

Digital Inequality in Education in Argentina

Mónica Pini

UNSAM, Buenos Aires, Argentina
moepini@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper – as a part of a broader research on the policies and practices of digital literacy in relation to inclusion-, seeks to identify the central tensions in teachers’ practices related to the use of digital technologies in education. In Argentina, these tensions have increased, the moment when the pandemic compelled the educational system at all levels, to switch from the physical to the virtual classroom. Despite the recent date of these events, in this study we aim to reflect on the first findings. We will continue this research through interviews and reports analysis, in the coming period.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Social and Professional Topics**; • **Computing / Technology Policy**; • **Human-Centered Computing**;

KEYWORDS

Digital technologies, teachers work, pedagogical practices, inequalities

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 The context

"In the days of COVID-19, the unforeseen oversupply of virtualization amplified doubts, resistance and questions". [11]

This paper – as a part of a broader research on the policies and practices of digital literacy in relation to inclusion-, seeks to identify the central tensions in teachers’ practices related to the use of digital technologies in education. In Argentina, these tensions have increased, the moment when the pandemic compelled the educational system at all levels, to switch from the physical to the virtual classroom. Despite the recent date of these events, in this study we aim to reflect on the first findings. We will continue this research through interviews and reports analysis, in the coming period.

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The end of 2019 in Argentina marked a peak in economic reforms, which started in 2015 and includes the abandonment of public services, the increase of unemployment, the reduction of domestic consumption, the external debt, and the increase in income inequality, became critical. These late neoliberal policies carried out a structural reform of the State, resulted in large transfers of income to the richest sectors, a capital flight, the flourishing of financial capital, the flexibilization of the labor market at the service of private interests, and above all, a decisive bet on the communicational, the marketing to the change of imaginaries and the common sense of society through the mass media [7].

In education, the government worked to build a market-friendly ideology, with mass media guiding the education agenda, expanded through the Internet, the symbolic colonization of educational discourse by economic categories and criteria, and the private appropriation of the public sphere, the reduction of the education budget, included salaries, equipment and supplies for schools and universities, and dismantling all training programs on ICT for teachers. Likewise, the government 2015-2019 tried to limit the acquired rights of teachers and educators, using the mass media to depreciate the position of teachers and educational organizations, using evaluation methods in a competitive and punitive way [3] [2].

The increase in inequality had an impact on the levels of failure and dropout of the students. The public school became the school “for the poor”. Children and adolescents were deprived of teaching materials. Moreover, social and cultural deprivation prevented them from equitably carrying out the training processes in the formal education space [10].

In recent years, there has already been intense institutional and social pressure for the use of ICTs in education. Adequate educational resources, and spaces for teaching or collaborative work have not been provided, causing an increase in the individual workload [4] [9].

1.2 ICT discourses

Regarding ICT, there are socially circulating meanings, linked to their instrumental use, technical neutrality and a high valuation of the benefits inherent in their access. However, this is a field of a discussion that needs to be expanded, from a historical, social and cultural perspective, that includes the cognitive, emotional and contextual aspects that come into play in a digital environment with a pedagogical sense. This study is connected to digital humanities, since digital education is one of the fields where corporations are imposing their agenda, especially in disadvantage sectors [8].

ICT assimilates the dominant discourse (governments and corporations) with common sense. This means that discourses on digital technologies only partially consider some aspects and distort or hide others, see Figure 1. For example, the considered indispensable use of ICT is celebrated as an inherent positive contribution to the problems of education. It is common for digital technologies to

Dominant discourse	What is hidden
Inherently good	Negative effects: cyber-addiction, individual control, data manipulation, computer crimes, etc.
An essential way to improve education and solve learning problems.	This kind of transformation does not occur per se, since the key is the pedagogical use.
Well managed by children and not by teachers (native / immigrant contradiction).	Children use devices to play, to bond, and to explore what is related to their preferences. But the tools to learn, select and interpret everything that comes across the screens should be provided by adults. Digital gap.
Carriers of educational innovation	Education is not renewed through technology unless we put it at the service of renewed pedagogical projects

Figure 1: ICT discourses and hidden problems

be seen as an essential means of improving education and solving learning problems, regardless of the fact that there are no single devices that solve the problems of education, the vast field of commercial interests behind these proposals, and the digital social gap between young people. This masks the negative aspects, such as cyber-addiction, individual control, incitement to consumerism, data manipulation, being exposed to unwanted sites and computer crimes [2].

The concept of innovation in education as a synonym for the use of technologies hides the fact that education is not renewed through technology, unless we put that tool at the service of renewed pedagogical projects.

Children and young people are usually considered to know everything about digital technologies and devices since, unlike teachers, they were born in the digital age (native / immigrant opposition). However, children use the devices to play, to socialize and to explore everything related to their preferences. But the tools to learn, select and interpret what comes through the screens is what adults / teachers should teach.

Much of this discourse was directed against teachers, since, showing only positive aspects of ICTs, they built an image of traditional teachers, attached to their old knowledge, without commitment to the life of young people, etc. that the media reproduced. The teachers, in turn, many did what they could but, without sufficient resources, resisted the pressure to join in such unequal conditions as best they could.

At the end of 2019, the opposition to the neoliberal government won the elections in Argentina, through a front with considerable popular support, but amidst a terrible economic crisis and national debt. Despite this, the Ministry of Education was filled with officials who came from and knew public education well, thus opening up a horizon of favorable expectations. And then the pandemic came, and did make technology an indispensable means to allow schools'

work go on, with a very heterogeneous background on the kind of tasks that were necessary to face the situation.

2 THE 2020 SCHOOL STAGE

Upon taking notice of the pandemic, the 2020 school year was about to start (March to December). Classes began in schools, but on March 16th, compulsory social isolation policies were established to curb infections, based on the lack of vaccine or cure for COVID19.

When classes were interrupted due to the exceptional situation, all teachers had to respond, without plan or preparation, to give continuity and virtual support to the learning processes started and to come. Like a bomb exploding in their hands. Scholars could afford to debate about the rights of teachers, the rights of students, workload, materials and content, commodification and big data, etc., instead, in schools, let's get to work, with all the conflicts, experiences and inexperience that were available, with the support from the Ministry of Education.

The situations to respond to are innumerable. The context described above does not account for the enormous variation in situations that teachers must respond to in their usual task, now multiplied. Those who have students with Internet connectivity, work from home, sending instructions to parents and mothers so that they can collaborate with their children, prepare and put materials online with different contents and activities for primary school children, or for several different high school courses¹, or Secondary and Higher Education, all at once and most with little or no experience in that type of tasks, activities that will later have to be corrected, take online exams, and all the administrative work – amid the discomfort of being isolated, having to take care of themselves and their family, and the discomfort of the students

¹In Argentina most teachers work on several courses and/or schools

Before pandemic	With pandemic
Pressure to use ICT technologies. Innovation discourse.	Increased pressure. Necessity, obligation
Individual work with large groups	Greater workload required by <u>virtuality</u>
<u>Womens work</u> : salaried work + domestic work	<u>Womens work</u> : salaried work + domestic work + children at home
Inequality in the Access to connectivity and the Internet. Segregation and overcrowding.	Poor children lose the possibility of the right to education

Figure 2: Teachers work before pandemic and with pandemic

themselves. As always, for the most part women have to share work with housework, but now all at home with children without school.

The teachers’ strategies to guarantee continuity of the education are diverse: from WhatsApp and Facebook groups to uploading materials to Drive or sending them by email. There are those who create blogs with Blogspot or through the Wix platform. During the first days, Google Classroom seemed to be the most used option and put all teachers in the quick task of searching for tutorials to familiarize themselves with this route (the use of personal data by this company merits extensive debate itself) [5].

And those who do not have access to connectivity, cell phone or another device? The (dis)connection, digitization, is a new dimension of inequality and the coronavirus crisis only accentuates it. They lack that possibility, as so many other rights. The pandemic does not create socio-educational differences, they pre-exist this crisis, and with it inequalities and tensions increase. Teachers who teach in peripheral areas, where many do not have the Internet, go to schools to organize and distribute bags of food and in those same bags they put the printed task for their students. Many rural school teachers distribute homework home by home.

One should not forget that, in this context, young people are affected by social problems intertwined with inequality; to the same condition of monetary poverty, the overcrowding situation is added as a conditioning factor for carrying out school tasks at home (Kaztman, cited in [5]). Figure 2 synthesizes the aggravation of the problems due to the crisis.

What is evident here, in addition to the increase in the workload of teachers due to the volume and characteristics of the virtual materials, is the prevalence of the instrumental meaning of technology and, in urgency, the prevalence of tools, applications and programs,

instead of cultural meanings, of the exploration of new ways of connecting with the knowledge, learning and cultural expressions of young people [9].

3 FINAL REFLECTIONS

In this unprecedented situation due to its characteristics, we observe increased tensions around the teaching task in virtualization, which the pandemic imposed while making its inconsistencies visible. This leads to two important questions: on the one hand, the perspective of the recognition of the tasks and the rights of teachers, who saw their rights cut and their working conditions worsened in the last four years, and the right of young people to education. The lack of resources finds some groups at a more obvious disadvantage, causing an increase in the differences between the learning of those who are or are not connected, that is, the digital divide reflects and deepens other inequalities.

On the other hand, the possibility of taking advantage of the opportunity for teachers to carry out, and make students carry out, a critical and productive appropriation of digital resources. From a pedagogical dialogue option, teachers need co-training and collaboration in institutional work, both with peers and with young people. Faced with the heterogeneity of the student population, teachers need to develop strategies and use resources that have a direct influence on improving pedagogical work, make better use of available resources and promote work in the area of production and selection of materials of support for teaching, especially that carried out by the students themselves.

Some proposals explore the educational potential of digitally building what they call the "third space": a porous space between

school and media culture, since learning with digital media is located in that arena of the daily struggle that is where the creation of a new popular culture is at stake. In these days of isolation and social distancing, teachers and students "will be what we do with what the networks and the media wanted to do with us." [6].

It is necessary to broaden the spaces for public debate on the different forms and hegemonic discourses and to mobilize in defense of public education, to deepen the criticism of the modes of production, circulation and naturalization of discourses that put technologies (corporations) in the center of the educational process.

Precisely because ICTs and the media are not neutral and are managed by large economic groups, it is that part of our cultural struggle must aim not to exclude ourselves nor exclude young people from understanding new languages, and from a critical perspective to a celebratory vision of all technology and all novelties. It is the responsibility of the education system to provide essential resources to interpret, understand and question the messages that saturate children's daily lives, but at the same time, the tools to be active participants in the culture of the media [1].

How else to question the permanent messages that invalidate teachers and promote the advantages of autonomous learning with computers? The devices have to serve to increase the understanding of the meanings. It is a fundamental task to analyze and answer media discourses that disqualify teachers teaching work and public education, holding educators accountable for everything bad that happens in school, and attack their unions.

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