation of some key policies.

The Emergence of the Discussion

At the end of the 1980s, a decade characterised in Latin America by economic stagnation and the rebirth of liberal democracy, a new rhetoric of education reform developed in the region based on three key concepts: quality, equity and efficiency (Braslavsky, 1999; see also Casassus, 1999). Each of these concepts allowed for different interpretations, but together they established a common framework for reform in most of the countries in the region (Braslavsky, 1999). At that time, the concern for the expansion of educational systems began to be replaced, at least in part, by the concerns about the performance of schools in terms of student learning and of how to realise equality of opportunities (Schiefelbein & Tedesco, 1995).

According to Casassus (1999), the new weight given to the concept of quality was due to the strategic centrality of education for economic development and social integration which was established globally at that time for both central and peripheral countries (see also Carnoy & Moura Castro, 1996). This shift began to be clear in the documents produced by the regional meetings of national ministers of education in 1989 and 1991 (Casassus, 1999; Gajardo, 1999). In the Fourth PROMEDLAC (Intergovernmental Regional Committee for the Major Project in the Field of Education in Latin America and the Caribbean) (Quito, 1991), it was declared that Latin American educational systems had been based on strategies that were no longer able to 'harmonise quantity with quality'. The document linked the improvement of quality to processes of teacher professionalisation and curricular transformation, while arguing the need for a new model of educational development in the region built around decentralisation policies and the establishment of student assessment and evaluation systems. For countries in Latin America, the global initiative of Education for All, launched in Jomtien in 1990, was also influential in the importance given to the issue of quality and its measurement. One of the goals established in Jomtien was an emphasis on learning outcomes as fundamental indicators of quality.[1]

A key text because of its impact on the regional educational discourse, as well as on national policies, was *Education and Knowledge: basic pillars of changing production patterns with social equity*, produced by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean in 1992 with the objective of updating the regional development model. This new development model was supposed to promote the strengthening of democratisation, as well as the integration of Latin American countries into the world economy. The document outlined an education reform strategy that would help to address 'both the internal challenge, which is that of building citizenship, and the external challenge, which is that of competitiveness' (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, 1992, Summary, para. 2). As its title indicates, the document placed the main emphasis on equity, rather than quality, as the principal concept. But, at the same time, while recognising the expansion of educational systems, it pointed to shortcomings in 'the quality of their results, their degree of adaptation to the requirements of the economic and social environment, and the degree of equity in the access of the different strata of society to them' (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, 1992, Summary, para. 3).

This new emphasis on equity seemed to respond to high (and rising) social inequalities, as well as to the awareness that educational policy should provide an answer to the also growing social and cultural diversity in the region (Feijóo, 2002). Casassus (1999) notes that the concern for quality is necessarily linked to the concern for equity, even when they are independent concepts. Given the massification of formal instruction, he argues, the goal is to achieve a high-quality education for all.

It should be noted that the discourse of the decline of educational quality was espoused not only by multilateral organisations or from functionalist viewpoints. Arnove et al (1997, p. 147), for example, arguing from a neo-Marxist perspective, point out that the quality of education in the region was severely affected by neo-liberal policies implemented during the 1980s and early 1990s: 'Decreased expenditures, outdated pedagogies and curricula, and restricted access all contributed to the general decline in the quality of education. Low teachers salaries also affected educational quality'.

In Argentina, the re-establishment of democratic political institutions in 1983 had allowed for a more open and broader-based discussion of the structure and content of education. With the Pedagogic Congress (Congreso Pedagógico, 1986-1988), which involved teachers, parents, community members, students and representatives of different organisations in a debate about the

situation of the educational system, 'an effort began to build consensus and to seek out or create new policies and action strategies' (Braslavsky, 1998, p. 299). At the same time, the issue of quality began to appear in the academic discourse in relation to the mismanagement of the school system, its increasing segmentation, and the need for policies that promoted equality of opportunities and school democratisation (Filmus, 1995).

Despite a variety of diagnosis and quality conceptions, there existed in the Argentine academic community a prevailing view that educational quality had been declining since the 1960s. While public schools had been suffering a situation of rising enrolments combined with falling investment (Beccaria & Riquelme, 1985), the private sector had been growing based on the incorporation of middle- and upper-class families.[2] The decline of public education had been accentuated by both the policies of the last military government (1976-1983) [3] and the economic crisis of the 1980s (Braslavsky & Tiramonti, 1990; Filmus, 1995). National and provincial ministries of education appeared to lack the capacities to govern the system and to affect the work of schools (Paviglianiti, 1988; Braslavsky, 1998). The fragmentation of the system implied great inequalities, as schools varied in the quality and types of services they offered to different groups of students (Braslavsky & Krawczyk, 1988). The combination of increases in enrolments and a lack of investment in the educational system resulted in schools and classrooms becoming overcrowded and accentuated the sense of crisis.[4]

On the other hand, as we have shown, the regional and global discourses expressed by multilateral organisations and meetings had begun to emphasise a focused, narrow view of educational quality, mainly linked to learning outcomes. A World Bank report on the Argentine educational system that was produced at the end of the 1980s (Kugler, 1991) reflected such a view, stressing the need for standards and measurement systems of student achievement that may result in interventions to address problems and shortcomings in underachieving districts and schools.

Quality and Education Reform in Argentina during the 1990s

The reform of the Argentine educational system during the 1990s was part of a regional process of educational change influenced by both international agencies and local actors, and linked to the recovery of democratic political institutions at national levels, global economic restructuring, and the idea of the centrality of education for development and social integration (Gajardo, 1999; Concha Alborno, 2005). In this regard, the regional and global discourses of education reform that were discussed in the previous section maintained their momentum.

At the same time, educational change in Argentina was influenced by the processes of state restructuring and neo-liberal reform, which included the opening of the economy to international trade, the privatisation of state-owned companies and the deregulation of economic activities. The first step in the restructuring of the educational system was the decentralisation of secondary schools and teacher training institutes from the national to the provincial level, which was followed by the enactments of the Federal Law of Education (1993) and the Law of Higher Education (1995).

At the basic education level, changes included creating a new academic structure that extended compulsory education from 7 to 10 years; modernising provincial systems of educational administration; updating the curriculum and establishing a new mechanism for its design; implementing compensatory programmes for the most disadvantaged social groups; developing student assessment, evaluation and information systems; retraining teachers to upgrade their subject knowledge and teaching methods; and adopting a new model of school management. The World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank participated in the design and financing of the education reform, supporting some of the policies implemented.

The declared objectives of the reform were enhancing quality and equity. Changes were also justified in terms of adapting the educational system to technological changes and the requirements of the global economy (see, for example, Ministry of Culture and Education, 1996b, 1997). The concept of educational quality in the Federal Law of Education (Government of Argentina, 1993), the main legal instrument of the reform, was not clearly defined. References were very general, but it was stated that quality would be guaranteed through evaluation (Articles 48, 49 and 53). The evaluation of quality should verify that curricular contents responded to 'social needs' and to the

'educational requirements of the community' (Article 49), but it was not explained how those needs and requirements would be identified.

With regard to the goal of improving equity, the Federal Law stressed a compensatory role for the federal government, which was translated into the Social Plan, designed to provide federal funds for improving facilities and supplying computers and textbooks directly to the poorest schools in the country. The Social Plan reached more than 17,000 schools and around 3.6 million students during the period 1993-1998 (Morduchowicz, 1999). The new emphasis on compensatory programmes can be seen as responding to a social context of increasing poverty and marginalisation, which developed despite the high rates of economic growth. The aim of one of the programmes, for example, was 'to provide poorer children with the same [pedagogic] resources as the most privileged ones' (Ministry of Culture and Education, 1997, p. 44).[5]

The improvement of quality, on the other hand, was to be achieved through governance and pedagogic changes. The official discourse linked educational quality to the implementation of a curriculum based on the development of competences, the movement towards school autonomy and the development of school institutional projects, and more efficient administrative systems at the provincial level (Decibe, 1998). It was argued that the successful implementation of curricular and instructional changes depended on a new organisational and management model that was more decentralised, participatory and flexible (Ministry of Culture and Education, 1996b). This combination of pedagogical and administrative innovations was promoted through national programmes like Nueva Escuela ('New School'), which worked with provincial governments and schools (Tiramonti, 1996). A main instrument for this new model was the development of the Proyecto Educativo Institucional ('School Institutional Project').

The curricular reform process, which had its precedents in various provincial experiences during the 1980s, was one of the main elements in restructuring the educational system. The design of the new curriculum was established at three levels. At the more general level, the Federal Council of Education set the general objectives and guidelines. At the provincial level – including the city of Buenos Aires – the objectives and guidelines were more developed, taking into account the reality of each province. The final design of the curriculum at the school level implied that each school had to make decisions on contents and instruction. The Federal Council had stated that the school was the fundamental unit for the specification of the educational project, so the provinces should leave to the schools the responsibility of completing the development of a curriculum that responded to local realities and needs (Ministry of Culture and Education, 1996a). The final product was a curriculum based on the development of 'competences', which was supposed to allow students to gain understanding and to perform in the personal, social and work dimensions of life.

Teacher professionalisation was also considered as a central element to improve educational quality (Serra, 2004). A national document argued that:

Pursuing schools with higher teaching quality is closely connected with a change in teachers' role towards higher levels of professionalization. A professional educator is someone who manages the knowledge areas necessary for teaching and learning, who at the same time, is able to make autonomous decisions with independence, freedom and responsibility. (Ministry of Culture and Education, 1996, p. 3, quoted in Pini et al, 2010, p. 189)

In spite of this stress on teaching improvements, the quality of the courses delivered under the umbrella of the Federal Network of Teacher Training – created and managed by the national ministry with the participation of the provincial ministries of education – could not be effectively monitored, resulting mostly in the offering of isolated courses of very different quality levels. As a result, teacher training tended to become a mere formal procedure, mainly pursued because 'taking courses' increased the score necessary for salary raises and for promotion (Serra, 2004; Pini et al, 2010).

Another significant policy in relation to quality was the establishment of the National System for the Evaluation of Educational Quality, with the objective of measuring learning outcomes. In 1993, the government began to conduct annual national assessments of learning outcomes through standardised tests in Spanish, mathematics, sciences and social studies, administered to samples of students at primary and secondary levels (Nores, 2002). Although the test content and items were decided through a consultation process with provincial governments, the evaluation system worked as a tool for the federal government to reassume centralised control over the educational

system (Benveniste, 2002). Through the publication of results, the national government seemed to seek legitimisation for the reform, and to hold provinces and schools accountable for student achievement:

Assessment data would not only inform policy change but would actually serve as a conduit to justify and mobilize public opinion around the incipient Argentine educational transformation ... The national government sought to supply public opinion with immediate, conclusive, and objective evidence that the education sector was in crisis and that this crisis demanded the wide-sweeping reforms inscribed in the Federal Education Law. (Benveniste, 2002, p. 106)

It can also be argued that the selective use of the information provided by the tests implied a focus on teaching as the main variable to explain outcomes (Gvirtz et al, 2006), which accounts, in part, for the opposition of teachers' unions to the assessment system (Nores, 2002). Unions feared that results would be used in the future to determine teachers' compensation and promotion schemes, but their critiques also addressed technical aspects and the fact that evaluation of the educational system focused only on the achievement of a minimum amount of curriculum content by students.

The official discourse on educational quality did incorporate references to the democratisation of schools and to the education of citizens, but it placed a greater emphasis on responding to the requirements of the economic and technological transformations, as well as on the measurement of educational results.^[6] This conception of quality was reinforced by the prevailing global and regional discourses of education reform, as can be seen in the arguments of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (1992) for institutional redesign and in the Partnership for Education Revitalization in the Americas' (1998) arguments for fixing educational systems in order to contribute to countries' economic competitiveness. It was also supported, both argumentatively and through technical and financial support, by the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank.

A document by the World Bank (1995), which helped to set the strategy for assisting with the reform, stated that: 'Argentina's population ... is ill-prepared in comparison with countries with a similar income level and with which it competes in world markets ... Despite relatively high coverage rates, the quality and productivity of the educational system is poor' (p. 3). Moreover, it was argued that 'the low quality of student learning' is 'related to the poor quality of educational inputs, including: shortages of educational materials; inadequate teacher training; lack of relevance of curriculum content; and poor school management and lack of school-based initiatives' (p. 9). In a positive appraisal of national reform policies, the document pointed out that the Federal Law of Education 'emphasizes and gives special priority to the provision of high quality education and its measurement' (p. 10). With a similar tone, the Inter-American Development Bank (1994, p. 7) declared that the Federal Law 'provides for improving the quality of education through curriculum updating, teacher training, and the creation of a National Quality Assessment System'.

On the other hand, the prevailing view of educational quality encountered significant resistance in local academics. The government discourse was characterised as promoting a technocratic view that reduced the meaning of educational quality to system productivity in measurable aspects, and responding to market requirements, while ignoring democratisation demands, in the context of restructuring policies that implied increasing unemployment and the undermining of universal social rights (Puiggrós, 1997; Tiramonti, 1997). The competences-based curriculum, for example, was seen as part of a neo-liberal discourse which encouraged a social Darwinist model (Frigerio, 1995a). Furthermore, it was pointed out that an educational policy that has the objective of improving quality should be linked to a social policy that attempts to provide a better quality of life for all the population (Frigerio, 1995b); and that the quality of education was 'measured only in terms of specialized learning achievement', referring to 'societal and job market-specific, content-related qualification requirements' (Munín, 1998, p. 231).

Other critiques of the national policy and its conception of quality came from neo-liberal think tanks and foundations sponsored by business groups, which became very active in the discussion of educational policy during this decade. The Latin American Economic Research Foundation and Center for Public Studies (2000), for example, argued that the reform of secondary schools had reduced the scope and duration of technical education.^[7] According to this view, compulsory education could have been extended without changing the academic structure, while a

technical education modality starting at the sixth grade should have been organised, which would have made schooling more attractive and useful for students with a low economic status.

The Implementation of the Reform and Its Effects on Quality

The design and implementation of the reform showed significant problems in enhancing both quality and equity, probably due to a combination of political, financial and technical factors. Tiramonti (1996) suggests that the national policy represented a dual political proposal which responded to the increasing dual structure of society. It consisted of compensatory programmes for the poorest sectors (like the Social Plan) and of pedagogical changes for the middle classes, who needed and demanded better education in order to compete in the employment market.

The initial push towards more autonomous schools and the development of institutional projects was gradually replaced by the centrality of the national ministry in curricular and pedagogical aspects. In addition, the conditions of high inequality, reinforced by the decentralisation of educational funding, prevented schools in poor environments from developing the necessary capacities for autonomy.

Given the decentralisation of the Argentine educational system established in 1992, the implementation of the reform depended to a great extent on the provincial governments. Provinces, with various political orientations and huge differences in terms of technical and financial resources, adopted diverse positions with regard to the Federal Law and the national policies (Senén González, 2000).

The province of Buenos Aires, which concentrates more than 35% of the total students in basic education nationally, was the province that advanced most quickly in the massive implementation of the new structure and the extension to 10 years of compulsory schooling. The implementation in this province, however, took place through a particular appropriation of the reform – which emphasised coverage rather than quality – and under a political leadership that was in competition with the national government. The political logic was to include and retain students with a low socio-economic status with the possibility of focalised social policy, but without modifying the segmentation of the educational system. Provincial policy makers recognised that this strategy would unavoidably lower quality (see Acedo et al, 2007). Despite a significant increase in educational expenditures, problems of infrastructure and in the training of teachers were salient. In many schools, quality suffered not only because of less demands on the students, and because of the adoption of primary school methods of teaching and evaluation at the lower secondary level, but also due to the challenge of the incorporation of students who were over age, had a history of school failure and belonged to social groups that had never accessed secondary education before. A discourse of ‘diversity’ (in official documents and among educational authorities, including supervisors) was articulated, addressing the need for adapting teaching styles to the reality of low-income students – an adaptation that, in many cases, resulted in teaching less contents (Acedo et al, 2007).

For the nation as a whole, the main positive effect of the reform of the 1990s appeared to be the increase in enrolments, particularly at the lower secondary level (Tedesco & Tenti Fanfani, 2001; Rivas, 2003). Most of the measures that could help improve quality – curriculum updates, administrative modernisation, improvements in infrastructure and equipment – were neutralised by a failed system of teacher training and the lack of adequate planning for extending compulsory schooling and adopting the new structure of primary and secondary education. Furthermore, many of the reform policies and programmes began to be cut at the end of the 1990s as the result of economic recession and changes in the leadership of the national government.

Recent Developments in Educational Policy and the Issue of Quality

During the last decade, centre-left and populist political orientations have prevailed in Latin America, resulting in a post-neo-liberal scenario. These changes have been reflected in the education rhetoric and policies of some governments. At the regional level, for example, a recent document by the Regional Bureau for Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (2007, p. 7) defines education as a ‘human right and public good’. In addition, it specifies that the quality of

teachers and the learning environment they generate is one of the most important factors influencing students' learning results. The implication is that the policies oriented to improving educational quality can only be feasible if the efforts concentrate on transforming not only teachers, but also the culture of schools. It is also emphasised that no reform would be successful without teachers' participation (p. 10). The document notes the importance of teacher quality for promoting learning and for safeguarding the right to education.

The economic crisis that Argentina suffered in 2001-2002 was unprecedented in terms of the rise in unemployment and poverty rates, and signalled the failure of the economic model that had been set up in the 1990s. The critiques against the Federal Law and the education reform – considered to be part of the neo-liberal orientation of the previous decade – gained momentum, as it was evident that its implementation had not improved quality (in any of the various conceptions adopted by different actors), while fragmentation and inequalities both within and between provincial school systems had increased.

The administrations of Néstor Kirchner (2003-2007) and Cristina Fernández (2007-) have represented a reversal of some of the policies of the 1990s in a context of significant economic growth, particularly during the period 2004-2008. Both administrations have adopted a discourse that emphasises state intervention and social rights, but have implemented policies that have reinforced – or, at least, maintained – an economic 'productivist model' and social inequalities (Svampa, 2008), although the implementation since 2010 of a universal subsidy per child appears to be an effective measure to reduce poverty levels.

From 2003, the national government aimed at establishing a more centralised regulation of the educational system, while legitimising policies through consultation processes, particularly with the National Confederation of Teachers' Unions. The presence of multilateral organisations has been much less salient, but they have remained involved in the national educational policy via the funding of a few programmes and the participation of Argentina in some international student achievement tests.

Among other measures, the government has raised teachers' salaries, created a National Institute for Teacher Education, passed new laws promoting technical education and increased funding for achieving specific targets like universal initial and secondary schooling.[8] At the same time, the national government has continued to promote, at the school level, the development of projects and the establishment of partnerships with civil society organisations, as shown, for example, in the 'Proposal for Socio-Educational Support for Secondary Schools' that the Ministry of Education is currently implementing.[9] On the other hand, since 2003, there has been a bigger stress on 'educational inclusion' for particular groups (drop-outs, over-age students, etc.), in which one of the main strategies is the 'joint management' of programmes between the state and civil society organisations (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, n.d.).

The most significant initiative was the enactment of the Law of National Education in December 2006, which replaced the Federal Law. The official document that was used to propose the public discussion of the new law stated that:

only an education of excellent quality for all the population will allow reaching the objectives of social justice, economic growth and democratic citizenship, which guide the strategy of sustainable development ... Argentines are recovering the conviction that the State must be the guarantee that these values reach the whole society without exclusions. (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2006, pp. 11-12)

In general, the law stresses the concept of education as a social right, highlighting its contribution to building a more just society, and to overcoming inequalities and different forms of discrimination (see Pini & Gorostiaga, 2008). Among other provisions, the law extends compulsory education to the whole secondary level, creates a National Institute for Teacher Education and establishes a 'full-time schedule' (*jornada completa*) for primary schools.

As was the case with the Federal Law of 1993, in the National Law of Education the concept of quality is not clearly defined, although it is mentioned many times. The first objective established for the national educational policy is to 'assure an education of quality with equality of opportunities and possibilities, without regional imbalances or social inequities' (Government of Argentina, 2006, Article 11). The new law devotes a whole section to the issue of quality (Title IV), in which the improvement of quality is linked to the development of information and evaluation

systems. In addition, it proposes a National Council of Educational Quality – with representation from government agencies, the academic world, business organisations and unions – which has the functions of providing advice and proposing criteria and modalities for the evaluation of the national educational system, and participating in the diffusion and utilisation of the information produced by evaluation processes. However, this council has not been implemented so far. The law also defines teacher education as a key factor for improving the quality of education (Article 73).

During the last years, despite the enactment of a discourse that stresses democratisation, and the establishment of legal provisions for increasing enrolments for initial and secondary education, repetition and drop-out rates remain high, and enrolment at different levels has not risen in a significant way (National Directorate of Information and Evaluation of Educational Quality, 2008). On the other hand, results obtained in national evaluations seem to show that learning has not improved. In the 2007 examination, for example, secondary students got between 44.7% and 65% (depending on the grade) of low or non-satisfactory answers in the area of mathematics. At the same time, private schools continue to outperform public ones in a significant way (National Directorate of Information and Evaluation of Educational Quality, 2009).

The performance of Argentina in international tests (the Programme for International Student Assessment [PISA] and Second Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study [SERCE]) also reveals a low level of student attainment. Participation in PISA [10] took place in 2000-2001 and 2006 (National Directorate of Information and Evaluation of Educational Quality, n.d.). According to the 2006 evaluation, which involved 57 countries, Argentina occupied the fifty-first rank in sciences, fifty-second in mathematics and fifty-third in reading comprehension, and it was the country with the greatest internal dispersion of results. In addition, out of the 36 countries that participated in both the evaluations of 2000-2001 and 2006, Argentina had the biggest drop in the results of the reading comprehension between the first and the second evaluation.

In UNESCO's SERCE, which was applied to samples of third- and sixth-grade primary school students in 16 countries of Latin America and the Caribbean (Regional Bureau for Education in Latin America and the Caribbean & Latin American Laboratory for Assessment of the Quality of Education, 2008), Argentina occupied the fifth or sixth ranks in the different areas (language, mathematics and sciences), which represents a significant drop in comparison to the second rank obtained for mathematics and language in UNESCO's First Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study in 1996. The poor performances in PISA and SERCE, however, have not prompted any important debate about the quality of education, nor have they had any apparent impact on the policies of the national Ministry of Education.

Notwithstanding some positive measures (for example, the growth in public investment, the establishment of compulsory secondary education and the upgrading of teacher education), it can be argued that no coherent, well-planned strategy for improving quality (even defined in a narrow way) and equity (in terms of differences between public and private schools or between different types of public schools) has been developed. In addition, the consultation processes implemented in relation to some of the most significant initiatives of the national government (for example, the creation of the National Institute for Teacher Education and the design of the Law of National Education) appear to be mechanisms that did not allow for the real participation of the different actors in the system.

Conclusion

We have shown that different conceptions of quality have interplayed in the planning and implementation of education reform in Argentina since the end of the 1980s. Changes introduced during the 1990s in curricular and organisational aspects did not have the expected effects of improving student learning, while governance reforms seemed to improve efficiency but reinforced inequalities among provinces. In addition, even today, most provincial governments play the role of administering educational systems and carrying out national policies, but without the capacity to design and implement their own policies for improving quality and equity.

The national policy has been influenced by different views of educational quality, including the rather instrumental view of international organisations like the World Bank, as well as broader

conceptions espoused by local academics, policy makers and other international organisations like the Regional Bureau for Education in Latin America and the Caribbean. As a result, the national discourse and policies have tended to express an unresolved tension between competing notions of quality. At different moments, specific elements and conceptions of quality seem to prevail over others, but without establishing a definitive view. Moreover, the implementation of reform policies has been marked by the difficulties in achieving improvements in both quality and equity. In a context of social inequality that is likely to persist, there are growing disparities between provinces and schools within the country in relation to educational access, promotion and attainment. Private education continues to grow – in 2008, it was reported that around 24% of primary students and 25% of secondary students attended private schools (National Directorate of Information and Evaluation of Educational Quality, 2008) – while public schools, with a few exceptions, tend to be seen increasingly as the schools of the poor sectors of society.

Notes

- [1] Pedró and Puig (1998) highlight the shift from concerns about equality of opportunities (during the 1960s) to quality (from the 1980s on) in education. They point out that this shift has been guided by a predominant political interpretation that identifies quality with academic achievement, which leads to an emphasis on the evaluation of educational products or results rather than processes.
- [2] The growth of private schools seemed to be due to their flexibility in responding to the demands of families (Narodowski, 2002), but increasingly to the prevailing view that they offered an education of higher quality than public schools.
- [3] Those policies included closing education offices with planning and research functions (see Paviglianiti, 1988), and neglecting pedagogic and curricular aspects. For example, Tiramonti (1995) points out that in 1983, 400,000 primary students in the province of Buenos Aires were offered only two or three daily hours of schooling, including the provision of a meal.
- [4] The secondary net enrolment rate, for instance, rose from 33.4% in 1980 to 53.5% in 1991. But regional differences were huge: in 1991, the secondary net enrolment for the city of Buenos Aires was around 72%, compared to about 38% for the province of Chaco, in the less developed north-east (Tiramonti, 1996).
- [5] The Social Plan, however, can be seen as a public policy that identified particular social groups as deficient and needy, while departing from the idea of universal social rights (Duschatzky & Redondo, 2000).
- [6] As Domingo Cavallo, former Argentine Minister of Education, put it at the time: 'what we try to measure is how well the training provided by each school fits the needs of production and the labor market' (quoted in Puiggrós, 1996, p. 26).
- [7] Historically, formal education in Argentina has had weak links with the world of work. Technical secondary schools – introduced during the 1950s by the Peronist regime – have been neglected by most governments.
- [8] Public investment in education and science grew from 4% to 5.4% of the gross domestic product in the period 2003-2007 (Delich et al, 2009), but some provinces still show a low level – compared to international standards – of investment per student (Center for the Implementation of Public Policies Promoting Equity and Growth, 2008).
- [9] See <http://portales.educacion.gov.ar/dnps/>
- [10] A programme developed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development which is administered to samples of 15-year-old students.

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