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EDUCATIONAL POLICY MAKING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN ARGENTINA.

PEDAGOGICAL CONTINUITY IN UNEQUAL CONTEXTS

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RÉSUMÉ

Pendant la pandémie de COVID 19 en Argentine, la fermeture massive des établissements scolaires et les stratégies dirigées à formuler une continuité pédagogique à travers de l'école à distance, ont dû faire face à un défi majeur : l'inégalité sociale. Cet article analyse les décisions en matière de politique éducative, tant au niveau national comme dans la province de Buenos Aires (le territoire avec la population la plus nombreuse d'Argentine), qui se sont centrées sur l'utilisation des réseaux numériques pour assurer le fonctionnement de l'école à distance. Ces politiques et ces pratiques sont la clé d'accès pour repenser, d'un point de vue pédagogique, les défis d'intégration des technologies et des réseaux numériques dans les écoles contemporaines.

MOTS CLÉS

École à distance – Réseaux numériques – Inégalités – Pédagogies numériques

ABSTRACT

The mass closure of schools and the strategies to formulate a pedagogical continuity throughout remote schooling during the COVID-19 crisis in Argentina faced a major challenge: inequality. This paper analyses the educational policy decisions regarding digital media for developing remote schooling at the national level and for the Province of Buenos Aires, the largest and most populated in the country. Policies and practices that unfolded allow to rethink ICT integration in schools from a pedagogical perspective.

KEYWORDS

Remote Schooling – Digital Media – Inequalities – Digital pedagogies

Introduction

As in many other countries, in Argentina the strategies for pedagogical continuity during the COVID-19 crisis faced a major challenge : inequality. Access to digital technologies is uneven, not only because of the available hardware (computers, laptops, tablets, mobile phones), but also because of the quality of connectivity, which in some areas might not exist. With the goal of reaching a population crossed by inequalities, the design, implementation and monitoring of programs for pedagogical continuity included uses of old and new media: WhatsApp and social media, printed booklets, and audio-visual productions for daily programming of public TV and radio.

Moreover, the Covid-19 forced the educational sector to re-think its practices regarding digital media and technologies in education. In Argentina, ICT integration into school and teaching practices had been a priority of educational policies since 2010, but the pandemic posed new challenges : What was possible in an unequal context? With which devices and with what pedagogical goals and strategies could schools continue to operate? What could be organized under extreme duress and to respond to immediate needs?

This article analyzes the educational policy decisions regarding digital media for developing remote schooling at the national level and for the Province of Buenos Aires, the largest and most populated in the country. It is based on an exploratory inquiry that reviewed public policy documents and interviewed policy officers at the national and local level[1], focusing on how inequality was taken into account in the actions and strategies for remote schooling during the COVID-19 lockdown and particularly in teacher education.

First, the article reviews national policies for pedagogical continuity and how they addressed the disparities in unequal contexts ; then it

1 In the research, we made five interviews to key national and local policy officers between May and August 2020. These key informants included the head of ICT educational policy at the national level and the Director of the public Children's TV Channel, which developed the audiovisual programming for supporting remote schooling ; and at the level of the Province of Buenos Aires, we talked to the head of educational technology, the director of in-service teacher education, and the director of higher education.

explores the case of these policies implemented in the territory of the Province of Buenos Aires (PBA). It specifically analyses a program that organized a close support system for marginalized students through teacher education institutions. Finally, it offers some concluding remarks that seek to nurture the discussions about ICT and digital media uses in teaching and teacher education[2] based on what was learned during the pandemic.

The local context : political changes and educational shifts

The research and analysis of educational policies that intended to face the global COVID-19 pandemic need to consider the conditions of each national educational system and how the policies and actions put into play produce specific effects. In Argentina, these conditions are intimately linked to its recent political and economic history, in which instabilities and crisis have been frequent.

Argentina began the 21st century amidst a deep crisis that ended with a total collapse in December 2001. After a transitional period, in 2003 Néstor Kirchner was elected president, opening a phase of economic recovery and relative institutional stability[3]. Kirchner led a government with a pro-equity orientation that denounced the dominant neo liberal consensus of the 1990s, with a strong alliance with similar governments in the Latin American region and the reinstatement of the state as the key actor for reducing inequalities (Feldfeber and Gluz, 2011).

In the educational field, these decades implied significant discursive and policy shifts. Between 2003 and 2015, years in which Néstor and Cristina Kirchner were presidents, national educational policies pivoted around a discourse that performed a metonymy between equality and inclusion, asserting education as a social right, the key role of teaching and teachers, an emphasis on a common culture without overlooking diversity, and the centrality of the state in educational policies and administration (Southwell, 2018 ; Vassiliades, 2014). The

2 In Argentina, pre-service teacher education is provided in two different institutions : the Institutes for Higher Education (ISFD) and, with a smaller scope and reach, universities.

3 In her article about the different perspectives that have analyzed the 2001 crisis, Moreira (2019) remarks that there is a scholarly consensus in placing 2003 and the first mandate of President Kirchner as the end of the crisis.

pinnacle of this trend was the National Education Law 26.206, passed in 2006.

By late 2015, the election of Mauricio Macri started a new cycle of neoliberalism (Vommaro, 2017). The focus of educational discourses shifted towards concepts of quality (as opposed to inclusion); teaching as a process that can be measured according to efficacy standards; and equality as an opportunity for meritocratic competence. The official policies welcomed market forces in areas that were previously red taped for the private sector and promoted a systematically negative perception of teachers and their education.

A new economic and political crisis brought a new coalition government in December 2019. When the pandemic exploded, the new administration was just beginning. It aimed to put an end to neoliberal policies, disinvestment, and a growing external debt, and in education it sought to put the notion of rights and social justice at the core of a new cycle of policies. Before the pandemic, ICT programs were conceived as part of egalitarian policies, both in terms of access to connectivity and hardware and of expanding teacher education and teaching materials to make better use of digital media in schools. These ideas would become the axis of educational policies when the pandemic reached Argentina.

Pandemic policies : Facing an extraordinary context

The policies to prevent and control COVID-19 in Argentina implied a series of economic and social restrains that had a strong impact in everyday lives, in poverty rates and in health, care and education systems (Kessler & Benza, 2021). Social isolation (Aislamiento Social Preventivo Obligatorio) and social distancing (DIstancia Social Preventiva Obligatoria) were the national regulations designed to control the spread of the virus in the territory ; long periods of lockdown and strict measures for public circulation affected institutions and citizens.

At the beginning of March 2020, schools in Argentina were just starting their annual cycle, but two weeks later all schools were closed because of the lockdown decree of ASPO and moved to remote

education. Two weeks after ASPO was made mandatory, the government put in effect national policy guidelines for improving digital access and educational content delivery. Digital media played a central role in this process, but so did public TV and radio, printed booklets, and social media. The main purpose of keeping this diversity of formats and contents was to reach the needs of students and families who had deep unequal conditions and access to technology.

After the winter holidays (at the beginning of August), schools were reopened in rural areas with low percentage of cases, and by the end of the year, as the sanitary situation improved and the spread of the virus declined, there was a progressive reopening of schools for limited periods. These months were devoted to what was called "pedagogical re-connection," focusing on rebuilding the links with school life and school knowledge.

During those months, and without knowing how long the pandemic would last, teachers and principals tried different alternatives to keep on with schooling. In some cases, this meant an abrupt experience of digitalization, and in others, they appealed to other resources to keep a remote connection with the students. Sometimes feeling over demanded, sometimes trying to mirror school practices at a distance, teachers intended to "make school" from their homes (Birgin, 2020).

Pedagogical continuity in Argentina through ICT : Policies and conditions

In Argentina, the debate over whether schools should remain open or close was a heated one and became the center of attention and concern of media, officers, and families. It was common to read on the media information regarding decisions and debates around schooling in different countries and their sanitary situations. As it was not possible to open school buildings, pedagogical continuity became closely associated with online digital platforms.

The digitalization of education as an effect of the pandemic is a trend that is being studied in several contexts. In most countries of the world, pandemic pedagogies (Williamson et al, 2020) saw a growth in the intervention of ed-tech enterprises that develop educational tools and contents from the perspective of bringing technological solutions to

educational problems (Morozov, 2014). This led to an increased datafication, a process of transforming diverse processes, qualities, actions, and phenomena into forms that are machine-readable by digital technologies (Kitchin 2014). Datafication in education was already present in educational policies and debates, mostly associated with AI, platforms and digital sensors uses in education (Selwyn, 2019 ; Williamson, 2017).

These ed tech corporations are becoming key actors in the platformization of education, a process that José van Dijck and other colleagues describe in the following terms :

> [P]owered by the Big Five tech companies, platforms are pushing a new concept of learning that uproots or bypasses the values that are fundamental to publicly funded education : Bildung, a knowledge-based curriculum, autonomy for teachers, collective affordability, and education as a vehicle for socioeconomic equality. (Van Dijck et al, 2018, p.118)

Perhaps what is distinctive about Argentina's educational technology policies is the low weight of these tech corporations in public decisions. This can be seen in what was the flagship program of the Argentinean government, Conectar Igualdad (CI). Launched in 2010 and running until 2015, the program promoted a one-laptop-per-child model for secondary school and distributed 5 million netbooks for students and teachers. It included a large teacher education program and a plan for producing digital content. Its main focus was secondary schooling, compulsory since 2006, with the goal of social inclusion and educational improvement. Its discursive focus was to promote equality and social justice, but also strengthen public schools and produce a pedagogical and cultural renewal (Dussel, 2014).

The implementation of CI involved a novel inter institutional articulation within the national educational system. Managed by the Ministry of Education and other public agencies[4], it also included societal actors, national universities that monitored implementation, and local technological enterprises. The program was closely

4 The complexities of the Program because of its reach and scale required a combined management that involved the National Ministry of Education, the Presidential Office, the National Administration of Social Security, the Chief of Cabinet Office and the Ministry of Federal Planning and Public investment. (Decree 459/10)

monitored, and different studies showed an egalitarian impact, improving access to ICT and a sense of entitlement in different social groups (Benitez Larghi, Lemus & Welschinger Lascano, 2014 ; Kliksberg & Novacovsky, 2015). Other studies pointed out that CI was successful in dimensions such as teacher education, hardware provision and a massive production of educational resources (Vacchieri, 2013).

CI was eventually dismantled after the change in government in December 2015. The new focus of the ICT educational policies became digital competencies and robotics. The office in charge of ICT policies for education was no longer the Ministry of Education but the Secretary of Educational Innovation and Quality. In 2018 the government issued a curricular syllabus on digital education, programming and robotics. It also launched the plan Schools of the Future, in which local and foreign tech enterprises were called to provide technical solutions to teaching problems (Rodríguez, 2017).

By the beginning of 2020, the debates on ICT in education were mostly focused on a possible relaunch of CI. This relaunching would extend connectivity and access to equipment, as well as address contemporary challenges such as digital sovereignty, mobile phones, digital literacy as a citizen's right, teacher education, a reconfiguration of the role of families and renewed policy monitoring and evaluation (Welschinger & Benítez Larghi, 2020).

However, the pandemic and the social isolation decreed since March 2020 opened a new chapter regarding ICT educational policies and practices in Argentina. Multiple uses of diverse platforms rapidly extended, including social media, free but private educational platforms such as Google Classroom, and public platforms specifically developed for the educational sector. It was clear that there were deep inequalities in access and use conditions, but teachers and schools were highly motivated to maintain remote teaching. According to some studies, pre-existent inequalities in education worsened because of the pandemic, most of all inequality in connectivity and access to computers, and in the possibilities of families to support their children's education (Kessler and Benza, 2020).

Dealing with this unequal map was a challenge for national and provincial policies, which in the federal structure of the Argentinean

educational system are responsible for regulating and administering schools[5]. In the next section, we describe the main educational policies developed by the national state to face the pandemic, which involved digital media and technologies as well as public TV and radio.

Media and digital technology for remote schooling -and beyond

Educational policies during the pandemic in Argentina were at first and foremost emergency policies, developed under high uncertainty about how long the social isolation and the closure of school buildings would last. The policies sought to design political instruments for addressing education inequalities. How to plan school continuity when computers or Internet connectivity were not available? Which contents should be privileged, and through which media? What kind of virtualization was possible when quality access is not guaranteed? In this section, we explore these questions by analyzing policy documents and interviews with public officers involved in policy making.

At first, policy strategies focused on the production of educational resources under the umbrella of a broad program called "Seguimos Educando" (We keep on educating). The program included printed booklets that were distributed in the whole country, in many cases throughout a network of solidarity of shops, neighbors, and social organizations[6]. These booklets proposed a weekly plan of contents, which selected curriculum priorities. Besides being physically distributed throughout the country, these materials were made available online and were shared through social media. The National

5 Since 1993, the administration of secondary and tertiary schools was transferred to provinces, which became responsible for their management and funding (primary schools were already under provincial administration since 1978). As Feldfeber (2003) points out, decentralizing policies and the managerial transfer were rooted in a fiscal policy that sought the reduction of public expenditure and the delegation of responsibilities of the national state to the provinces.

6 In the first three months (March – May 2020), social isolation and lockdown were very strict in the whole country, and only essential shops as pharmacies, supermarkets and grocery stores remained open.

Ministry of Education set up a WhatsApp account to chat with teachers and school principals about the booklets.

According to a national survey by the National Ministry and UNICEF during the isolation time, vulnerable households reported a high use of booklets (41%), while in less vulnerable households its report declined (18%). 91% of households that used booklets had a very positive valuation about them (ME-UNICEF, 2020).

"Seguimos Educando" was also deployed throughout public TV and radio, which devoted morning and afternoon strips to educational programming. With a hybrid design, TV hosts and teachers led a 6 hour daily live TV show, from Monday to Friday, which was organized according to education levels (preschool, primary, secondary). The programs simulated a classroom lesson, and approached curricular content using short films, documentaries, and shows from public TV channels such as Encuentro and PakaPaka[7]. The production did not follow the steps of tele-school or radio-school, as the experiences in some rural areas in Latin America where lessons are prerecorded and broadcasted, but sought to explore school contents in a TV or radio format, using the aesthetics and dynamics of those media (Serra, 2020).

This case is particularly interesting because it involved designing a pedagogical policy using media to achieve egalitarian goals. The programs were produced by a team that combined people from the National Ministry of Education and from the Public Media System. In an interview, the officer in charge of "Seguimos Educando" says :

> Educational TV showed in 2020 that it is alive and capable of quickly responding to a complex and unprecedented demand. This happened in Argentina and also in other Latin American countries. In deeply unequal contexts, of all the resources that were enabled, I think TV had and still has a great power, because it accompanies children and young students in their

7 The public channels Encuentro and Pakapaka were created in 2007 and 2010. Both channels were designed and developed by the National Ministry of Education in teams that combined educators and TV and artistic producers. A new TV menu was offered, intending to achieve educational and cultural goals but also trying to reach specific audiences. Programming was accompanied by a proposal for classroom work. Both channels gained prestige and developed a way of producing TV committed with showing and narrating diversity, respect for human rights and justice, while opening a work dynamic that entailed co-productions, fostering small production companies. In December 2016, Encuentro and Pakapaka were transferred to the public Media Secretariat (Smerling, 2015).

routines, but also in their emotions, anxieties, fears, and questionings daily. The TV brought words and images to curricular contents, and also presented teachers that, along with TV hosts, spoke to the children every day at the same time while they were confined at home. These TV programming reinstated something of the school routine in the domestic space.

The TV version of "Seguimos Educando" combined a way of producing educational TV previously and successfully explored at Encuentro and Pakapaka public channels, but this time it sought to respond to the urgent need to offer remote education for children in their homes. This exceptional time opens new questions about the possibilities and limits of educational TV (Serra, 2020), and at the same time it reaffirms the key role of public media, its commitment to pluralism, and its content production strategy regulated above all by public interest (Becerra and Waisbord, 2015).

Plan Federal Plan Juana Manso : Towards an integral digital educational policy

As it has already been said, the remote educational experiences during the 2020 pandemic made the inequalities in terms of access and use of digital technologies immediately visible. Even if digital inclusion was already a policy priority in pre pandemic times, the Covid-19 crisis rushed the design of a plan for the short, medium, and long term that would be able to address the emergency context.

Four months after the pandemic began, in June 2020, there was a national assessment of the process of pedagogical continuity by the Ministry of Education and UNICEF Argentina. The survey covered a large number of teachers (n=21471), principals (n=5387) and households (n=2568). The report of this survey shows significant findings. On the one hand, 95% of households reported that they had been in contact with the school and received educational materials during the social isolation measures.

The access to different types of media conditioned the continuity of schooling. Less than half of the households had good quality broadband connectivity. The mobile phone was the only device for connecting to the Internet in 27% of the households, and 3% did not have any kind of

connectivity. In 47% of households there was a computer for educational purposes, but the availability of connectivity and devices in those households in which kids attend private schools doubled those of public school (ME – UNICEF, 2020).

Principals, teachers and families reported that the most frequent device to maintain pedagogical continuity was the mobile phone[8]. In preschool and primary schools, mobile phones were mostly used to send messages (85%); in secondary schools, besides instant messaging platforms, there was also an extended use of e-mails, which might be related to a more autonomous use of devices. For a third of the teachers in the three school levels, digital platforms and video conference software were the most used tools, though the lack of devices and connectivity in the households limited those uses.

The June 2020 report points to another interesting trend : while in private schools, synchronic meetings were frequent, in many cases mirroring the regular school schedule, the more vulnerable groups — mainly attending public schools— were not able to meet synchronically and organized other strategies such as establishing schedules for chatting through WhatsApp and uploading tasks and photos of the school notebook. In many households the only device available was a shared mobile phone, and the adult figure had to mediate between teachers and kids. These practices triggered collaborative work strategies and showed a strong alliance between families and teachers during isolation.

The mapping of digital inequalities nurtured the launch of the Federal Plan Juana Manso[9] (PFJM) in August 2020. The plan brought together the national administration and the ministries of the 24 Argentinian provinces. Its logo links ICT with egalitarian purposes : "Technology at the service of a quality and inclusive education," in a similar vein that Conectar Igualdad used to do, conveying a narrative of change in which

8 According to the regulatory authority, mobile phones have a penetration of 120%, being one of the highest in Latin America (ENACOM, 2020).

9 Its name pays an homage to Juana Manso, an educator whose ideas about education and feminism contributed greatly to the expansion of schooling in Argentina, Uruguay, and Brazil in the second half of the 19th century.

ICT was expected to improve educational equality (Dussel, Ferrante, Sefton Green, 2013).

The Juana Manso Plan is structured around four key objectives : connectivity and hardware provision ; an educational platform with virtual classrooms and a repository of open educational resources ; teacher education programs ; and a data warehouse that enables traceability of the interactions within the program's platforms. It entails the delivery of a computer for every student of Grade 10 of compulsory education (upper secondary), and a connectivity plan for all public schools in the country that involves the telecommunications public enterprise ARSAT, the telecommunications regulatory authority ENACOM[10], and the Federal Network of Optical Fibre (REFEFO)[11].

In the interview conducted with the head of the Plan, she compared the new program Juana Manso with the former experience of Conectar Igualdad :

> There is a key fact that connects PFJM with CI: the State is again going to distribute computers to secondary school students. The computers belong to the students, it is their right and it is an inclusive policy. We learned from CI that in many households, the computer provided by the program was the first computer in their homes. One difference is that we no longer talk about a one-to-one model in the classroom, but instead seek models of high technological availability in the classroom. Back in 2010, it was thought that kids would be all the time connected with their computers and that didn´t happen anywhere and we've learned it is somehow pointless. What makes sense nowadays is that they can use their computer when they need it.

If Conectar Igualdad in 2010 situated the state as the main actor in ICT access policies, assuming that digital inclusion is a right and that the educational system is the space to make that right happen (Dussel, 2014), the Juana Manso program builds upon these ideas while approaching new contemporary dilemmas. Juana Manso brings a new

10 ENACOM is the state regulatory authority in charge of leading the process of technological convergence and create market conditions to guarantee access to the Internet, land and mobile phone, radio and TV. See : www.enacom.gob.ar

11 The Federal Network of Fiber Optics was created in 2010 as part of the larger Plan Argentina Conectada with the main goal of connecting public institutions through fiber optics services and reducing the digital gap among regions. See : https://www.argentina.gob.ar/jefatura/innovacion-publica/ ssetic/conectar/refefo/que-es-la-red-federal-de-fibra-optica

dimension into ICT policies related to data management, with implications on regulation, privacy, access, and uses that need to be carefully weighed. It more clearly embraces free software, developing a campus with virtual classrooms in Moodle, the production of open resources and the creation of a repository of educational data supported by a public infrastructure. The officer said :

> In this network, each province offers and takes resources. It works as some sort of Napster[12]. Resources are shared once they are validated by the local authorities. The goal is to create a national repository, a collaborative network of resources produced by teachers nationwide.

The plan operates under the concept of digital sovereignty, a powerful term in the political discourse that aims to reinstate the nation state, including national economy and national citizens, as relevant categories in the global governance of digital infrastructures and in the development of digital technologies (Pohle and Thiel, 2020).

Finally, a core objective of the new Plan is teacher education, bringing to the fore highly relevant questions for the experience developed during the pandemic : What should a teacher know about digital technologies and media? If diverse apps, resources, sites, and contents are being used, can pedagogies remain as their main drive? In the next section, we will briefly explore some of the experience developed in the province of Buenos Aires (PBA). This experience makes it visible that technologies and teacher's knowledge are deeply connected, and that policy strategies need to take these connections into account.

A closer look at pandemic pedagogies : The case of Buenos Aires

The PBA is the largest district in the country and the second biggest educational system in Latin America, where 37% of students of the whole country are situated (ME, 2018). It is organized in 135 districts distributed in more than 304,000 km², with a population of 17,500,000

12 Napster was a platform to share music using peer to peer (P2P) technologies that was launched in 1999 by Sean Parker and Shawn Fanning. It radically changed the way in which music was shared in the Internet. It faced a big trial in 2001 because of copyright violation, and was eventually transformed into a paid platform. One key aspect about Napster is that it showed the efficacy of P2P technologies and led the way for the development of software for content sharing.

inhabitants (Dirección Provincial de Estadística, 2020). 61% of those total lives in the suburban area of Great Buenos Aires (GBA), also known as "conurbano bonaerense" (Buenos Aires outskirts). Given its populational concentration, GBA is a key political territory, and has a periphery dynamic (Gorelik, 2015) that is closely linked to the city of Buenos Aires, which is autonomous from the province. The province has inequality levels higher than the national average, and is home both to families in extreme poverty and to the wealthiest landowners in the country (CEPAL, 2019). The Great Buenos Aires concentrates half of the students and teachers in the province.

In Argentina, provincial government are direct administrators of schools, and their decisions have direct impact in schools and teachers' work, not only through curriculum designs but also through socio-communitarian policies that provide financial support and food and other resources through the schools. This was evident, for example, when some schools and their principals oversaw food distribution during the social isolation ; this delivery continued to take place even if the school buildings were closed, sometimes every two weeks. The province of Buenos Aires also designed programs for pedagogical reconnection, explored later in this article, and an ICT plan that addressed the emergency situation.

The interruption of "*educación presencial*" (education in-presence, or physical co-presence in schools) brought what the head of education technology in PBA called as a paradigmatic breakdown :

> In only 15 days, we achieved a massive response to what was our main concern. Teachers who hadn't used technologies, because they didn´t want to or they didn´t know how to, started using them. The first goal of our administration was soon overcome. Suddenly, the scene was massive ICT for teaching, and it was also conceived as a right. These are two categories that frame our work, in which the state is the key actor to guarantee better conditions for teaching that can lead to more possibilities for learning. We

planned for the short term the website "Continuemos educando" (We shall continue teaching), developed in Moodle for the whole province.

The provincial officers produced immediate interventions in teacher education[13] in order to move it to virtual platforms. During the lockdown, the use of digital campuses tripled in preservice teacher education, and there was an array of institutional projects to build affiliation of the students towards their institutions (Coulon 1997). The head of teacher education of the province said :

> For the first time in the history of the province, almost 50,000 students began their studies to become teachers without any contact with their institution's building. They did not choose to pursue an online course, but they had to do it anyway. Our main task was to welcome them, build a sense of institutional and academic belonging in a virtual mode, even if they hadn't entered the building or met their teachers or their classmates.

The offer for teacher education was entirely renewed, and it was conceived as a space for supporting schools and building collective knowledge for the unprecedented situation of teaching with no school buildings. While the previous administration privileged curricular content that conceived ICT as mere tools, offering courses on, for example, how to use the mobile phone for teaching, how to edit a video, or how to deal with emotions, among other topics, the new policy strategies reoriented these courses around broader pedagogical criteria : teaching in virtual environments, supporting teachers, and attending the diversity of experiences in schools.

The Direction of Teacher Education offered a course, *La continuidad pedagógica en la emergencia* (Pedagogical continuity in the emergency), that had three cohorts in 2020 and reached 45,000 teachers and principals from throughout the province. This course triggered a pedagogical discussion about how to teach in virtual environments

13 In PBA, teacher education is organized around two main areas : preservice or basic, and in-service or continuing education. Preservice education is provided by the institutes of teacher education (ISFD), and continuing education by the Centros de Información e Investigación Educativa (CIIEs). Both depend on and are regulated by the province.

when access and connectivity are not available for all students. The head of the Direction explained :

> We produced a proposal that put together issues about schools, cultures, and literacies in the contemporary world, discussing what distant teaching implies beyond the campus or the platforms. Some digital and analog practices like the uses of WhatsApp, Instagram, local radios, and TV emerged and were also included in the proposal. The concrete situations that school faced during the pandemic were turned into case studies, and they were a stimulus for approaching pedagogical continuity from different perspectives.

These pedagogical decisions were paralleled by design decisions, given that platforms can shape uses and promote or limit practices (Gillespie, 2010). Its platform was developed on a haste and took into consideration the limitations of connectivity and access, and how to respond to the needs of teachers. The head of educational technology explains :

> The contents were adapted to the users' profiles, considering that almost 80% of the users access platforms through their mobile phones. The team designed first and foremost for mobile phone usage. You can develop very nice sites, but they are inadequate for mobile phones and hence useless. This is part of accepting the actual conditions in which the emergency unfolded.

It is noticeable that the provincial educational authorities developed a key telecommunication policy that eventually became national : through an agreement with telecom companies, it was arranged that the navigation in educational sites (.edu) would not consume data, ensuring access to educational resources and contents.

The head of in-service teacher education also noticed how inequalities were built into teaching proposals. The continuing educational centers of PBA (CIIE, see note 16) offered more courses on the uses of social media for educational purposes and developed new networks to share experiences and resources. These virtual networks contributed to the communication of teachers that live far away but share common needs, something that has also been noticed in pre-pandemic research (Lechón Gómez & Ramos Muñoz, 2019).

The design of the platform and of specific courses to tackle the needs of remote education helped define a digital territory in the already

complex map of the province and were important supports for the pedagogical continuity sought for by national policies. But besides virtual support for teachers, there were also other programs that aimed at reaching students who could not keep up with school during the pandemic.

By the second semester of 2020, it became evident that approximately 10% of children and young students were disconnected from their teachers and schools during the lockdown. In order to address this problem, the provincial education administration launched the program *Acompañamiento a las Trayectorias y Revinculación (ATR)* [Supporting School Trajectories and Re-connection or Re-Bonding], which intended to reach 279,000 kindergarten, primary and secondary school students who could not keep up with schooling for diverse reasons.

According to data gathered by the administration of the program, the disconnection was often due to the lack of equipment and/or connectivity, but also because of the absence of adults that could help with homework or the domestic chores or tasks that many young students performed, i.e. taking care of younger siblings or preparing meals.

The ATR program's main goal was to (re)build the affective and intellectual bonding between these students and schools. Through visits to students' homes and in face-to-face meetings, the program proposed different activities, some of which were designed by their teachers and others were created by the program. The agents of the program were advanced students from teacher education institutions, who received a scholarship and worked with students that were geographically close to their own homes, something critical in the context of social isolation or distancing, which made mobilization difficult. With a stronghold on solidarity, the program also received resources from provincial technical schools, where first-care kits with masks, alcohol, and tissues were produced, seeking to guarantee safe encounters between the students and the program's agents. The program also developed

pedagogical guidelines for kindergarten, primary and secondary schools oriented to intensify teaching.

ATR continues during the austral summer of 2021-2022 (December to March), aiming to intensify teaching, fostering a better bond between families and schools and, eventually, bringing more students back to in presence school. According with the Observatorio del Regreso Presencial a las Aulas (Observatory of the in presence return to classrooms) established by the Federal Council of Education (CFE 386/2021), by September 2021, 200.133 students of the Province of Buenos Aires never returned to in presence schools, 5% of the total of students in the province and representing the 27.5% of the total of students that didn´t return to schools nationwide[14].

Concluding remarks : New questions for the yet to come

As in most countries, the covid-19 pandemic in Argentina brought great challenges to educational policies. In a country where inequalities were already severe, the situation worsened with the health emergency. The crisis produced fears, anxieties, and human losses, and will have long-term effects both at the institutional and the subjective level.

Schools were shaken by the pandemic but, as in the past, they played a key role in building some sort of social thread during the times of mandatory isolation or lockdown. From the distribution of photocopies to storytelling through WhatsApp, using mobile phones, netbooks, zooms, TV programs, booklets, and food supplies, multiple strategies were put into play to maintain the bonding and connections to schools.

As regards ICT, the pandemic makes visible that technologies go beyond access and connectivity. From the virtual school to the school by other means or in other formats, educational policies during the pandemic showed their flexibility to design and maintain a multiple approach including ICT, digital media and "traditional" media as TV and radio to have remote education in an unequal context. In this process, public policies play a significant role as propellers of digital sovereignty, fostering and funding the development of platforms and

14 Observatorio del Regreso Presencial a las Aulas, Situation Report Number 8, September 2021, CFE. Available at http://www.bnm.me.gov.ar/giga1/documentos/EL007622.pdf

resources that promote the collective production of knowledge among teachers, and creating pedagogical space for meeting teachers and students where they were. The ICT educational policies intended to set a path to be followed in the post pandemic, both in terms of access and rights and of broader debates on data and national sovereignty.

In that respect, it can be said that, even if the public policies analyzed here were marked by emergency and immediacy, they also convey a political view about schools, cultural transmission, sovereignty and equality that may extend beyond the pandemic. While the post pandemic world might take different shapes, there might be some deep changes already in course regarding education and ICT uses. The extended and expanded virtuality demands new and more egalitarian conditions for access and participation, but as the pandemic has shown, equality goes beyond material devices. Teacher education and curriculum documents need to stress that digital tools and devices should be an object of knowledge at schools (and not just tools). It is clear by now that digital culture is part of our common world and it has to be included in the conversations that schools organize with the new generations (Simons and Masschelein, 2014), not as a magical solution but as part of the questions about the futures yet to come.

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