

Digital Inequality in Education in Argentina – How the pandemic of 2020 increased existing tensions

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Purpose of the paper

- To identify the central tensions in teachers' practices related to the use of digital technologies in education.
- In Argentina, these tensions have increased since 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.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. The context

- 2015-2019 late neoliberal policies in Argentina
 - abandonment of public services,
 - increase of unemployment, income inequality, and external debt,
 - the reduction of domestic consumption.
- 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
 - a decisive bet on the communicational, the marketing to the change of imaginaries and the common sense of society through the mass media.


In education

The government worked to build a market-friendly ideology,

- with mass media guiding the education agenda,
- the symbolic colonization of educational discourse by economic categories,
- the private appropriation of the public sphere,
- the reduction of the education budget, and
- dismantling all training programs on ICT for teachers.

In education

- The government 2015-2019 tried to limit the acquired rights of teachers, used the mass media to depreciate the position of teachers and educational organizations, and used evaluation methods in a competitive and punitive way.
- 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.



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.

1.2. ICTs discourses

ICTs meanings

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

Table 1: ICTs discourses and hidden problems

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

ICTs discourses

- 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, that the media reproduced.
- The teachers, in turn, many did what they could 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, amidst a terrible economic crisis and national debt, but opening up a horizon of favorable expectations.
- 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

- The 2020 school classes began, but compulsory social isolation was established a few days later. Then, all teachers had to respond, without plan or preparation, to give continuity and virtual support to the learning processes started and to come.
- The enormous variation in situations in their usual task, now has been multiplied.
- Those who have students with Internet connectivity, work from home, sending instructions, prepare and put materials online with different contents and activities, most with little or no experience in that type of tasks, activities that have to be corrected, take online exams, and all the administrative work -- amid the discomfort of being isolated, and the discomfort of the students themselves.
- As always, for the most part women have to share work with housework, but now all at home with children without school. In Argentina most teachers work on several courses and/or schools.

- Many students 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.
- 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.

Table 2: Teachers work before pandemic and with pandemic

Before pandemic	With pandemic
Pressure to use the ICT. Innovation discourse.	Increased pressure. Necessity, obligation
Individual work with large groups	Greater workload required by virtuality
Womens work: salaried work + domestic work	Womens work: 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

ICT MEANINGS

It is evident the prevalence of the instrumental meaning of technology and, in urgency, the prevalence of tools, applications and programs, instead of cultural meanings and the exploration of new ways of connecting with the knowledge, learning and cultural expressions of young people.

3. FINAL REFLECTIONS

- Increased tensions around the teaching task in virtualization, which the pandemic imposed while making its inconsistencies visible.
- This leads to some important questions:
 - the perspective of the recognition of the tasks and the rights of teachers.
 - the right of young people to education.
 - 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.
- 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.
- The devices have to serve to increase the understanding of the meanings.