

## Secondary School in Contexts of Inequality: Small-scale Policies and Teacher Precariousness

### Secondary School in Contexts of Inequality: Small-scale Policies and Teacher Precariousness

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#### RESUMEN:

En Argentina, la educación secundaria se volvió obligatoria con la Ley de Educación Nacional en 2006. Desde entonces, se impulsaron numerosas políticas para garantizarla. Este artículo resulta de una investigación que se inscribe en la perspectiva de trayectorias de políticas, cuyo objetivo fue estudiar los modos de construcción y desarrollo de estas políticas, analizando tanto su formulación desde el Estado como su “puesta en acto” en las escuelas. La investigación, de corte cualitativo, fue un estudio de caso instrumental sobre el Programa Escuelas Promotoras (Provincia de Buenos Aires, 2018-2021). Combinó diferentes técnicas de obtención de datos: análisis documental y entrevistas en profundidad a informantes claves del gobierno y de escuelas. Los resultados muestran los límites de las políticas de baja escala, que desarrollan sus acciones en condiciones precarias y con dificultades vinculadas a las formas en que se organiza el trabajo y la contratación de docentes en la escuela secundaria. La producción de conocimiento sobre las formas de construcción e implementación de las políticas para este nivel resulta de relevancia para comprender las dificultades que se observan para garantizar el derecho a la educación secundaria a pesar de las múltiples iniciativas impulsadas desde la sanción de la obligatoriedad.

#### KEYWORDS:

School  
Teacher  
Policy  
Inequality  
Effectiveness

#### ABSTRACT:

In Argentina, secondary education became mandatory with the enactment of the National Education Law in 2006. Since then, numerous policies have been promoted to guarantee it. This article results from research within the perspective of “Policy Trajectories”. Its purpose was to contribute to the understanding of the ways in which these policies are constructed and developed, analyzing both its formulation from the State and its enactment at schools. It was qualitative research, with an instrumental case study design – the Promoting Schools Programme, developed in the Province of Buenos Aires (2018- 2021) – and combined different data collection techniques: documentary analysis and in-depth interviews to key informants in the government and in schools. The results show the limits of low-scale policies, which develop their actions based on the work of teachers in conditions of high precariousness and numerous difficulties due to the ways in which work is organized and teachers are hired in secondary schools. The production of knowledge on the forms of construction and implementation of policies is relevant to understanding the difficulties observed in guaranteeing the right to secondary education despite the multiple initiatives promoted since it became mandatory.

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## 1. Introduction

Latin America in the 21st century has been characterised by the heterogeneity of political processes in general and of educational policy orientations and proposals in particular. However, one common theme that was sustained throughout these years at the regional level was the centrality that secondary schooling acquired in public policy agendas (Acosta, 2019; Saforcada and Baichman, 2022). In Argentina, the National Education Law passed in 2006 made the level compulsory and, from that point onwards, numerous national and jurisdictional policies were promoted which, although with dissimilar logics and orientations depending on the different governments, had the common aim of guaranteeing secondary schooling.

In this article we share some results of a research project<sup>1</sup> to study education policies for the secondary level in Argentina. Although the subject has been extensively looked at, the particularity of this proposal is its aim to contribute to the understanding of the ways in which these policies are developed based on the actors and processes of the different scales of implementation, analysing both their formulation by the state and the forms they take in schools from the perspective of teachers. For this, the Promoting Schools Programme (PEP) developed by the Directorate of Secondary Schools in the Province of Buenos Aires (PBA) between 2018 and 2021 was taken as a case study. The PEP was the core policy for the level implemented by the government in charge of the PBA between 2015-2019. This province, in turn, is the largest jurisdiction in the country, with an enrolment of 1,677,473 students and 4,670 institutions at the secondary level.<sup>2</sup>

With this paper, we intend to describe and analyse the proposal of this public policy and its key lines of action, as well as its implementation in the Municipality of Merlo. The case analysis allows us to address some topics that have been recurrent in policies to guarantee compulsory secondary schooling in Argentina over the last two decades and that are present in the PEP. These include the creation of teaching roles to support students' trajectories, innovation in the organisation of teaching practices and the creation of interdisciplinary spaces, among others.

Argentina currently has profound disparities in relation to secondary school. According to available data, only 77% of young people complete secondary school. If we disaggregate by economic level, we find that 90 % of the higher income population completes this level while only 67 % of the lower income population does. That is, a gap of more than 20 points. On the other hand, in families whose adults have less than

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<sup>1</sup> The article is a product of the project "Trajectories and scales of policies for secondary education: a study of the Promoting Schools programme and its implementation in Educational Region No. 8 of the Province of Buenos Aires", under the direction of Fernanda Saforcada, based at the School of Humanities of the Universidad Nacional del Oeste (UNO), programme 2021-2023.

Inputs are also retrieved from two other projects: 1) UBACYT project "Derecho a la educación, escuela secundaria y trabajo docente: un estudio sobre las políticas públicas para el nivel y sus formas de regulación", directed by Fernanda Saforcada and Bárbara Briscioli; based at the Instituto de Ciencias de la Educación de la Universidad de Buenos Aires (IICE-UBA); programme 2018 - 2023; 2) UBACYT project "Políticas públicas y derecho a la educación en la Argentina del siglo XXI. Análisis sobre las trayectorias de las políticas educativas en un país federal", directed by Myriam Feldfeber and Nora Gluz; based at IICE-UBA; programme 2018-2023.

<sup>2</sup> Data from the *Sistema Integrado de Consulta de Datos e Indicadores Educativos SICDIE* of the Ministry of Education of the Nation, for 2022. <https://data.educacion.gob.ar/>

12 years of schooling, only 61 % of their young people complete secondary school, and, more worryingly, this number drops to 5 % in young people who live with adults with less than six years of schooling<sup>3</sup>.

The study of secondary school policies – in particular those aimed at ensuring that the entire population has access to and completes this level of education under equal and quality conditions - is of huge importance in a country marked by profound social inequalities and in which education is one of the vectors for the reproduction of these inequalities, as the foregoing figures evidence.

## 2. Theoretical framework

As noted above, in the 21st century secondary school became a central issue in Argentina. This was also expressed in the academic field, where a vast production on the subject developed from the study of various aspects such as the school format in its organisational and academic aspects (Acosta, 2022; Gutiérrez, 2022; Krichesky, 2014; Southwell, 2011; Terigi, 2008; Tiramonti, 2011); inequalities and inclusion in relation to this educational level (Carlachiani, 2021; Dussel, 2014; Gióvine and Martignoni, 2011; Gluz and Rodríguez Moyano, 2014; Grinberg, 2009; Pinkasz, 2013); student trajectories and the identification of “critical points” in the schooling paths of children and young people to achieve full inclusion (Terigi, 2015; Steinberg, 2014; Briscioli, 2016; Terigi and Briscioli, 2020); among others.

In turn, numerous studies have systematised and analysed secondary school policies since the enactment of compulsory education (Gorostiaga, 2012; Mas Rocha et al., 2012; Miranda, 2013; Schoo, 2013). Within the latter group, it is possible to identify some studies that approached public initiatives from the perspective of “policy trajectories” (Bocchio et al., 2016; Bocchio and Grinberg, 2020; Miranda, 2013; Miranda and Lanfri, 2017), including that of Krichesky et al. (2021), which addresses the same case and arrives at results congruent with our own, which complement each other.

The research and the article are inscribed in this perspective. Making policy trajectories visible makes it possible to identify the different arenas in which the state-defined actions are developed and put into practice, in the different contexts in which policy is implemented, from the governmental context to the school level one.

Ball’s “policy trajectories” perspective is a substantive contribution to this (Ball, 2002; Beech and Meo, 2016; Bocchio and Miranda, 2018; Miranda and Lanfri, 2017), which allows “overcoming linear and simplistic views of ‘implementation’ in which policies are analysed as a finished production of the state that schools either do or do not implement” (Beech and Meo, 2016, p. 3). In particular, consideration of the context of practice and “enactment” proved fertile for the research. As noted by Bocchio et al. (2016), the notion of “enactment” and the context of practice allow us to question educational policies from the standpoint of their effects on educational institutions and their actors:

*... ‘shedding light’ on how reform reaches schools is a way of showing that there is political responsibility for the effects that reforms have on schools.... In other words, the context of practice and the analysis of policy implementation allow for*

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<sup>3</sup> Data for Argentina 2022. SITEAL, IIPE-UNESCO. Consulted on 25 March 2024. <https://siteal.iiep.unesco.org/>

*a political reading of the reform when it leaves the desk and reaches the schools.*  
(p. 17)

In addition, with a particular reference to secondary schools, the research took up the difficulties identified by specialised literature in recent decades. There is a broad consensus in recognising as obstacles a series of arrangements within the organisational pattern of the traditional Argentinean secondary school. According to Terigi (2008), this pattern comprises: 1. a curriculum organised by disciplines, which responds to the division of knowledge of the late 19th century; 2. an organisation of knowledge that corresponds strongly to the training of teachers in very delimited specialities; and 3. the organisation of teaching work by paid time that mirrors the hourly load of the curricula. In secondary education, these three features have become so intertwined that today they form a structure that is difficult to change.

We wish to highlight the third point. The hiring of teachers is organised by hours of actual class time in front of students (not by position), leading to a fragmentation of work in many schools and class groups, and insufficient paid time to devote to other institutional or teaching-related tasks such as planning, student monitoring, correction, activity design, etc. These conditions prevent better monitoring of students and limit teachers' possibilities to make changes in their ways of working or to discuss with peers about teaching or students.

### 3. Methods

As noted in the previous section, the perspective used in the research was that of policy trajectories, on the understanding that policies do not unfold in a vacuum, but that institutions and individuals influence the forms they take. Following Ball (2002, p. 24), "given the constraints, circumstances and practical conditions, translating the crude and abstract simplification of political texts into interactive and sustainable practices involves productive thinking, invention and adaptation". Accordingly, the purpose was both to reconstruct the official policy proposal and to identify and analyse the meanings, conflicts, agreements and translations that are part of the understanding and production of the policy at the different scales, including the school institution.

The research project was designed around a single case study - the Promoting Schools Programme (PEP) - of an instrumental type (Stake, 1998), since the aim was not only to understand the case, but also to produce knowledge about public policies to guarantee compulsory secondary schooling and their implementation in schools.

The research conducted was qualitative, aimed at describing and interpreting the definitions in the educational policies linked to reforms at secondary level, in their different trajectories and contexts. We seek to describe in a dense and complex way the ways in which these policies are defined and developed at various levels of statehood and materialised in schools. According to Hernández Sampieri et al. (2014, p. 80), "descriptive studies seek to specify the properties, characteristics and profiles of (...) the processes (...) under analysis".

From an interpretative perspective, the focus was on understanding and analysing the meanings of these initiatives and the regulations they seek to establish in schools, teachers' work and students' trajectories. This implies considering the processes, the subjects and their practices, and the meanings they give them, as well as making heterogeneities and complexities visible (Achilli, 2010). These theoretical-methodological decisions involve a "back and forth" between theory and empirics; that is, an analytical and interpretative spiral logic (Sirvent, 2006) that, starting from general assumptions, approaches the case in the field and, based on the analysis of the

data obtained, reformulates or complicates the original hypotheses in order to return to the fieldwork.

The design envisaged case studies at different scales or contexts of policy production, in line with the perspective of the policy trajectories. On the one hand, the formulation of policy at provincial level and how it relates to the national context. On the other hand, the implementation in the municipality of Merlo, specifically in two schools in this district, where the “putting into action” of the policy was addressed. These institutions were selected on the basis of the time they have been involved in the case study.

The design combined different data collection techniques: desk research and in-depth interviews with key informants. An exhaustive documentary research and systematisation was conducted at the provincial and national levels, identifying 54 programmatic and legal documents, management reports, resolutions and operational and pedagogical communications for the district and school levels. In addition, 7 cross-curricular or integration projects, 2 report cards and 2 rubrics developed in the framework of the PEP by different teachers from the two selected schools were collected.

In-depth interviews with key informants were held at the provincial management level - 2 members of the team that designed and implemented the PEP in the Provincial Directorate of Secondary Education - and at the school level - 2 members of the management team in both institutions, 5 classroom teachers and 3 “PAT” teachers (a teacher figure created by this policy; see below) - complemented by 4 field records.

The analysis strategy, taking into account the diversity of sources, was content analysis, allowing for the interpretative consideration of the manifest aspects in the interview records and documents, as well as the latent aspects belonging to the context in which these texts are inscribed (Piovani, 2007; Sautu, 2003).

## 4. Results

### 4.1. *The Promoting Schools Programme*

In December 2015, both on a national level and in the PBA, a new government of a right-wing political force took office, which implied a significant change with respect to the previous decade of continuity of progressive governments. After only two months, the Federal Education Council (CFE)<sup>4</sup> approved the Purmamarca Declaration, which established, among other commitments, that of “ensuring the entry, permanence and graduation of all students in secondary education, promoting diversified proposals that address their interests and promote the development of skills and the learning of priority knowledge”. Shortly afterwards, the National Strategic Plan 2016-2021 “Argentina Enseña y Aprende” (Resolution No. 285/16) was approved, defining the central axes for national education policy, with a strong emphasis on learning to guarantee entry, permanence and graduation from compulsory education, and to achieve “conditions of equity in access to meaningful learning” (p. 11), as well as strengthening and innovating teaching practices.

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<sup>4</sup> Argentina is a federal country, with 24 jurisdictions - 23 provinces and the City of Buenos Aires - that are directly responsible for education. The Federal Education Council is a collegiate body, composed of the highest educational authority in each jurisdiction, where policy guidelines are agreed and binding resolutions are passed.

The following year, as part of the implementation of the Strategic Plan, a specific policy for secondary schools was launched - Federal Secondary 2030 - and the CFE passed Resolution No. 330/17 “Secondary 2030. Learning Organisation Framework”, which stipulated that the 2018-2025 jurisdictional plans to be formulated by the provinces should include actions to promote 4 changes: 1. the institutional and pedagogical organisation of learning; 2. the organisation of teaching work; 3. the academic regime; and 4. the training and professional accompaniment of teachers.

In this framework, in 2018 the PBA promoted a policy initially called “New format for secondary school” (Resolution No. 748/2018 of the Directorate General for Culture and Education of the PBA), later renamed “Educational experience: Promoting Schools for Secondary Education” (DGCYE, Res. No. 5222/18) and known as the Promoting Schools Programme (PEP).

At first it was presented as a proposal for universal coverage with implementation to be phased in. However, to start with the plan was to work in 300 public and 287 public schools as a pilot experience, which was later expanded to a total of 900 institutions in 2019<sup>5</sup>. Furthermore, at the end of 2018 it was specified that schools should apply to join the PEP so that the process of incorporation of state and private educational institutions continued by voluntary adhesion mediated by the approval of the Provincial Directorate of Secondary Education (DGCYE, Res. 5222/18).

The PEP aimed to “implement modifications in the secondary school format”, “promoting other forms of organisation for teaching and learning” in order to favour students’ school career. However, the focus was on lower secondary school, due to the specific difficulties in entering the level, and then expanding progressively: in 2018 in the 1st year of secondary school, in 2019 in the 2nd year and in 2020 in the 3rd year.

While the original aim was to continue with the planned roll-out, in December 2019 there was a change of both provincial and national government, which determined not to continue with the expansion and the programme was finally discontinued at the end of 2021.

According to the PEP guidelines, schools had to prepare an Institutional Project, develop articulation strategies with the primary level and carry out a “welcome week” for new first-year entrants. It also incorporated three core components:

- The creation of a specific figure, the “Teacher Accompanying Trajectories”, known as PAT. Their task was to monitor and sustain a holistic view of young people throughout the basic cycle (we will return to this later).
- The development of pedagogical practices based on “integrated knowledge”, with teaching and learning strategies based on specific problems or projects, planned and evaluated collegially by the teaching staff.
- The implementation of a collegial approach to evaluation, accreditation and promotion, which included the use of various purpose-developed evaluation matrices.

For these tasks, the participating teachers were assigned two modules (equivalent to approximately 2 hours). At that time, a compulsory weekly meeting was to be held outside school hours.

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<sup>5</sup> According to Krichesky et al. (2021), considering 2017 data, the PEP reached an enrolment of close to 10% and 20% of state and private secondary schools in the Province.



This programme can be understood as an analyser of how compulsory secondary education has been processed in recent years (Briscioli and Schoo, 2023). Unlike other small-scale programmes that proposed variations based on the organisational model (attendance, coursework, etc.), the PEP presented itself with a reshuffling logic supported by discourses linked to pedagogical innovation and the concept of “project-based learning”, which implied collaborative and interdisciplinary work among teachers.

If we look at all the secondary school policies developed in Argentina over the last 20 years, we can distinguish between universal policies, i.e. initiatives aimed at all secondary school institutions, teachers and students; targeted policies, whose scope is delimited to certain problems or characteristics of the “focus population”; and small-scale policies, aimed at a more or less limited number of schools due to the impossibility (financial or technical) of covering a broader field or due to a decision on political strategy. The case we bring here was a small-scale policy.

Universal policies were few but far-reaching. Conversely, small-scale policies were widespread, both at national and provincial levels, and became the main policy rationale from 2015 until the pandemic. This does not mean that they had no impact. Both for what they construct as a whole and for what they contribute to install in discursive and symbolic terms means they acquire a presence that exceeds what the numbers appear to show.

## ***4.2. Putting policy into action: the PEP in schools***

As explained in previous sections, the “context of practice” and the “enactment” of policies are categories proposed by Ball to highlight how there is production in schools in the transition from the policy text to concrete actions, moving away from the idea of implementation as an analytical perspective (Miranda, 2011). Below, we share some results related to “enactment” that emerge from the analysis of documents and interviews on the school scale.

### *4.2.1. On the work of teachers and programme development*

The PEP, like many country-wide policies aimed at transforming secondary education, resorted to the allocation of “overtime” to teachers. As mentioned, in Argentina, in the vast majority of cases, secondary teacher recruitment is based on the hours spent in front of a class, meaning that most teachers work in several schools and circulate in different institutions throughout the week. So, introducing “overtime” refers to recognised and paid non-teaching time and the possibility of spending more time at one school. However, in general, these appointments tend to be limited and remain outside the teaching regulation, on a provisional and interim basis and with no stability. The PEP was no exception. This overtime was only 2 hours per week, allocated on a precarious basis and with a late payment made several months later.

Accordingly, the foregoing conditions made it very difficult to coordinate these “overtime hours” at an institutional level and, according to the information obtained in the interviews -both in the two schools studied and in other institutions- the implementation of the policy ended up relying on a certain voluntarism and trust that teachers would get involved for their own motivations beyond the precarious working conditions.

Most of the reports show great enthusiasm for the activities carried out and the possibility of seeing students sustain their studies under these new conditions.

Teachers are also motivated to get together with other teachers to plan, to evaluate collegially and to share daily activities:

*It was a different proposal that really excited us from the point of view that we were finally going to have a space to meet, which is precisely what is difficult for us as teachers with our timetables when we have several schools. So having a meeting space was extremely valuable. We met on Saturdays. (Teacher 1, school A)*

Simultaneously, these same working conditions made it difficult to find time to meet, even with the “overtime”. In one of the schools, and not without resistance, it was therefore decided that these spaces would be held on Saturdays. Then the meetings were held once a fortnight, and eventually, as the number of teachers participating reduced, they managed to find a day to meet during the week:

*...this project, which was very ambitious, was later changed. There was no money, you know there are always cuts in education. (In 2020) They took out the two modules from all the teachers. Only two modules in core subjects were left and paid for: Mathematics, Social Studies, Natural Sciences and Language Practices. And that's when the break was made. (PAT 1, school A)*

At the other school they also considered meeting on Saturdays because of difficulties in matching schedules. However, faced with the inconvenience that the school was not going to be open, they managed to organise these spaces to be held on weekdays, but at the expense of time (shorter meetings) and participation (some teachers could not attend).

Having time to meet and to work together in secondary school is a debt that the PEP, as well as other programmes, took into consideration. In the interviews it was evident that this possibility helped improve the work and, in a broader sense, re-signifying the task.

However, along with a certain positive view of working in dialogue with colleagues, there were also difficulties in finding common times, of being obliged to attend school outside school hours or agreeing on issues that had hitherto been defined individually. The fieldwork provided a glimpse into the nuances of an intensive and time-bound work experience.

In addition, it should be noted that teachers in the first year and then later in the second year were added compulsorily, once the school management had agreed to be part of the programme. They then received materials and held a workshop at the start of the year, after which they had to organise themselves institutionally in order to work in a new way, without having to go through other levels. In one of the institutions, they reported that there were those who refused to accept the position in order to avoid participating in the experiment.

This leads to a discussion of a recurrent theme in the policies of recent years and that is present in the PEP: the continuous requests to teachers to come up with other ways of teaching and evaluating without changing their working conditions, as well as the sending of documents with pedagogical guidelines and examples of proposals without considering specific training and organisational instances.

Along this line, the distinction between *organisational model* and *pedagogical model* (Terigi, 2008) offers a perspective of analysis to understand why, despite the many changes that have been driving educational policies for some time, things do not seem to improve, or do not improve at the speed and with the depth expected. The assumption is that the introduction of policy innovations produces modifications in organisational aspects of school functioning, but fails to impact on the predominant pedagogical



model, partly because many proposals for organisational change involve great complexity which, if not properly considered, reduces the initiatives to formal arrangements or makes them less powerful in solving the problems analysed (Terigi, 2016). This is seen, for example, in the use of interdisciplinary project work or collegial assessment of students, both of which are presented as good in themselves and therefore as if they were not the result of complex processes to be constructed.

Terigi (2010) warns of the need to produce professional, pedagogical and didactic knowledge for the required pedagogical models, given the different learning times. The research also allows us to note the importance of observing the political responsibility of accompanying the processes of transformation of teaching and schooling conditions to move forward in the fulfilment of the right to education (Briscioli, 2023a).

#### 4.2.2. *The figure of the PAT as an articulator of policy at the local level*

The PEP created a figure to monitor students: the Teacher Accompanying Trajectories (PAT). This creation responds to the focus that this policy had on entry to the level and the articulation between primary and secondary school, and on the accompaniment of student trajectories.<sup>6</sup> Each cohort had a PAT that concentrated a set of tasks and functions in liaison with other institutional actors: “The interesting thing about this is that you accompanied the kids for three years. And that you were going to be with the whole team, not alone. Because it is very difficult to work alone” (PAT 1, school A). For this task, each PAT was assigned a minimum of four modules (8 hours) allocated according to the number of students they had<sup>7</sup>.

In the interviews and documents, the PAT appeared as a prominent figure because of their ability to monitor and sustain a holistic view of each student. It therefore became a role with novel tasks in relation to the conditions and possibilities of the other teachers. Those who performed these functions became references for the groups they were in charge of, because they were responsible for continuing or rebuilding the link with the school, when necessary, through socio-affective support with each student and their families. At the same time, they mediated with the management and teaching staff. Thus, the PAT became a key figure.

PATs were elected on the basis that they had to be school employees with at least one year’s seniority, present a project to the authorities within the institutional definition and be interviewed. As we documented in previous research (Finnegan et al., 2019), when these proposals ‘reach’ the schools, management teams often recruit teachers or individuals working in the school based on a set of attributes they consider relevant for such roles. In one of the schools, the role of PATs was taken over by two

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<sup>6</sup> Within the axis ‘Accompanying the trajectories’ the task of strengthening ‘the monitoring of students through a teacher of the institution, called Teacher Accompanying Trajectories (PAT), which will have the function of accompanying the trajectories of the group throughout the basic cycle, articulating its task with the management team, the teachers of the course, the EOE, the preceptors, families and other related institutions’ is included. The PAT builds a comprehensive view of school trajectories that implies a twin consideration: academic and relational. Their task will be: to guide, orient and help build the role of secondary school students, to promote and sustain their real school trajectories, to favour the internal articulation of the pedagogical proposal, to exchange and inform about best practices, among other actions” (DGCYE Res. No. 5222/18, Annex 1).

<sup>7</sup> The PEP established the number of Institutional Weekly Modules assigned to each PAT based on the number of students (DGCYE Res.). No. 5222/18, Annex 1). For example, teachers with up to 30 1st year students were allocated 4 modules; over 80 students, 10 modules.

preceptors<sup>8</sup>. The fact that they were preceptors allowed them to organise their time according to the different demands that would otherwise have been more complex if they had been in charge of class hours.

Reference is made in the interviews to the strong demand for meetings convened by the provincial authorities, as well as to training and exchange with other PATs in the district in which the task to be developed took shape.

As mentioned, they were assigned modules based on the number of students to be accompanied, which, according to the interviews, were not sufficient to cover the number of tasks involved in the role:

*We were paid for seven modules, plus seven modules, but of course, we had our mobile phones on all day at all hours, parents and the counselling team ..... So we were having meetings, we were communicating by phone. (PAT 1, school A)*

As we can see, the role involved a wide range of both assigned and self-assigned tasks for which the working hours allocated were notoriously insufficient. Working as a PAT necessitated permanent communication via WhatsApp, meetings with families, with counselling teams from the students' previous schools, with teachers from the current school, with the management team, but also accepting tasks that clearly exceeded the definitions of the contractual terms, such as coordination with different actors in the education system and with other state bodies when it came to addressing extremely complex social problems or offering activities to broaden the cultural and social horizons of these young people:

*We were going to look for help outside. Because we have had problems with drugs, with kids who were going through a bad situation and the parents are desperate because they don't know what to do. They came to us for help. So what was the counselling team doing? It was connected to the Addiction Centre .... The counselling team started to take over, supporting some mother .... We also asked for help to come and give classes on sexuality, body care .... Because this is also important, that the state commits itself to the school. And well, we were going to look for it. We also went to look for a place where the children could go, so that they wouldn't be on the street, and because the parents also asked, we went to the youth centre and brought them brochures, I explained the Health Promoting School (Escuela Promotora) and, well, we brought the children to sign up for dance and cooking workshops. That's what we did. (PAT 1, school A)*

In all cases, the extra payment for the role appears as a motivating factor, but the meaning of the task acquires particular relevance, breaking with the inertia of everyday school life, more so when what is done is considered to "work", which produces identification with the Programme.

*We were very involved. We were in touch with their homes. We did more than just being here in the school, we focused on getting the family to become involved and take interest in what was happening to their child, because it was not only about pedagogy, about school. There were other aspects too, and it really worked. Today, the students tell us that they miss us being on top, behind, you studied, you didn't study, you did, what you had to do, you didn't do it, you handed in, you didn't hand in, of constantly calling, of talking to the teachers, because we were also in contact with the teachers. ... And the truth is that the teachers were always well disposed too. ...that was achieved. That nice working atmosphere*

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<sup>8</sup> In Argentina, the figure of the preceptor performs multiple tasks within the secondary school, but does not teach classes and is not responsible for teaching. He/she is in charge of one or more classes, works throughout the school day and is responsible for various administrative tasks (attendance, passing grades) and discipline.

*between the whole school... The truth is that we worked a lot with the counselling team as well. So, I miss it. (PAT 2, school A)*

It is interesting to note that those who occupied this role in the schools where fieldwork was conducted highlighted the fact that they had a certain sensitivity and social commitment, and that this is why they were invited by management to take part. In the narratives, politics appears as an action sustained by a “militant” commitment, of the order of social activism, which is rooted in different meanings to be further explored. One of these refers to becoming a reference point for the students in multiple ways: to define a specific school course proposal in accordance with a drug recovery process or with other circumstances such as pregnancies or students who were mothers/fathers; to make links with different institutions to address issues they considered of interest to young people; to generate spaces for dialogue to learn about their lives, even to listen to them talk about the performance of their teachers. At this point, the PATs also seem to have functioned as articulators and enhancers of the work of adults in the school. Hence the value placed on the weekly meeting space to circulate information on the situation of students, issues which, as they point out, are often invisible in secondary education:

*...the interaction of the PAT with the family was fundamental because you knew everything about everyone, the whole family, how it was made up, what their problematic situations were, the changes that could occur in the children. Because you saw, maybe in secondary school it happens... At that time, we didn't have a counselling team, so a lot of things went unnoticed. (PAT 1, school B)*

These dialogues between teachers facilitated the exchange of information that allowed them to be more attentive to the specific situations of the students, and to liaise with teachers. One PAT describes the task as “it was the beak pecking in my head all the time” (PAT 1, school B), referring to the image of a woodpecker, a graphic way of illustrating the constant reminding of teachers about information they considered important for the children.

The relationship of the PAT with families and with the students themselves seems to have highlighted the very naturalised attitudes of some teachers, which this figure could have influenced based on its function of articulation:

*Our role was to be everywhere and if there was someone who was not committed [referring to teachers] we would go and look for them. ... [they asked for the report card] you had to do something, you can't have everyone failing. ... But not only us, also the director, the vice-director because it wasn't my job to question the teacher, but that's what it is. (PAT 1, school A)*

*...we talked with the students a lot and they themselves told us that the teacher doesn't explain, doesn't teach, doesn't hand out the material, doesn't communicate with us. ... So there was no way of not knowing whether the teacher was doing his or her job or not. ... then you also saw the report card, when we asked for it, everybody failed. And what did you do? There we defended the kids to the death... Or not knowing their first and last name. (PAT 2, school A)*

These comments reflect the tensions they went through, which, however, they were able to overcome over time. In this school, the PATs made reports on each student, taking into account their life situations. The teachers were given this material, which synthesised information and a comprehensive view on each student that, due to the dynamics of the work, the teachers themselves were unaware of. The work done is missed by the teachers who participated in this experiment and, according to the PATs, the support provided was crucial to sustaining attendance and passing the school year. This diagnosis is based on their experiences in other programmes where they have recorded significant dropout rates.

In school B, on the other hand, the work seems to have been more focused on the demands of the teachers:

*If a teacher needed me to summon a dad, talk to the family, see what was going on, talk to the student first, mediate, see if we could mediate something. If a student had some content that he or she didn't understand, well, we played the role of a private teacher, we worked on that content. If a teacher asked us for something specific to say "well, let's try such and such a thing for such and such a pupil", we talked about it, we worked on it. (PAT 1, school B)*

We may therefore assume that the PEP proposes huge transformation in the school dynamics, backed by a few modules in people who are very committed. The question remains as to what traces this collaborative work left behind. According to our interviewees, it could be argued that what was already working before the PEP appeared continued with its dynamics and its ups and downs, in particular because of the consequences for the teaching work that the pandemic and the consequent suspension of face-to-face classes caused. But fundamentally, the articulation between actors sustained by the PATs and the management teams appears to have vanished with their termination.

#### 4.2.3. Sentiments around the accompaniment and achievements of the PEP

In recent years, some words have become key terms in educational policies for secondary schools in Argentina. These are words that in everyday school life are associated with diverse and even contradictory notions and meanings, but which express the ways in which compulsory secondary education is processed and understood, in particular in the framework of programmes that focus on young people from lower-status sectors with discontinuous educational paths. One of them is *accompaniment*.

*All that about being on top of things. It is difficult for them, many could not read, write. The importance of having someone behind them who was interested in them and trying to make sure that they finish school, but that they end up learning. (PAT 2, school A)*

Accompaniment translates into this minute-by-minute monitoring, this "being on top of things" so that the student gets closer to the historically constructed ideal of a student: that they attend, are disciplined in their behaviour and pass their subjects (Schoo, 2016). To this is added an emotional component - which appears in the PATs and teachers, but also in those who promoted the programme and in some documents - related to a certain reparation towards young people with trajectories that express frustrated approaches to educational institutions:

*A special bond was created. I'm here, I care about you, I'm behind you, which meant what it means in any family when there are problems with teenagers, right? (Teacher 1, school A)*

*These kids who repeat and repeat, what a word, right? What a failure. They come with a backpack. They feel the failure because the schools take them as if they no longer belong to their school because they are no longer in the same age group and this school takes them in. And that failure had to be lifted from them. That was the work of the PAT. To encourage it together with the teachers. (PAT 1, school A)*

The scene of the trip to Mar del Plata<sup>9</sup> is repeated in the teachers' testimonies as a space for recognition of the entire journey:

*When they went to Mar del Plata and felt part of that project to discuss everything and that they were listened to because the inspector and the whole group of people who were there listened to each one of them, they filmed them. They felt so important that when they came here, they came, imagine, with an expectation, but the best part was when they passed the year. (PAT 1, school A)*

The reading that PEP was a success is linked to the programme's extension to other schools, but also to the results achieved with students. In school A "success" is measured in terms of the number of young people who continued to study (in stark contrast to the drop-out rate that used to exist in that institution). In school B, in addition to highlighting the sustainability of enrolment, they stated that "the best courses we have in the school today are the courses that had that experience" (PAT 1, school B). According to school and management interviewees, these results can be explained in the "accompaniment" that the programme allowed and in the ways of approaching the contents and of relating to each other:

*They are kids who got used to it, you noticed, for example, that year with the first year ones, that they were able to interrelate the subjects that were being taught, the interdisciplinarity could be seen, but of course in the kids' daily work. It was very clear. And the support of the PAT in the subject among students, teachers, parents, family, was very different from other courses. (PAT 1, school B)*

The specific commitment or "extra" effort required to work in schools that are part of this type of initiative (Briscioli, 2016; Peniche Cetzal et al., 2020), which are limited or small-scale, and the strategies deployed for "personalising the links" between teachers and students (Nobile, 2012) indicate a certain exceptional nature required to be part of the teaching team in these experiments. And for the same reason, it is clear that there is something of a "non-transferable" nature about them, making it difficult to think that they can be replicated and/or scaled up to the entire education system under the same conditions (Briscioli, 2024).

### ***4.3. The limits of policy and the tensions in its "enactment".***

Despite its limited scale - as noted, it reached only 20 % of schools - the programme was diluted by internal policy management issues. Firstly, an initiative promoted by another directorate within the provincial administration - the Network of Learning Schools - emerged in parallel, which, although aimed at all compulsory levels, overlapped with some of its purposes. Second, there was a change in the management of the Directorate General for Schools and, for that reason, the person who had been the main authority of the Provincial Directorate for Secondary Education until then, who had promoted the programme, also left. Finally, there were difficulties in sustaining PEP funding in the second year, in a broader context of provincial and national budget constraints. These issues highlight the fragility of these types of initiatives created to move towards the fulfilment of compulsory secondary education yet tied to policy cycles (Briscioli and Schoo, 2023).

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<sup>9</sup> In September 2018, a trip was made to Mar del Plata, a seaside resort city. 150 1st year students from 15 schools participating in the PEP took part. Among other activities, students presented some of the integrated knowledge projects. <https://abc2.abc.gob.ar/escuelas-promotoras>

Specifically, in its brief duration, the PEP managed to change some central issues: in 2018 the participating 1st year teachers were assigned two modules per week for joint planning meetings, project development and collegial evaluation, among other tasks. In 2019, these modules were paid only to some teachers and suspended in all other cases. This was compounded by significant delays in payments (they were paid between 4 and 9 months late).

As analysed, this type of programme appeals to a certain voluntarism and involvement of teachers even in the precarious working conditions that are promoted. In the case of the PEP, while this may have been tolerable in the first year of implementation (assuming a certain naturalisation of the decoupling between the political-administrative timeframe and the imperative of immediate policy implementation), the restriction in the second year meant a weakening in the momentum of this experiment.

Many of the teachers interviewed, who had found this proposal and other pre-existing programmes valuable, regret that it has ended. In a broader sense, the fact that the actors themselves believe there are no longer lines of work that are working and producing results serves to highlight the spasmodic nature of policies for secondary education. These policies are generally tied to government administrations, to good intentions but without accompanying conditions, to the short duration of the administrations of officials and to lack of resources, which causes much frustration and weariness in school institutions (Briscioli and Schoo, 2023). This was evident in all the interviews conducted.

Each administration allocates a set of different resources (financial, technical, documentary, etc.) for the programmes that reach schools. Some of these resources remain in the school while others disappear. The same occurs with the practices that are promoted and those that are being built, but that, once public policy is interrupted, the general feeling that remains in the school - according to this and to previous research conducted by the authors - is that without the Programme, without the impetus and resources of political action, nothing different can be done. There is a return to the inertia of everyday school life and the never-ending problems of education and social inequalities.

It is possible that the PEP has left its mark on those who actively participated in its form and content, and our interlocutors point to this in interviews. However, it is another valuable experiment, but with a limited scope, which contributes to the trend of programmes that imply important efforts of school reorganisation and intensification of teaching work and, in the end, last a short time and have little impact.

## 5. Conclusions and discussion

The PEP is considered successful in the participating schools insofar as it broadened the students' universe (because of the projects deployed, the articulation work carried out by the PATs, the experiences offered, among other issues) and, fundamentally, because it managed to keep them schooled. In addition, these and other schools report that the groups that started their first year under this programme tend to stand out as "very good courses" in terms of how they work. According to the interviewees, the key was in this detailed accompaniment and in the capacity to articulate actions between the different school actors, issues that are basic if we think of educational processes, yet difficult to achieve in everyday school life.

As we were able to reconstruct from the analysis of the documents and the interviews, the PEP was presented with a reshuffling logic of secondary schooling supported by

discourses linked to pedagogical innovation, with great pretensions of transforming the school format and dynamics, and teaching practices. However, it was sustained on the basis of the appeal to a certain voluntarism of teachers and, in particular, of those who played the role of PAT, as well as by resorting to institutional arrangements sustained with effort and under precarious conditions (Briscioli and Schoo, 2023).

At the same time, it is possible to identify a mismatch between policy proposals that assume intense dynamism in matters that are unlikely to occur in schools - such as time-sharing and the development of joint activities of a large part of the teaching staff when the work and recruitment of teachers is organised on an hourly basis in different institutions - and assume stability where there is none: the work of schools and the possibilities of introducing transformations require lengthy periods and continuity, but teachers rotate frequently, run from one school to another, see hundreds of young people pass by every day, lack the conditions to connect with the many and complex situations and problems presented by students, among other issues that make daily activity dizzying, with little time and energy available to ensure that certain changes can be sustained.

Above all, secondary school transformation policies - and the PEP is an archetypal example as the preceding sections show - are based on an idea of long-term continuity, while experience shows that the policies are constantly modified: actions and forms of operation change from one year to the next, the requirements made of schools are changed, they are committed to contracts that are not sustained, they expand or contract in the participating schools with changing criteria, and, above all, they are interrupted with each change of management. Given that the political period in Argentina is four years, and considering that at the start of each new government term there are rotations in decision-making positions and the technical teams of ministries, it takes time for policy guidelines to be presented and developed. Once started, it also takes a variable but significant period to put all the necessary components in place (resolving resource transfer mechanisms, making the necessary agreements with the different actors, approving the necessary regulations, covering all communication needs throughout the system, etc.). In most cases, fully functioning policies therefore tend to cover two to three years.

An initial gap then appears between the grand discourses of transformation that a programme sustains and what is actually feasible at different scales and in educational institutions (Briscioli, 2024; Saforcada, 2012). As Viñao (2002) warns, there is a “contrast between the *de facto* changes, usually slow and imperceptible, if not superficial, and the impatient and noisy clamour of the reformers with their attempts to ‘reinvent’ the school” (p. 76) through administrative documents and with fixed and limited deadlines.

In this sense, the differential timing deserves special consideration, due to the specific logics and interests that govern “the time limited perspective, in terms of past and future, of the policy makers of educational reforms” (Viñao, 2002, p.76), in terms of an “ahistorical presentism” -the PEP is another programme that suffers from this “ahistorical presentism” that has characterised educational reforms for at least three decades (Saforcada, 2012)- together with a monochronic or technical-rational conception of the distribution and uses of school time, impersonal and programmed, scarcely sensitive to context (Hargreaves, 1996).

In the case of policy makers, this conception, in turn, is reinforced by the temporary nature of their mandate and the need to obtain visible results in the short term, politically profitable (Viñao, 2002) and, at least in the case of Argentina and the period



considered here, in a context of reduced resources for education and relatively small technical teams. This leads to the design, as we have pointed out, of small-scale policies, but which expect large-scale impacts.

In this sense, the programme pathway is perceived as not substantially altering schooling conditions, as they remain practically unchanged, or teachers' working conditions. However, an accumulation has been generated - made up of references and practices that the different programmes generate in order to process compulsory schooling, made up of pedagogical and socio-educational lines - which is constantly growing, with figures created ad-hoc (such as the PAT) on which much of the responsibility for educational transformation appears to fall and programmes of variable durations and with precarious resources that could cease to exist with any change in political will at the different levels of implementation. Thus, the continuity of compulsory secondary school policies seems to be their discontinuity (Briscioli and Schoo, 2023; Saforcada and Schoo, 2024).

The repeated illusions and disillusionment with the discontinuity of the programmes for the level and their proposals for change, the boom and bust, are producing a progressive disenchantment that is difficult to remove in schools and in their communities. The same programmes that propose to transform the level in order to make it universal, end up focusing on specific groups of institutions, students and teachers, using devices that are intended to be comprehensive but for which roles are defined that cover very specific profiles that depend on personal wills and must bear the daily responsibility of responding to extremely complex and varied problems and situations.

The constant transformations can be overwhelming and destabilising for those who receive the information about so many changes to work frameworks in short periods of time and can make it difficult for them to be institutionalised and appropriated, taking into account their reconversions with discourses that generally seek to "differentiate" themselves from those previously in force (Briscioli, 2023b). The temporariness of the changes and the difficulty in sustaining them strengthen the hypothesis that small-scale programmes are not sufficient to universalise secondary education (Briscioli, 2024) and sow disappointments and burnout that make it increasingly difficult to engage teachers in new initiatives.

In this research, although various documentary sources have been gathered and the perspectives of several actors in the education system on the programme under analysis have been offered, it is limited by not having conducted systematic observations of classes and not being able to give a complete account of the learning actually carried out by the cohort studied. However, as mentioned above, the policy study provides valuable information in terms of lessons learned and the challenges that remain, in line with other studies developed on other small-scale programmes implemented.

The findings contribute to the field of education policy studies - in particular for secondary education - and to the accumulated knowledge of the research team, which will soon continue to investigate recently launched initiatives for all schools in the jurisdiction studied. The aim is to further investigate the processes and forms of construction of educational policy for this level of education as well as the processes of teaching and assessment of learning, with the same approach and methods, in order to continue to contribute to the production of knowledge on the trajectories of educational policies and the necessary mediations.

The effective realisation of secondary education as a right for all is urgent in a country whose society is marked by enormous inequalities that are reproduced, among other

variables, through education (as pointed out at the beginning of this article). Ensuring equal access to quality secondary education and completion of secondary education on equal terms requires large-scale public policies, in terms of size, time, conditions and resources.

The “personal efforts” of teachers to sustain links that are adapted to the particular situations of students in a context of school massiveness and to respond in articulation with various actors and agencies to multidimensional situations and problems are not transferable on a large scale. Acknowledging this difficulty does not mean discouraging more far-reaching policies, but rather rethinking the strategy and the ways of constructing public policy.

It is essential to define structural transformations for secondary education, but it is important to note that it will not be possible to continue to rely exclusively on the commitment or enthusiasm of some teachers: Instead, we need processes of collective political-pedagogical production in which the point of view of the schools and their teachers forms part of the policy; adequate and stable long-term working conditions are needed; and systematic training is necessary to work with and for the school massiveness implied by the compulsory nature of this level and the guarantee of the right to education for all.

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