How does educational research in Argentina transform practice?

There has been some improvement driven by the CONICET (Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas/ National Council for Scientific and Technical Research), whose efforts in the last years have been directed to augment the social relevance of research.

A very interesting new phenomenon is the important role of non-governmental organizations as mediators between academia and practitioners. There is a renowned national program, Nexos (Links), which is implemented by CIPPEC (Center for the Implementation of Public Policies Promoting Equity and Growth), whose main aim is precisely to bridge those gaps by providing accessible research to public officers.

Despite these mediators, there seems to be little concern on behalf of the research community for turning sound ideas born in policy. Out of the few research studies carried out, only a small minority are directed toward what happens in schools. A recent book by a very prestigious researcher in the country states that there are less than a hundred researchers—being very generous with what we consider excellent research—in education in Argentina. In this sense, it is critical to train young researchers to carry out meaningful high-quality studies. I think it is a responsibility that we, current academics and practitioners, cannot avoid.

If you look back to the Modern School Movement work between the 1920s and 1960s in Argentina, academics were also practitioners, and their writing was relevant to the field. For example, there is a publication directed to teachers, La Obra, which was particularly popular in that period.

There were also two noteworthy exceptions during the 1980s—on one side, Cecilia Braslavsky, whose work reflected her eagerness to associate research to macro policy, and on the other side, Edith Litwin, who worked hard to identify good practices at universities. Fortunately, in the last decade, universities, think tanks, and governments have produced and continue to foster a kind of knowledge
focused on district and school levels. In this sense, I would say that research groups specialized in the didactics of each discipline are the ones who have been working the most at producing socially relevant knowledge.

Argentina has gone through significant school reforms since the 1990s. How have these reforms changed the education system?

The first wave of reforms was in the 1990s. During that time there were several significant changes. First, Argentina transferred public schools from the national to the provincial governments. Second, it changed the nature of primary and secondary schooling—primary school was replaced with two cycles (equivalent to 1st to 3rd grade and 4th to 6th grade) followed by three years at a low-secondary school. The traditional secondary school was replaced by an upper-secondary school. In practice, however, each province adopted a different scheme thus creating diverse education systems across the country.

In addition to the structural changes, Argentina also changed the assessment system to foster communication between the nation and the provinces. In 1993, we had our first National Assessment Process, which evaluated students’ achievement in primary and secondary education across the country. It consisted of a test in each discipline and an attached questionnaire that provided additional information that might be useful to explain results.

The curricular framework was another important change. Although we had been experiencing a process of slow decentralization of curricular policy from a very centralized model since the 1970s, the real transformation happened during the 1990s. Basic Curricular Contents (CBCs) were set as general guidelines for the whole country, and each region and province was given the power to design their own specific curriculum according to their contexts.

However, the reforms of the 1990s had a weak social support and were intensively resisted. As soon as Carlos Menem (the president that led the reform) ended his period, many changes were revised—the education structure returned to the old scheme, reducing primary school and coming back to a longer secondary school; the curriculum guidelines were revised into well-defined standards of achievement for each grade level; and, the Congress passed the 2006 National Law of Education that launching a second wave of reforms, which stipulated 180 compulsory days of classes, a transformation of teacher education, a plan for adult literacy, a minimum of six percent GDP expenditure on education, and new measures to promote technical and vocational education.

At the same time, two major changes from the first wave of reforms remained. First, schools remain administrated and overseen by provincial governments. Second, the introduction of assessments is still an important component of the education system and has seen a permanent increase in its budget.

The implementation of the monitoring and evaluation system aimed at regularly assessing fundamental aspects of education has helped to identify serious problems in internal efficiency and quality and with students’ academic achievement. As a result, the national government has designed standardized national assessment tests, both for primary and secondary levels. Although we had some idea about the real conditions of the system, this new strategy gives us objective data about which are the most serious problems. PISA, TIMSS, and SERCE (which is regional) also inform our system.

Today, Argentina is entering a third wave of reforms aimed at achieving inclusion and
social justice through two universal programs. First, the Universal Benefit per Child program aims to diminish social exclusion by giving a small allowance to families in compensation for sending their children to school and making them have the required vaccines and health control. Beyond the specific monetary contribution, this program helps to redefine the relationship between school and families. In fact, the benefit has contributed to an increase in the enrollment rates in all provinces.

The other central educational policy being undertaken is the implementation of the national program, Conectar Igualdad (Connecting Equity), a 1 to 1 model, which has just delivered Netbooks to one million students. Aimed at achieving digital inclusion, the program expects to reach three million students in the whole country by the end of 2012.

How are student assessments and school evaluation data used to improve practice?

We have not been able to meaningfully use the information we are collecting. Although the National Assessment Process is supposed to produce systematic, valid, and trustworthy information about students’ academic achievement, the fact is that very little is captured by schools to improve their practices.

One of the main reasons is the current disclosure policy. In the 1990s, test results were issued to press and to schools, together with recommendations about how to deal with the most frequent mistakes found. Some rankings were published, based on the hypothesis that certain accountability was needed in order to make “the worst schools” publicly responsible for the outcomes they produced and also to reward “the best schools” (which, of course, had many problems, the most obvious one being that the study was carried out on a sample of schools). The disclosure policy changed with the 2006 law, which forbade the dissemination of results by school, so the schools do not receive information about their performance (not even privately) and, therefore, cannot use this data to improve.

Another drawback is the existing doubts about the assessment’s reliability, since many studies started to find technical deficiencies and limitations. On one side, there has been a certain lack of knowledge about how to interpret its results under the assessment approach upon which the evaluation tools were designed. On the other side, results turned to be not comparable across time due to some methodological problems during different stages in the construction of the tool. Not even the State bureaucracy uses the data that is produced, even the one produced under the framework of international tests (such as PISA). Overall, we cannot say there is a real impact of national and international assessment inside the schools.

Something a bit different happens with data on a school level. In my experience as director of the program Escuelas del Bicentenario (Bicentenary Schools), we have been working hard to train principals and supervisors across the country to accurately collect data and make a diagnosis of their own situation, mainly in terms of internal efficiency and students’ academic achievement. Our goal in this sense it to let them be used to permanently diagnose their situation, build a strategic plan setting goals and specific actions to achieve them, and systematically monitor and evaluate it. We also need to train principals, schools, and even public officials to consider internal efficiency and academic achievement indicators altogether. A good school has both good internal efficiency rates and high
academic performance. In the past, both indicators used to be analyzed separately, which meant that some schools could have a small group of high achieving students while also have high repetition and dropouts. Since we now know that all children can learn, we should be expecting to find schools where repetition and dropout rates are low, and academic achievement is high for everyone.

**What do you believe are the fundamental ingredients for a meaningful macro-level educational change in Argentina?**

I think a critical factor for assuring educational change is developing and maintaining State policies in the long run. In Argentina, we are used to starting all over again with each new government, disregarding previous choices and lessons. These frequent changes only erode the base of legitimacy each decision must have while not giving the opportunity for significant construction. We have a number of promising initiatives, including a ten-year-plan in education driven by the Organization of Iberoamerican States and constructed by dozens of social organizations and State agencies, and a similar plan in the province of Cordoba, one of the largest in the country, also built on the consensus of social organizations, political parties, academic institutions, and the State.

**Second, to uphold a minimum investment in education of six percent GDP, as it was established in the Ley de Financiamiento Educativo (Law of Educational Funding). Its sanction demonstrates the power a law can have in shaping reality, since we were able to reach the stipulated goal.**

**Third, undoubtedly, to maintain the Universal Benefit per Child, which guarantees social security for all children with unemployed or informally-employed parents. So far, it has demonstrated excellent results.**

Fourth, to double efforts in stimulating and collaborating with teachers. Top-down approaches have not proved successful. Policy-makers need to believe that teachers are the main character in this play, and we have to trust them, and thus, to trust bottom-up initiatives.

Finally, it is important to permanently assess processes and goals, and use the information evaluations provide to make informed policy decisions. Much has been done to build a monitoring and evaluation system, but more should be done to make it work properly.

**What do you see as one of or the most pressing issue related to educational change today?**

I strongly believe that guaranteeing educational justice is our most pressing issue, which is linked to improving the quality of the whole education system. We need to break the social determinism of learning achievement. Today, we all know that poor children in poor schools tend to underperform while rich children attending rich schools tend to overperform.

Therefore, we need to move forward to the implementation of key policies that have proven to be effective. Our children only have four hours of class in a day. As more hours at school are associated with better achievement, especially for those children whose cultural capital is very low at home, we have to go to double-shift schools both in primary and secondary levels. If we ideally fulfill the 180 compulsory days of classes as it is established by the law, we will be having only 720 hours of class in a year, while the UNESCO recommends a minimum of
between 850 and 1000. We have a very significant deficiency here.

We also know that chances of success are increased the sooner we start. It is very difficult to wipe out the long lasting consequences in a child who at five or six has still not received enough care and stimuli. We need to ensure universal early childhood education for all children since they are 45 days old, and the State has to work specially for those children whose mothers need to work and who do not have enough supplementary resources.

Achieving digital inclusion is not less important in this knowledge-intense era, where a person who is not digitally literate is out of the system. If a child or a young person has not effectively accessed a computer and Internet, he or she cannot understand and manage modern society’s codes, therefore, remains excluded. Equipping schools with the best technology and delivering Netbooks to students seems to be necessary for narrowing the gap.

Promoting instructional leadership and empowering principals at schools is also very important. We now know that all children can learn, and that schools where principals and teachers are aware of that have better outcomes than those where principals and teachers are not confident about their own and their students’ capacity. Changing these perceptions is a huge challenge. There are remarkable cases of schools whose students have good performances, despite the contextual limitations they may have. Although it is State’s responsibility to equip schools and to provide good opportunities to families, it is important to know that there is still room for improvement.

Finally, for all students to learn more, we need teachers teaching better. It is very important to advance merit-based opportunities for growth in their career. It is fundamental to create different stages in the teacher career path, without that necessarily implying that he or she has to end up being a principal.

In the end, it is paramount to allocate more resources to the most disadvantaged groups, and for that we need to ameliorate the production and distribution of resources in the country.

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