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# **Decentralization and Educational Reform: What Accounts for a Decoupling Between Policy Purpose and Practice? Evidence from Buenos Aires, Argentina**

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## **Abstract**

*This study provides empirical evidence of the implementation outcomes of decentralization and education reform policies conducted in Argentina during the 1990s. The study examines how the reform was adopted at the provincial level, to what extent policy implementation matches national official mandates, and what role organizational factors play in the processes of policy implementation and outcomes. Results shed light on the political roots of organizational adaptation that motives a decoupling between policy directives, implementation, and outcomes.*

## **Introduction**

During the past decades, policies of education decentralization have been advocated and implemented worldwide (Davis & Guppy, 1997; Green, 1999). In the 1990s, almost every country in Latin America (hereafter, LA) was engaged in some sort of education reform that included decentralization. In contrast with the effectiveness and cost efficiency arguments advocated during the decentralization policies conducted during the 1980s, democratization and participation were the generalized arguments advanced during recent educational decentralization reforms (1). While the rationale and rhetoric used for decentralizing education were similar across countries, actual implementation varies across and within countries. Although students of education decentralization in LA have been describing some of the differences and similarities in policy implementation across countries, still very little is known about policy adaptation and outcomes at subnational levels (2).

The purpose of this study is twofold. The first goal is to provide empirical evidence of the implementation and outcomes of the education reform and decentralization policies conducted in Argentina during the 1990s. The second, to examine how the reform was adopted at the provincial level, to what extent policy implementation matches national official mandates, and what role organizational factors play in policy implementation and outcomes.

Argentina is an interesting case for many reasons. First, this case study shows an example of the various ways education decentralization and reform could take place and what it presupposes at subnational levels. Second, the whole decentralization and school restructuring process that took place in Argentina is a good illustration of response to global organizational changes in education than a real commitment from within. Third, this study shows how the organizational structure and politics impact on how change process unfolds and its outcomes.

The article is organized as follows. It starts by providing background information of the education restructuring process and decentralization reform conducted in Argentina in the early 1990s. A section that blends the organizational theory with my assumptions follows. In this section I argue that following global cultural changes, the Argentine government put into place at comprehensive process of school restructuring and decentralization that did not matched in practice at the provincial level (Meyer et al., 1997). Indeed, organizational environments may provide us an explanation for that decoupling (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Hannaway, 1993). Then, I present the methods and data collection process used in this study. Lastly, the results of the study and my concluding thoughts are presented. As result of a qualitative analysis, the case study of the province of Buenos Aires shows that political environments dictate policy adaptation and implementation. Policy adaptation and implementation responded to ways of accommodating management to individual political aspirations, which in turn make organizational changes remain unchanged to keep the status quo. The outcomes resulted in a mixed of centralized and decentralized practices that did not translate into democratization and participation at local and school levels, so prevalent in the policy discourse at the time (3).

### **Decentralization and School Reform in Argentina**

The end of authoritarian regimes and the return of civilian rule in many Latin American countries during the 1980s, the developments of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, and the decline of civic involvement in long-lasting western democracies during the last decades led to a worldwide revival of political and economic liberalization. In the political realm the emphasis was on democratization. In education, democratization became equated with decentralization on the basis of local sovereignty and increased responsiveness to the needs of diverse actors. Thus, decentralization was presented as a win-win situation helping,

to maintain political stability and democratize while at the same time, improve efficiency of public services, preserve macroeconomic stability,

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and to respond to the interest of all groups” (Burki et al., 1999, p.17).

In the early 1990s, following worldwide and regional trends, the Argentine government continued and emphasized a process of education decentralization that started in the late 1970s (4). Then, the central administration, under a military regime (1976-1983), transferred the financial responsibility of primary public and private subsidized schooling to the provincial governments. This decentralizing process reached its zenith in 1992 and 1993, when the democratic government of Dr. Carlos S. Menem (1989-1999), started a second process of decentralization and restructuring of the whole schooling system.

In 1992, the transfer, as the education decentralization process is called in Argentina, delegated the financial responsibility of all public and private subsidized secondary and tertiary schools that were still under the umbrella of the central administration to the 23 provincial governments and the city of Buenos Aires (5). After this *provincialización*, in 1993, the *Ley Federal de Educación* (Federal Education Law No. 24195—hereafter, FEL) was passed. This law institutionalized the transfer process through a comprehensive education reform initiative. Besides the curricular reform and schooling system restructuring launched, the FEL delegated to the provinces some decision making over the management and administration of schools (6). The central government, however, kept control as policy maker, coordinator, and controller of the national educational design. The central administration also retained control as administrator of compensatory programs for needy schools.

In addition the FEL established a key reform initiative at the school level to foster education quality, the development of the *Proyecto Educativo Institucional* (School Institutional Project, hereafter PEI). The central administration conceived the PEI as a pedagogical and school management tool that should ensure that the school organization is attuned with the organizational reform. Its purpose is to adapt national and provincial directives and curricular frameworks to the school environment and to foster democratic and participatory practices at the school level (Ley Federal, Art. 41 and 42) (7).

### **Theoretical Background**

Much of the literature that looks at issues of decentralization, in Latin America is either interested in situating the discussion at the discourse level, establishing connections between neoliberalism and economic restructuring policies (Torres & Puiggros, 1997; Arnove, 1997; Paviglianitti, 1991, among others), or in showing “what works” to increase student performance (McEwan & Carnoy, 1998; King & Ozler, 1998; Winkler & Gershberg, 2000). Others

were simply concerned in showing the mismatch between policy intention and practice at the national levels (Prawda, 1993; Gorostiaga Derqui, 2001; Braslavsky, 1999). Less research looks at the outcomes of decentralization reforms at subnational and school levels (Cigliutti, 1993; Munín, 1994; Dussel & Thisted 1995; Fuller & Rivarola, 1998; Rhoten, 2000). For the most part, analyses on education decentralization and reform efforts in Latin America have not paid so much attention to providing accounts of the nature of organizational environments and its impact on policy implementation, adaptation, and outcomes.

As stated above, education policy reform in Argentina responded to a worldwide institutional change in education. In a well known work Meyer et al. (1997) argues that this global cultural change produces isomorphism of structures and policies of nation-states, which not necessary coupled in practice. On the contrary, decoupling between policy purpose and results is the most common development,

Nation-states are remarkably uniform in defining their goals as the enhancement of collective progress.... [However,] ... decoupling is endemic because nations-states are modeled on an external culture..." (Meyer et al., 1997, pp.153-154).

Consequently, world cultural dominant models may experience a wide variety of forms during the adoption process. At central or provincial levels some external elements are easier to adopt than others, and even some of them could conflict or be inconsistent with local organizational structures (Meyer & Rowan, 1977, March & Olsen, 1989; DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Meyer et al., 1997).

According to Ramirez and Rubinson (1979) developing nations adopt symbolic education reforms through national systems, but they experience a great difficulty in producing change (8). Usually, under exogenous pressures to conform to worldwide validated education paradigms, new education structures are adopted. Yet, since educational innovations usually carry high levels of uncertainty and are loosely connected to school outcomes (Meyer & Rowan, 1978; Rowan, 1982), organizations may not want to go beyond the provision of a symbolic response. Ritual compliance allows school organizations to continue its activities unchanged. Meyer and Rowan (1978) suggest that this lack of change is rooted in what they call "logic of confidence" (p.101). The confidence actors have in each other is what maintains the organization out of disruption while keeping its legitimacy.

Following the same line of argumentation, Hannaway (1993) argues that although broad institutional environments may tell us about why schools and school organizations are similar, local political environments may explain the

degree of their differences (9). Her article examines the effects of political pressures and the system's centralization on public school districts in the United States. Evidence indicates that "the more pressured the political environment, the more likely it is that control is held by central, rather than subunit authorities." (Hannaway, 1993 p. 148) Thus, decentralization trends may experience more difficulties to succeed in politically pressured environments (McGinn & Street, 1986; Elmore, 1993; Weiler, 1993). However, how can policy success be measured in the case of interest here?

In line with ideas advanced by neoinstitutionalist students in organizational analysis, I argue that policy success in politically pressured organizational environments may not be measured in terms of the objectives of general policy mandates but in regards to the goals of its adaptation at the local level—provincial in this case. In other words, what is the purpose of policy adaptation and whose interests does this adaptation meet? I suggest that the mismatch between policy mandate and policy adoption (decoupling), or the implementation of symbolic practices that some scholars may consider "policy failure," may well serve the goals of the political elite to meet other interests and consequently to maintain the education organization unchanged. These arguments are addressed through the case study developed for this work.

## **Research Design, Methods, and Data Analysis**

### **Research Design**

This study uses a qualitative case study approach (Merriam, 1998). The process of building a case study involves in-depth data collection in preparation for the description of the cases of interest, confronting, validating, and generating a theoretical construct, which invites judgment and offers useful evidence for comparative analysis (Merriam, 1994). The unit of analysis in this study is the province of Buenos Aires, Argentina. Following Paton's typology of purposeful sampling (in Creswell 1994), this study uses a critical case sampling strategy. Critical cases are defined as those that can address the point of the study clearly or are particularly important to make some differentiations. Thus, this study focuses on this province for three main reasons that follow.

First, Buenos Aires is the larger province of Argentina and concentrates 38% of the country's total population. The province produces almost 50% of the country's agricultural production and 70% of Argentine cattle is raised in its lands.

Buenos Aires holds 40% of the total Argentine industrial buildings and 49% of the country's total job posts, of which 70% reside in the Greater Buenos Aires (Situación Social y Evolución Social Provincial, 1998; Consejo Federal de Inversiones, 1999). However, today, the most noticeable characteristics of this province are a bankrupt economy—with an estimated fiscal deficit of 1804 million dollars for the year 2001, holding 33% of the provinces' accumulated debt and a poverty rate of 35.3% for May 2000 (Evolución Gasto Público Social, 1997; Datos Provisionales Censo, 2001).

Second, Buenos Aires has had not only importance as an economic core, but as a “political treasure” since it counts for the 37% of the total Argentine electorate. Jointly, these two characteristics, gave the provincial administration a wide margin for negotiations with the national administration, and some sort of autonomy. It should be noted here that Buenos Aires was the last province in signing the education transfer agreement with the federal government. From the total amount of school services transferred from the national government to the provinces during the early 1990s, 33% of them were located in the province of Buenos Aires (10). The delay could have been caused by tensions between the provincial and central administrations on the amount of extra funds that should be allocated to cover the cost of the transfer process (Dussel & Thisted, 1995; Senén González, 2000).

Third, by 1875, before the consolidation of the nation-state and the creation of a national system of education, the Province of Buenos Aires institutionalized its system of education—one of the oldest in Argentina. The provincial *Ley de Educación Común No. 2688* (Law of Common Education) was primarily intended to organize and unify primary schooling; secondary education was initially provided in Argentina by the national government although some normal and secondary schools were created by the provincial administration (11). Probably the main feature of this foundational system of education was its decentralized structure of governance to the level of local school councils. However, the decision-making power assigned by law to these councils did not last for long. Even today local school councils have not regained the power they had when they were created.

#### **Data Gathering and Analysis**

During the time the researcher spent in the field, two qualitative procedures were conducted: content analysis and semi-structured interviews. The first procedure was performed during the entire period that the researcher was in the field. I used methods of content analysis to examine how national directives materialized in provincial official documents and legislation. This analysis provided me with general statements of policy rationale and objectives.

This method was an important tool during the first phase of the study and provided the backbone for the design and adjustment of the semi-structured interviews questionnaire.

Following this initial stage, the researcher conducted the second qualitative procedure: the semi-structured interviews. Interviews are the primary source of data collection. The researcher used them to get information and build the case study about the implementation, adaptation, and outcomes' perceptions of the comprehensive education reform. Two waves of personal interviews—typically 45 minutes to one hour in duration—were carried out (12). Thirty-three key informants were interviewed. Schoolteachers, parent association representatives, ministry officials at the provincial and national level, and local and provincial school administrators were interviewed. Interviewees were selected in various ways, but primarily by means of snowball sample and geographic base.

All written and narrative protocols were coded for common thematic statements that helped analyze the content of the data by level of analyses: national, provincial, and municipal. This method was used to examine actors' accounts of the decentralization and reform processes, changes, and the consequences of them. I limited the analysis to the content of their stories and to analyze "who" tells "what" and "why." Each interview was identified and categorized by actors' location, position in the administrative structure, role, and identification number. This differentiation allowed me to identify environmental from organizational representations of the policy process and to measure the effect of environmental and organizational characteristics in determining the outcomes.

## **Results**

### **Buenos Aires Socio-political Characteristics and Policy Adaptation**

Since 1988 the *Justicialista* party dominated Buenos Aires's political scene (13). It was particularly during Dr. Eduardo Duhalde's administration (1991-1999) that a process of state reform was implemented. Using the same rhetoric advocated internationally, regionally, and nationally, major changes in education took effect that included policies of education decentralization. Thus, Duhalde's administration implemented changes in the education framework to make the federal education reform possible. These changes were blended with the provincial administration's goals of equity, administrative efficiency, and work ethics (Programa de Gobierno, 1994), which the governor foresaw as important elements that would distinguish him from the unpopular turn of Menem's presidency.

Accordingly, Duhalde implemented policies of state reform not without a

quota of pure *Peronista* lineage. As expressed by a provincial official, “Duhalde could not get rid of traditional populist practices while implementing liberal type of policies, he needed them if he wanted to be reelected or for his future presidential aspirations” (EBAONo.2). Students of recent neo-populism in LA agreed that although governments faced fiscal constraints in state spending they managed to create material benefits to their constituency by, among other tactics, targeting social programs for the poor (Weyland, 1996).

Various reasons allowed Duhalde to act with substantial autonomy from the national government and the national party leadership to implement a robust social program tied to educational reform and decentralization initiatives in the province of Buenos Aires. Among those are: his strong ties with the provincial *Peronist* chapter, the resources the province receives from the central administration through the *Fondo de Reparación Histórica* (Historical Compensatory Fund), and external loans. As a local party member said, “Duhalde is the boss, he has the money . . .” (EBAPVLNo.1). Indeed, Eduardo Duhalde was the boss; he was and is still today the president of the Buenos Aires *Peronist* chapter, which had controlled the provincial legislature from 1991 to 1997.

Besides controlling the provincial legislature, “the two main *Justicialista* party factions have been distributing among themselves positions within the provincial and municipal administrations and electoral lists . . .” (EBAMPNo.2). Therefore, with the control of the bureaucracy, which means control over state resources and job post used for patronage, the provincial *Peronist* chapter on his side, a discretionary use of public funds, and a provincial public debt that increased over the years—from 1112 million pesos to 3864 million pesos in 1999 (Situación Social y Evolución Social Provincial, 1998; Dirección Provincial de Planeamiento, 2000), the governor was able to establish as *Plan Social* (social plan) side by side structural adjustment reforms.

According to official documents, the provincial *Plan Social* was based on three pillars, 1) active participation of the community, 2) creation of social welfare networks or solidarity networks at all administrative levels: provincial, regional, municipal, 3) decentralization and *regionalization* of the development and implementation of social programs. Education, of course, was at the center of the provincial social development program (*Programa de Gobierno, 1994*) and schools were an important piece in the distribution chain. In some cases, the implementation of this plan was through an *asistencialista* network (social welfare network) run by Dr. Duhalde’s wife and a group of party brokers widely known as *manazaneras* (Auyero, 2000).

The *Plan Social* was clearly an exchange of favors for votes and shed light on the convergence of patron-client relations and the social welfare policies



implemented by the *Justicialista* party in the province of Buenos Aires. This plan linked state funding, local political leaders, nongovernmental organizations, party brokers, and in some cases the school and local school councils. Its implementation was indeed decentralized and each unit of the implementation chain acted autonomously, but under control of the provincial executive. Duhalde and his wife soon became synonymous with the benefits distributed. The organizational structure established helped the governor to act ignoring the party's national-level leadership and to informally integrate its constituency to the provincial party structure in a disciplined manner (Levitsky, 2000). In sum, Duhalde's administration was able to adapt policy purpose to his personal political aspirations.

#### **Policy Implementation and Educational Structure in Buenos Aires**

In 1995 the provincial legislature passed the *Ley Provincial de Educación* No. 11.612 (Provincial Education Law—hereafter PEL). In terms of the proposed actions the law translated into the functional reorganization of the managerial structure with strong implications for the way schooling services were delivered. Since then, the provincial system was organized on the basis of a regional administrative decentralization. It is clear from the law that this organization was a strategic objective for the successful implementation of the provincial educational reform (Ley Provincial, Art. 46). This new regulation placed a strong separation between administrative and pedagogical functions, *deconcentrated* to the level of 134 school districts (14).

The new managerial structure is organized as follows (see Figure 1 below—Diagram of Buenos Aires Educational Organization). At the top of the organizational structure is the *Dirección General de Educación y Cultura* (General Directorate of Education and Culture—hereafter GDEC) with ministerial hierarchy. This unit has the overall responsibility of the education system. By its side works the *Consejo General de Escuelas* (General School Council). By law this council has the responsibility of policy planning and coordination; however, in practice it functions as a consultative body of the education executive. It is followed by sixteen *Jefaturas Regionales* (Regional Chiefs) for each branch of the education system (general basic education, hereafter EGB and *Polimodal* schools) appointed by the GDEC and reporting to the *Subsecretario de Educación* (under-secretary of education) and to the corresponding education branch directorate.

These *Jefaturas Regionales* oversee the operation of *Secretarías de Inspección* (Inspection Secretariats) at the district level, and *Supervisores de Distrito* (district supervisors), selected, although not always, on a competitive basis. *Secretarías de Inspección*, through districts' supervisors, are responsible

for carrying out the reform at the district level and of the bulk of administrative work in relation to the technical and pedagogical operation of the provincial education system. For example, they are responsible for filling teaching vacancies and providing statistical information to the GDEC on the standard functioning of the district such as teacher attendance, school drop outs, etc. (Ley Provincial, Art. 48).

At the district level, local elected school councils or boards initially created to be political participatory units became administrative mediators vis-à-vis the municipal administration, school-site cooperatives, and provincial authorities mostly to mobilize resources for schools within their district. Local school councils do not have budgets on their own, but they are in charge of processing funding requests for school lunches and the improvement of school buildings.

Another important point to consider is that municipalities in an attempt to adapt themselves to the new provincial administrative requirements, have set up education and culture directorates or secretariats that have started to play an active role within their limited formal authority. While municipalities have only an insignificant quantitative participation in the delivery of education services, in the majority of the cases at the pre-school level, they provide additional funding sources for the schools, mostly to be used for infrastructure work and other minor expenditures. Still the bulk of public schools funding, of which almost 90% goes to pay the administrators, teachers, and school staff salaries, comes from the provincial level (Ministerio de Economía, Buenos Aires, 1995, p. 42). Additional funding sources come from the *Asociación Cooperadora Escolar* (school-site cooperatives).

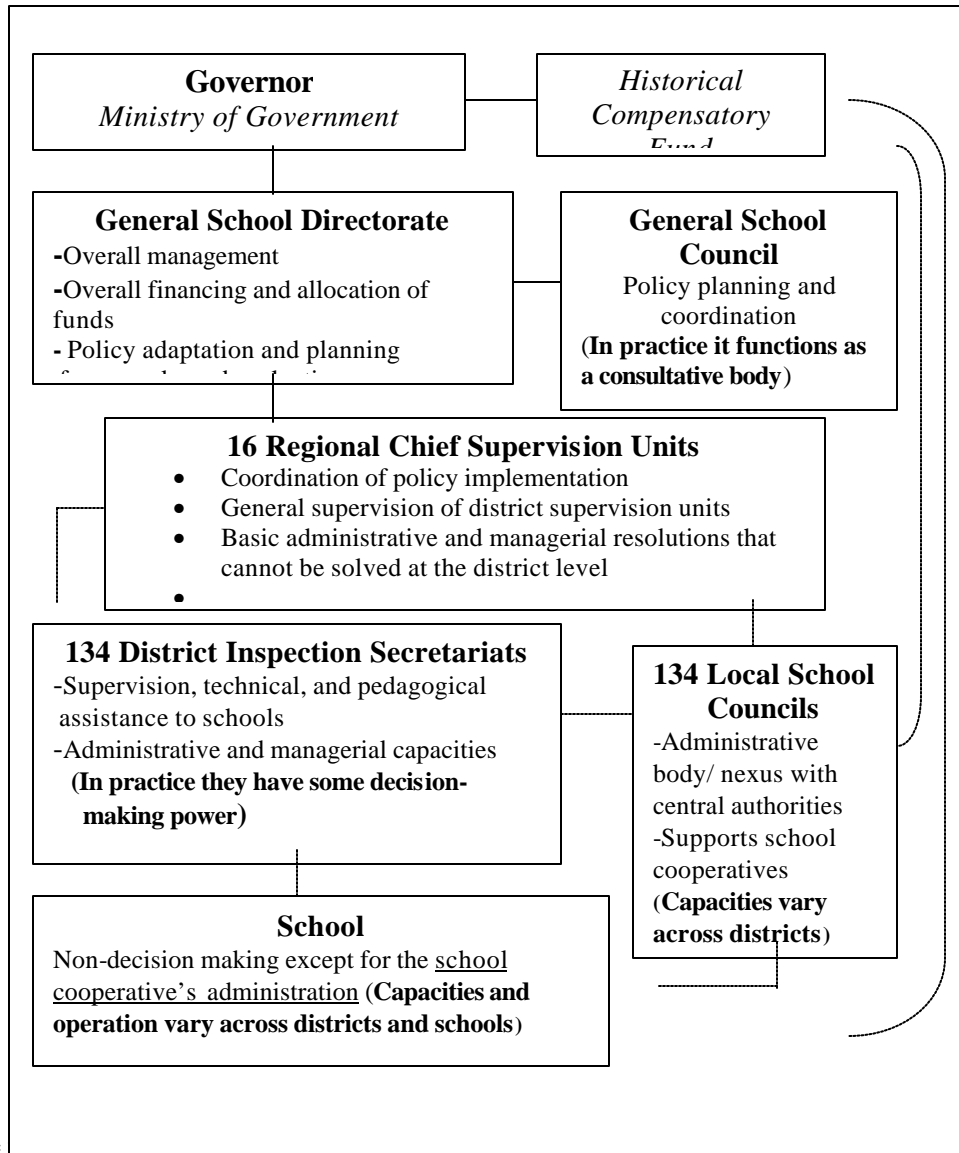
Each school in the province has a *cooperadora* to which parents voluntarily contribute with time and an optional monetary amount. The amount varies across school districts and the socio-economic situation of the family (15). The role of the school-site cooperative is “to assist the school in eliminating all the causes that have a negative affect on students.” (Manual de Cooperadoras Escolares, Art. 1) In addition, “the *asociación cooperadora* involvement has not to address technical, administrative, or disciplinary issues unless the school requires it to do so” (Art. 4). So even when both the FEL law and the PEL stress the role these associations have as participatory mechanisms, *asociación cooperadoras* have not been granted the authority to participate actively in the school other than with funding.

Paralleling the FEL, the school unit was at the center of the reform process (Ley Provincial, Art.19); however, its centrality was to be achieved through the implementation of programs of social welfare orientation. In a context of economic hardships, the provincial social plan took different forms at

the school level; school food programs for EGB schools and fellowships for students in *polimodal* education. Fellowships were administered in form of nine monthly allocations of 100 Argentine pesos to improve high school student retention.

Compensatory and social welfare programs were financed, in some cases, through alternative channels that used extraordinary funds from national transfers and external loans. These funds, instead of being distributed through the established channel—GDEC, local school councils, schools—were transferred directly from the provincial administration –sometimes through the *asistencialista* network, to either the school or individuals. As stated by an interviewee, “social plans were the direct connection between the government well, Duhalde, and the poor....” (EMPLNo.4); they have been used as a patron-client method to link the masses with the leader.

Figure 1

Buenos Aires Diagram of the Educational Organization

### General Perceptions of Buenos Aires Administration, Policy Implementation and Outcomes

Generally speaking, education informants have a negative perception about the decentralization process and the implementation of the federal and provincial education laws. The categories identified from the grassroots as representing the provincial administration are: *extremely bureaucratic* and *inefficient*, *vertically* structured and *inflexible*, *centralized*, *fragmented*, *lack of compromise*, *unplanned*, devoted to political *clientelism* and *particularisms*. In the words of the education administrator,

there is no clear and defined education policy in Buenos Aires . . .  
 .the provincial administration is trapped between the inertia of the reform process and an unclear diagnosis of the system's inefficiencies . . . *virtual vs. real* policy. (EBAPONo.1)

Probably it is the lack of an informed policy, adjusted to Buenos Aires' educational needs and not to personal political aspirations, the causes of the inoperative and chaotic perception actors have about the provincial administration. "Improvisation rules," declared a school supervisor (EVLSNo.3). Moreover, this situation could also be the reason for its inflexibility and fragmentation.

Some distinctions, however, are to be made since interviews underscore dissimilar concerns based on actors' position within the organizational structure. Criticism of general councilors, school councilors, chief inspectors and supervisors revolve around broad administrative, financial, operational and cultural issues, though not exclusively. However, both principals' and teachers' concerns are limited to the impact of the changes over the daily school life.

These attitudes constitute two patterns of thinking about educational issues. First, a *macro-micro linkage*; provincial education officials and administrators think about the system's changes and outcomes as part of larger forces, including national and state general policies. Their beliefs show that the education sector alone is not responsible for the changes and outcomes, but rather broader institutional changes. Moreover, an effective change in education requires political and institutional changes as well. Second, *micro-focused affairs*; in this case, actors' attitudes are of immediate concern and although aware of macro level changes, their focus is more concerned with local and provincial level effects. While school administrators and teachers do see national and provincial levels changes as the causes of education problems they do not

expect them to be solved politically but pedagogically. Actors' views about the reform implementation are as follows.

Macro-micro Linkages: Provincial education officials and education administrators' views

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, education actors' views reflect the difficulties the provincial system of education is facing after the implementation of the 1990s reforms. Provincial education officials and administrators suggest the difficulties of isolating the results of the educational changes from the broader Argentine picture.

Argentine institutions are in crisis, they usually lack specific planning, or when the rules are there no one respects them. Institutions work according to the person that leads them. Political representation is also in crisis; unions and political parties are unreliable. Citizens are voting less and less over the years and even blank ballots are increasing in number. Besides, radical changes are implemented here that are copies, shapeless embryos, and before any result could be seen, either central authorities change and with them some minor changes occur—there is usually no continuity from administration to administration—or if the same people stay they manage to change something for electoral purposes (EVLPS No.1).

According to the interviewees' accounts, this pattern is evidenced through the implementation of the educational reforms. Once schools were transferred, "the problem then became the provincial administration." Duhalde wanted to complete the process of reform no matter under what circumstances: "*without consensus . . . it was improvised, disorganized, and with harmful results for the provincial education system*" (EBAPANo.10). Interviewees' emphasized that the system is formally hierarchically centralized at the provincial level but since control mechanisms are loosely attached with one another they leave space for *personalism* and *clientelism*. Although this contradicts arguments that support decentralization, in this particular case decentralization produced a formal centralization of control at the provincial level but at the same time opened space for reinforcing traditional informal political practices. This paradox is apparent through school councilors' accounts,

Sometimes, intentionally or by bureaucratic inefficiency, while one school receives three subsidies for repairing the same problem others receive

none. Usually the rules are there, but the procedures are unclear, sometimes obscure . . . (EVLCENo.4)

Supervisors agreed that the process by which decisions are made and implemented are generally coming from the top and are not always transparent, a fact that indicates that many of these decisions represent less systematic efforts to include different sectors of the education community and consequently more short-term political investments. Supervisors and councilors pointed out that some irregularities applied to the distribution of food programs and scholarships. Indeed, a chief supervisor of *polimodal* education declared, “the problem is that those scholarships are not merit base, they have been granted without any control whatsoever.” (ELMIJNo.2)

From their arguments one can agree that administrators are not as critical of the reform in itself as they are with its implementation and practice. Provincial administrators and education leaders attributed the limited results of the reform to national-level economic conditions, market approaches implemented, and to financial constraints that the province encountered after its implementation. However, their main concern revolved around the celerity and unplanned process of reform, unsupportive environment, and the cultural shock experienced by those institutions that were previously under national tutelage,

since the process was conducted by force and, without the necessary means to carry it out, it soon became a race against time, an accelerated implementation without resources and needed infrastructure, and even worse, a cultural shock that end up in a clear discrimination from both sides [national and provincial] (EVLCENo.3).

Interviews reveal a strong agreement about different cultural patterns between provincial and transferred national schools (16). This difference is identified as rooted in the political and administrative environment in which schools have been operating. From these arguments it is possible to speculate that, unintentionally or not, schools reproduce the pattern and act in consequence of the organizational environment they are a part. Thus, the school organization adapts certain practices that become the norm. Therefore, as soon as national schools and national inspectors found themselves in an unfamiliar environment, they not only resisted it but they also tried to reinforce previous practices to maintain their identity and status quo. In fact, the culture of national schools still persists and transcends geographical boundaries in Argentina to the extent that these schools are still informally called national schools.

The tension between organizational pressures to change and national schools' resistance was at the origin of conflicts outside and within the school organizations. The tension within the system was clearly expressed by a school supervisor, who said

In the first meeting we had together, the transferred [transferred supervisors] –we called them pejoratively in that way, and us [provincial supervisors] could not understand each other, we were talking in different languages. After hours of hot discussions, a transferred supervisor suddenly stood up and said, are you [referring to the provincial supervisors] and the province going to tell us how to run our schools? But from that moment they knew there was no other option than to accept they were in the province (EVLSNo1).

Both groups—former national and provincial administrators and teachers—presented throughout our conversations a certain resentment of each other. In the words of a former national inspector, “before, administrative and pedagogical issues were handled easily than today. Here everything is based on negotiations . . . this shows the lack of administrative capacity the province has.” (EBACINo.1) On the other hand, chief inspectors and provincial supervisors agreed that, “in spite of the resistance, former national supervisors ended up accepting that they were doing a more desk-based type of work, but in the province you have to put your feet in the mud . . .” (EBACI No2)

As I mentioned before, the reason for this unfortunate situation was rooted in the characteristics and practices of each distinctive education system, yet schools did work under different regulatory frameworks, which generated the cultural contradictions presented.

#### Micro-focused Affairs: School Administrators and teachers' views

How do the problems previously identified by supervisors, chief inspectors, general education councilors, administrative officials, and local school councilors affect the daily school operation (17)? According to teachers and school administrators, those problems affected the schools in many ways to the extent that they produced a general deterioration of the quality of services schools provide. First, both teachers and school directors mentioned the limited autonomy they have today and the instances of control that have been added since the last reforms were in place. Before, some decisions about the management of provincial schools were made at the local level through the local school council, but not any more. Even, “National schools used to have more



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autonomy, not intended though, but real.” The principal mentioned that this autonomy allowed her to select her team, portrayed as “a group of committed, experienced, and motivated teachers. Today that is not the case.” According to her comments, what rules is the unfortunate situation of a great number of professors’ *taxi* with a negative impact on the school. “Even though teachers put so much effort from their part, it is impossible to feel attached to an institution where you only spend two hours twice a week, she said” (EVLSP No.2) (18).

Furthermore, according to principals’ and teachers’ accounts, teachers’ appointment instability affects in-school communication and collaboration, which according to the FED is a fundamental piece of the successful development of the school institutional project. Even when in many cases teachers and principals reported the successful development of the PEI, they had recognized the fundamental role principals had in its drafting. The design of a PEI requires having a permanent teaching body that could establish some compromise, something “that is not happening in a *polimodal* public school in the province of Buenos Aires today. (EVLTPNo2)

In addition, since “the process of teacher selection is not completely transparent—sometimes very political, and salaries grew less day by day, the teachers we receive are usually not as qualified as they used to be. ” (EVLSPNo.2) This concern regarding the general deterioration of the teacher profession was also a matter of concern among other administrative officials, scholars, and stakeholders (19). Teachers and administrators complained about the lack of pedagogical support they received during the implementation of the reform. In spite of the courses and materials administered by the National Ministry of Education, those elements proved to be insufficient and of very low quality. The consequence then, “is more pressure on the school because at the end we are going to be blamed about the poor schools outcomes” (ELMTNo.2).

School administrators identified another organizational problem that leads to conflictive situations within the schools; that is, the incorporation of 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade to the formerly primary schools.

In many cases, as the construction of new classrooms in formerly primary schools is in process, 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grades operate as a semi-independent unit within our *polimodal* school. So we have kids and ex-primary schoolteachers working in our school but under different rules and objectives. This [situation] is a source of conflictive relations (EVLSPNo.2).

It is worth mentioning that throughout the interviews issues of funding and how those scarce resources are distributed were points of concern among school administrators, particularly among those principals who cannot count on their school cooperatives and do not receive extra funds from the municipalities. Since schools were transferred and the reform implemented,

more pressure was put on us to search for funds. One may say that since there is a provincial office that deals with infrastructure issues and we have a local council that acts as a liaison to place our funding requirement, things will be easier. Well, that is not the case. Depending on the type of repair needed, our request requires the signature of the supervisor and then goes to La Plata [central administration]. Moreover, the whole process is highly influenced by the connections you have; as everything in this country (ELMSP No.3).

Overall, the underlying assumption from the micro level affairs is that a system that attempted to distribute bureaucratic control negatively affected schools, particularly through blending of politics, inefficiency, and a vertical accountability mechanism.

## Conclusions

Recent decentralization and reform attempts in Argentina were designed at the national level under the premise that first, reforms will follow, and second that reforms will result in uniform implementation patterns and outcomes. The case of Buenos Aires provides an account of a decoupling process between national policy mandates and policy adaptation and implementation. The underlying idea presented here is that within the confines of certain geographical areas, political environments determine the actual game in town. It is evident from this study that policy adaptation and implementation of decentralization and education reforms carried out in Buenos Aires responded to various ways of accommodating managerial functions to individual political aspirations, which in turn make organizational changes remain unchanged or to keep the status quo.

From the findings presented in this study one can see that even when a formal centralized control to intermediate level units is what predominates, loose control, inefficiency, and the system's fragmentation open up space for *clientelism* and *personalistic* practices carried out through a decentralized informal organizational arrangement that, in some cases, involved the school. However, this decentralized informal organizational arrangement did not translate into democratization and participation at the local level, so prevalent in the decentralization and school reform policy discourse. On the contrary, the organization of the provincial education system prevents that from happening, as shown through the accounts of school administrators and teachers. Indeed, former national school and local school councils lost control over the daily school operation. Also, in-school participation and collaboration that schools were supposed to reach with the new managerial arrangement and the developing of the school PEI were rarely achieved.

Although this study was designed and meant for Argentina, its results do have significance for scholars worldwide, particularly those interested in decentralization policies and the dynamics, development, and outcomes of institutional environments. It is also relevant for policy makers in that it shows that policy design and practice do not usually match. Furthermore, the case at hand suggest that policies of decentralization aimed at promoting democratization and involvement at local levels fail to promote those expected results.

As the academic community continues studying the reforms analyzed in this study, more evidence about the pressures of the organizational environment on policy implementation and adaptation as well as reform outcomes at the local level will be provided. Further research will also shed more light on how actors' accounts about schooling vary according to their position within the educational organization, a fact evident in the case of Buenos Aires, Argentina.

## Notes

(1) For a detailed discussion about the different rhetoric used during the 1980s and the 1990s education decentralization reforms see Rothen (2000). For the arguments exposed during the 1990s education reforms see OAS (1998), UNESCO (1992), and Feinberg and Rosenberg (1999).

(2) For cross national descriptions of education decentralization policies and implementation in LA see McGinn and Street (1986); Hanson (1989); Prawda (1993); Winkler (1993); Fiske (1996), among others.

(3) In previous works, Astiz et al., 2002, and Astiz, 2002, I detailed the characteristics of mixed models of governance in education and their outcomes.

(4) Policies of education decentralization in LA have been encouraged by intergovernmental and international lending institutions. See Arnove (1997), Torres and Puiggros 1997.

(5) See *Ley de Transferencia de Servicios Educativos* No. 22049. For a detailed description of the transfer process see Senén González and Kisilevsky (1993).

(6) Besides regulating the distribution of responsibilities between the central and subnational governance levels, the 1993 Federal Education Law introduced a new schooling organization, which consists of a three-level system of one-year compulsory initial education, a nine-year compulsory basic education (*EGB*), and a three-year optional high school education (*Polimodal*). In the province of Buenos Aires high school education is also compulsory.

(7) The national administration proposed some basic institutional guidelines that all schools in the country should follow. Also, in 1994 the national administration started a program called *Nueva Escuela (New School)*. This program was intended to provide technical assistance to the schools in the design of their institutional projects.

(8) Usually this process takes place under the leadership of professional authorities (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991 and Meyer et al., 1997).

(9) DiMaggio and Powell (1991) also addressed this point.

(10) The passing of the law did not translate into an immediate transfer; especial agreements with each provincial government were still needed. Those agreements defined the pace of the transfer process and the funds that the central administration should transfer along with the transferred schools. The education transfer agreement between Buenos Aires and the central administration was signed in 1994 after a financial accord by which the central administration compromised to transfer 90,900 million pesos/dollars to the provincial government was made. See *Convenios de Transferencias Educativas* (1992-1998).

(11) This gives an idea of how complex the system of education was in Argentina before the transfer process initiated in the late 1970s and the 1990s. Basically, three administrative education systems coexisted: national, provincial, and municipal.

(12) Interviews were conducted between August 1998 and January 2000.

(13) The *Justicialista* Party is widely known as *Peronismo* or Peronist Party. It is usually characterized as a populist movement. For more information about the party characteristics see Murmis and Portantiero (1970).

(14) Students of decentralization reforms distinguish among types of decentralization initiatives depending upon the degree of control and authority that is transferred to lower level administrative units. *Deconcentration* is one of those types. According to Rondinelli et al. (1983) *deconcentration* is the process by which administrative responsibilities are transferred to lower level or field agencies, but under strict control of the central unit or authority. For more information about this typology see Hanson (1997) and Lauglo (1996).

(15) *Cooperadoras* usually organize different fundraising events for the schools and/or look for private contributions. However, *cooperadoras*' activities are not limited to fundraising; they organize school trips, extra curricular courses, and social activities for the students and their families.

(16) *National vs. Provincial System of Education*. Since its origins, the national system of education was less bureaucratized than its provincial counterpart. Except for national inspectors, there were no other administrative units between the Ministry and the schools. Due to the geographical distance between the national administration and the school and the small inspector-school ratio, greater school autonomy was evidenced in national schools. Also,

secondary-school principals were able to choose their teaching staff according to national regulations. In addition, almost all teachers concentrated all their instructional hours at the same school—something unusual in the provincial system.

The national education administration also implemented a system called *Proyecto 13*, or project 13, a program oriented towards the improvement of education quality through an enhanced curriculum, extracurricular activities and lessons, and a teacher-student advising program. In some cases these schools even implemented an International Baccalaureate program for highly motivated students run and administered by a group of parents, teachers, and the school administration.

In combination, all the characteristics described above created a highly positive image of national school performance among the Argentine population and, therefore, their increasing demand. Until 1983, a highly competitive entrance examination was required to be admitted into national secondary schools. Based on the year's enrollment demand and available vacancies each institution determined its admission benchmark.

This picture differed greatly from the situation of provincial schools. Schools, and in turn, local school councils did not have a say in teachers' appointments process. In addition, funds for infrastructure were channeled through more than one office and in an unorganized manner. The process of teachers' appointments was and is still today ruled by the *estatuto docente*, or teachers' contract. The *estatuto docente*, which was approved in the late 1950s, is a point of continuous confrontation between central authorities and teachers' unions. The *estatuto docente* established that teachers handle decisions on teachers' appointments and promotions through a special board. This board is responsible for assigning points for teachers' qualification and tenure.

Teachers, on the other hand, generally toil under oppressive conditions, unclear and very political selection processes, and unstable work situations. They teach one or two hours in one school, two or three in another, and they have sometimes hours in a third or fourth school. Because of this, they are called *taxi* teachers. For all the reasons presented above, lack of commitment, fragmented institutions, and a general apathy are the norm in the schools that belong to Buenos Aires.

(17) In this section I purposefully left aside any evidence of parents and community involvement at the school level since they vary across local environments. I addressed this point in another paper.

(18) I included the code assigned to this interview only once since all the

quotations are from the same interview.

(19) About this point, see Braslavsky and Birgin (1995).

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