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The Educational Reform in Argentina: A Look at the Labor Trajectories and Teaching Conditions

Reforma educativa en Argentina: una mirada sobre las trayectorias laborales y las condiciones de trabajo docente

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Abstract

Eleven years after the implementation of Argentina's Federal Law of Education, this paper offers a critical analysis of the impact this educational reform has had on the career paths and working conditions of teachers in the Argentine educational system. The changes brought about in the economic and political field, the redefinition of the relationship between State and Society, and its impact on the labor market constitute the framework or context for our study of the reform. We maintain the methodology of analyzing labor

trajectories, in order to recover the voices of the protagonists, in an attempt to break with the representations built from an external view only. We have attempted, through a cooperative construction of meaning, to capture the dynamic aspects by relating the social practice of the actors with the structural aspects already mentioned.

Key words: Educational reform, teachers, labor trajectories, work/teaching conditions, professionalization.

Resumen

A 11 años de la Ley Federal de Educación en Argentina, el presente trabajo propone un análisis crítico del impacto que ha tenido esta reforma educativa, operada en su contexto sobre las trayectorias laborales y condiciones de trabajo de los docentes del sistema educativo argentino. Los cambios provocados en el ámbito de la economía y la política, la redefinición de las relaciones Estado-sociedad y su impacto en el mercado de trabajo, constituyen el contexto en el que enmarcamos la reforma. Sostenemos la metodología de análisis de *trayectorias laborales*, con el fin de rescatar las voces de los protagonistas, en un intento de quiebre con las representaciones construidas sólo a partir de la mirada externa. Intentamos, mediante una construcción cooperativa de significados, captar los aspectos dinámicos a partir de relacionar la práctica social de los actores, con los aspectos estructurales ya mencionados.

Palabras clave: Reforma educativa, docentes, trayectorias laborales, condiciones de trabajo docente, profesionalización.

Introduction

This paper proposes a critical analysis of the impact of the new regulations and of the educational reform, brought about in this context in connection with the career paths and working conditions of teachers in the Argentine educational system. We focus our attention on the regularities of this process in the Province of Buenos Aires, and particularly in the General Pueyrredón District in which this analysis was developed.

The changes produced in the economy and politics, the redefinition of state/society relations, and in particular their impact on the labor market, provide the context for the reform. Analysis of the broad social space permits the identification of new relational rules that structure new practices. In this sense, we have borne their usefulness in mind for understanding the discontinuities and ruptures which the reform movement produced in the institutional life and social practices of actors in the system.

The global scenario imprints certain regulations on processes produced in Latin American countries, where it is possible to discern common guidelines. These guidelines appear in the recommendations of international organizations that propose significant changes in the education-sector dynamics and modifications in the mechanisms of performance. The new educational paradigm is built around

categories that redefine the institutional organization, the vision of knowledge and the professionalization of teaching. The elements identified, together with the policies of adjustment that mark today's labor market, have a strong impact on the working conditions of the teaching collective, and demand new strategies for integration and system maintenance. We hold that the combination of these factors is a key element in shaping a new model of social regulation.

As a background for this work we take a study we concluded in 1999. It was entitled "Professional teaching careers in a context of a precarious labor market", and in it which we analyzed the professional trajectories of teachers in the General Pueyrredón District (Buenos Aires) at a time when the reform had just begun to be implemented. Progress since then has led the complete restructuring of the provincial education system. This which motivated our interest in going back to that study, in order to review the directions detected then. We have also taken as a source of information the study done by the International Institute for Educational Planning, Buenos Aires (IIEP) in collaboration with the Argentine Ministry of Education (May 2000), and data provided by the General Pueyrredón District School Board (Province of Buenos Aires).

The categories of analysis around which we developed the current proposal are the same as those that guided the earlier work. In this sense, we return to the idea that the political, economic and social changes that characterize the neoliberal restructuring appear as a holistic phenomenon, which reshapes the patterns of production, distribution and consumption of goods and services. These transformations of a general nature have their correlation in the changes produced at the level of the educational systems, which in conjunction with the transformations of the structure and dynamics of the labor market, affect teachers' work conditions.

We have characterized the institutionalization of *mass schooling* as a phenomenon typical of modernity. Modern states assume the task of socialization and education as social *control* by linking, as Popkewitz (1994) says, the State's need with the subject's self-government. The appearance of the teaching profession has been connected to this process in which the school naturalizes practices, rules and procedures that order, frame, and classify the world at the same time they carry with them the potential to organize and configure individual identities. In this sense, we go back to what the author argues: that "the best way to understand the reform is to consider it as a part of the social-regulation process" p. 143). As Llomovatte noted (1999), referring to current educational reforms, the consequences of globalization are displayed in the educational environment in the form of structural, curricular, institutional and management reforms, which constitute the political and educational proposal of the 90s. He adds: "In this way is defined the construction of subjectivities appropriate to the hegemonic project of the decade" (p. 35).

In this scenario of changes and transformations, we focus our attention on the determiners that govern the *working conditions of teachers* and try to identify the

ways in which they are processed through the analysis of their *career paths*, guided by the assumption that, as Whitty, Power and Halpin (1999) point out:

“The allusions relative to further professionalization appearing in the reform, mask the fact of an effective proletarianization of teachers’ work, both on the ideological level, through the loss of control over politics, and on the technical plane, through a more rigid specification of the content and rhythm of their work” (p. 65).*

We propose the methodology of *analyzing career paths* to retrieve the voices of the protagonists, seeking a break with the representations constructed on the basis of external appearance. We hold that the cooperative construction of meaning will permit the capture of dynamic aspects, from relating the actors’ social practice with the structural aspects which we have mentioned.

I. Some methodological issues

The study was organized around two dimensions of analysis: that having to do with structural issues (economic, social, and political context of the educational reform, funding sources, historical configuration of the teaching profession in the country, requests based on transformation); and that concerned with individuals (their stories, their career paths, the impact that structural issues are having on the effective inclusion of teachers in the labor market). This last aspect conforms to the microsocial perspective we proposed to approach from a sociological perspective.

The information available and the new questions arising from it acted as “organizations/concepts” (Saltalamacchia, Colón and Rodríguez, 1992), in that they acquired the character of conceptual references and guided the investigation of the teachers.

After the bibliographic analysis that allowed us to discuss contextual issues, we used the in-depth interview as a technique for the second stage. In it, we worked with stories of middle-class teachers (men and women), practicing in the city of Mar del Plata (General Pueyrredón District), selected from an intentional purposive sample and following a chronological sequence in the analysis. Some of those selected were interviewed in the previous study; this allowed us to compare their current views with those they expressed at that time, and to analyze continuities. In the interviews, we adopted the biographical focus, not in order to follow *life stories*, but to condense teachers’ *work trajectories*; seeking to reconstruct retrospectively, insofar as possible, the chronicle of their training and work in the way most closely related to their experiences, so as to capture the dynamic aspects based on relating the actors’ social practice with the structural factors.

* Translator’s note: As the original English versions of the works originally produced in that language, and cited in this work, were unavailable for use in this translation, it was necessary to employ the technique of back-translation, for which we offer our most humble apologies.

As in the previous study, special attention was paid to periods of change or “inflection” (Sautu, 1999), historical or personal, for their influence on the paths’ continuity or change. This assumes a theoretical hypothesis (Godard and Cabanes, 1996): that there are “key moments” or “nodes” in people’s lives, moments of “transition” or “passage” that merit special observation if we are to understand important aspects of these. One works on a restricted time taken from their biographies, and on *temporal rationings* (nodes or key moments), but resurrecting their past history and particularly their representations about these phenomena.

An event becomes a *node* when it effects a change in the life of the person; in this case it configures a *bifurcation*, the road ceases to be linear, it opens, changes the person’s destiny and is transformed into a central issue of the research. This focus is different from narrative structure (hermeneutic), in which the story is built with nothing a priori. Here the basis is the hypothesis that there is a series of events which have become central to the construction of a career course.

In this way, based on a structural approach, exogenous data are taken under the assumption that to understand individual biographies we must refer to external or social temporalities. The interviewee’s professional calendar will crosscross other personal calendars, since the individual is not one story, but is constructed as such, based on several stories (Cordero, 2001).

1.2. Teachers and professional identity

The establishment of teaching as a profession coincided with contemporary forms of schooling, the consolidation of the modern school building required professionals with specific training and formal accreditation for transmitting culture and the “truths of science.” Getting a degree placed teachers in the situation of being carriers of “legitimate knowledge”, and on this imaginary concept the profession was built, at the service of the state, and carrying a mystique that highlighted the sense of sacrifice and material selflessness. The symbolic prestige which the official discourse assigned to the task, marked the self-perception of its members, and raised it above the unfavorable working conditions.

The configuration of the teacher’s professional identity has been a controversial task. The high degree of job structuring, the bureaucracy based on a reliance on state projects, and the diversity and ambiguity of their practices, situated it in a particular social space. After the organization of educational service, teaching was established as a public service job. Its agents always maintained a relationship of dependency, with the state as employer, whose centralized control extinguished the possibility of initiative while ensuring the enforcement of each injunction. The regulations imposed precise limits on professional autonomy.

We found in the historical configuration of teaching, some constraints on the construction of this social group’s *identity*: the “redeemer” and “missionary” character assigned to the task made it difficult for teachers to see themselves as

laborers. The previously-mentioned dependence on the state, the narrow margin of autonomy in decision making, the meager wages, the weakness of the training, have called into question its character as a profession.

To understand the difficulties involved in defining teaching as a profession, it must be placed in the broader context of professions in general, so as to orient its analysis toward the dimensions involved in the work of teaching, and to establish the extent to which its particularities place it nearer to or farther from that characterization. Moreover, the processes of modernization being managed in recent decades, especially the changes in the labor market, constitute new factors that structurally affect the ways of organizing professional work.

We agree with Tenti Fanfani (2002), who says that despite the strategic importance of human factors in the provision of education services, reform policies tend to rely more on the institutional and legal devices than on pedagogical agents to change education. Teachers become agents of structures acting above them (laws; regulations; content; funding and management models); their practices are governed by objective orders, and leave little room for professional development.

The teacher's distress is linked to the contradictions that characterize the exercise of his** office. Its action is intended to produce certain changes in the subjectivity of students. The development of his activity requires the mastery of skills and techniques unique to his work, and learned in a particular space and time. Although he works in institutionalized contexts, his labor in the classroom has a certain degree of autonomy. These characteristics, which allow him to be defined as a *professional in education*, are opposed to his status as a salaried employee who works in a dependent relationship; a worker who frequently is unionized and must fight for his salary (not honorariums) and his working conditions.

To this is added the fact that the teacher's work today is part of a new cadre of more-complex relationships: substantive changes in politics, economy and culture, submit the school to a set of demands that result in new requirements for the professional profile. The changes in family structure, the effects of the powerful culture industry, the acceleration of changes in scientific and technological knowledge, are mixed into the daily school life along with social exclusion, extreme poverty and related phenomena (violence, malnutrition, abandonment), which hinder and take away from the specificity of the scholastic task. These issues keep the teachers' professional identity in a state of crisis, and require supporting policies of professionalization aimed at developing new and more-complex competencies.

** Translator's note: Before the feminist movement arose, in situations including both genders it was customary to use the masculine pronoun. Today, however, pronouns of both genders are used to avoid what is now seen as sexist language. To avoid the awkwardness of a continual repetition of such forms as "s/he", "his/her", in this paper we shall sometimes use the feminine pronoun, and sometimes the masculine.

II. Some facts to consider

The following is a series of data from research requested by the Ministry of Education and conducted by the IIEP-Buenos Aires (2000), which worked with a sample of 2,384 teachers of both sexes, from around the country, and belonging to the education levels *basic general* (EGB) and *polymodal*¹ during August and September of 2000. Since these are the latest official data, it seemed interesting to check them against the stories of teachers whose professional careers we have investigated in our study.

2.1. Demographic aspects

Research shows that women outnumber men in the field of teaching. Only 17.4% of primary-school teachers are male. Among teachers in higher educational levels, feminization is even greater: there is 1 male teacher for every 14 female teachers, while at the middle-school level the average ratio is 1 male teacher for every 2 teachers. In some regions of the country there is a greater presence of men, for example in the NOA (Northwest region)² and in Patagonia. The proportion of men is greater in general among younger teachers, showing in recent years a considerable number of men with a greater predisposition toward teaching.

2.2. Position in the income structure

There is a marked difference between *primary-school teachers*, and *secondary-school/university teachers*. The incidence of poverty among the former is almost three times higher than among the latter. Of the first group, 11.6% are poor, while of the second, only 4.2% are so. Geography is important, to the extent that the incidence of poverty in teachers in the NOA provinces is more than six times higher than in those living in metropolitan areas of Buenos Aires.

In most cases the remuneration for teachers' work is not the only family income. For 55%, it is less than half; for 22% its contribution represents between 50% and 99%, and in 23% of cases, teachers are the sole providers of income for their households. Based on current earnings, 45% of primary-school teachers and 25% of upper-level teachers are not able to sustain an average family above the poverty line (the value of the poverty line for a family consisting of two adults and two children is 536 Argentine pesos, equivalent to \$185 USD).³

The incidence of poverty increases as teachers' age decreases. This allows us to hypothesize that in the group of people who show interest in teaching there is a shift towards lower-income sectors.

2.3. Teachers' perception regarding their social trajectory

Most teachers have a higher educational level than do their parents. The primary-school teachers come from lower-income families than the upper-level teachers. Thus, while among the former, only 7.5% come from a family of professionals, in the latter group the proportion rises to 13.4%. Nearly 20% of teachers in general come from families whose head did not finish primary school, and this percentage rises to 68% if we consider those who did not finish high school. Today, 85% of these teachers have a higher level of education than their fathers, and only 8% have less.

In relation to the social trajectory of teachers, a third consider that their situation is better than that of their parents when their parents were children; one third consider themselves equal, and one-third, worse.

When imagining their economic future, a third could not predict how their economic situation would be in 5 years. A third believed it would be worse, and only 13.3% imagined a future better than the present.

2.4. The labor of teaching

Just over half the teachers work in primary schools, and almost 30% work in high schools or universities. Those who teach special subjects, and those of the beginning level complete the universe of teachers.

As for to those of mid-level education, more than half are upper-level/university teachers, and just over 20% teach at universities, but have no degree in education. The profile is significantly different for the genders. Among women teachers, 65% have a degree in middle-level education, while among men this value is reduced to 39%.

Sixteen percent of teachers say they are currently working in establishments where the socioeconomic status of students is low. However, 30% had their first teaching job in this type of establishment. Moreover, while this study focused on teachers who work in urban schools, 18% of them began teaching in multigrade rural schools.

One of the objective dimensions in teachers' work is the stability in the position. In other words, it can be considered as a characteristic for which there is a legal term: what is called a "review situation". In this sense, the data indicate that 71% of teachers are full-time employees, 23.7% are interim/part-time, 19.8% are substitutes, and only 2.0% have tenure.

On the average, teachers are paid 731 Argentine pesos monthly. Twenty-five percent earn less than 400 pesos a month, while another 25% have an income of 1000 pesos or more.

Seniority is a major determinant of the remuneration level. A teacher with five years of seniority earns an average of 6.1 pesos per hour. For those with more than 25 years, the pay is 8.2 pesos—35% higher.

2.5. Educational reform

There were more positive views than negative ones in two respects only: evaluating the reform in relation to pedagogical innovations (37.1% positive opinion against 22.1% negative and 31.1% neutral); and the methods and content of teaching (37% positive opinions against 24.3% negative and 30.6% neutral).

Only 9.2% of teachers considered the reform positive in relation to their working conditions, while the vast majority—58.7%—said it had negative effects. Only a small minority of 12.2% believed that the reform had positive results in terms of the education system's coverage.

2.5.1. Dimensions of the Reform

In the following, we will identify those dimensions which are the object of our study in this first stage.

a) Common-core content. The elevated consensus (70.4% agree or strongly agree) obtained by this dimension of the transformation process varies according to several factors. It is higher than the national total among teachers under 29 years of age (74.1%), particularly in the Northeast (79.7%), and to a lesser extent in the Northwest (74.3%) and Cuyo (73.1%); among those who work in privately-managed establishments (73.1%); among those of low (74.7%) and low-middle socioeconomic status (73.4%) and among primary-school teachers (77.9%), especially in comparison to high-school/university teachers, where the level of agreement decreases to 61.8%.

b) The new structure of the system (initial, EGB, polymodal). Here, teachers' opinion is almost equally divided: 48.9% agree, 44.4% disagree. The agreement weakens and falls below 50% among teachers with experience of social decline and those who perceive themselves as belonging to the lower and lower-middle classes of the social structure.

c) Federal Teacher Education Network. The vast majority of teachers participated in some of the courses offered through the Federal Network of Teacher Education. More than half (exactly 52.4%) agreed with this program, and over a third disagreed.

Teachers in the AMBA (Buenos Aires area) have the lowest percentage of agreement in the country (44.2%). The Pampas region presented a percentage rate close to that recorded in the AMBA (47.6%). In other regions, agreement far exceeds the national average. There is high agreement recorded in regions like the Northwest (70.7%), the Northeast (67.9%), Cuyo (57.2%), and Patagonia (56.1%).

d) Educational innovations. Of all the teachers interviewed, 37.1% are of the opinion that the impact of educational reform on this dimension of their practice was positive, while fewer than a quarter (22.1%) consider it negative, and almost a third (31.1%) see the effects as neither positive nor negative.

The type of teachers and gender attitudes also differ, because the primary-school teachers are more “positive” (41.1%) than the high-school/university teachers (32.7%); and men teachers (37.5%), more than their female colleagues (30.7%).

e) Teaching methods and contents. The trajectory is a strong differentiating factor: teachers experiencing social advancement are much more optimistic (43.2%) than those suffering a decline (33.8%). Teachers objectively located in the lower levels of the social structure tend to evaluate the effects of reform as better (concerning methods and content).

In this case, primary-school teachers are also more positive than their high-school/university colleagues. At the same time, a positive attitude is much more common among younger teachers, under 30 years of age (45.2%), than in the rest (36% approximately), and among those of the private sector rather than those of the public sector (39.9% to 36.3%, respectively).

III. The voices of the actors

This section will analyze the career paths of the teachers interviewed in this study. Labor trajectories take place in the broader context of paths of life; thus it is that we refer to biographical accounts in the same sense as Bertaux (1988), in that we do not access total biographies, but partial segments, linked to the fundamental concern of the study (Freidin, 1999).

Following Godard and Cabanes (1996), we began from the hypothesis that in people’s lives there are theoretical key moments, *nodes*, which determine *bifurcations* in their destiny, and that this is of vital importance in the construction of the course of their careers. Thus, we have established *a priori* the existence of events we consider decisive in the career paths of those interviewed, and which, in that sense, have become nuclei of analysis. They are: a) the time of receiving the professional degree; b) memories about their decision to enter, and their actual entry into the field of teaching; c) the labor situation before and after the Federal Education Act and the implementation of the reform.

We define *trajectory* according to the authors mentioned, as patterns of mobility into which an individual enters, knowing her starting point and considering different significant moments through which the route is constructed. A biography is not self-explanatory; rather, it is necessary to incorporate another series of moments which we call *social temporalities*, beginning with the assumption that the professional calendar is constructed in the interplay with other life and social calendars.

We relied on comparison, not on the consideration of unique biographies. Thus, the first level of analysis led us to isolate the significant events identified by the protagonists, so as to determine then whether these appeared with some regularity in the reports obtained. The material followed a chronological sequence and was organized around thematic nuclei; some of these flowed naturally from previous things like the interview guide; others came out in the dialogue; and finally, others were constructed based on expressions denoting the interviewees' modes of perception or presentation.

3.1. Getting the degree, and deciding to go into teaching

The first milestone was getting the professional degree. The candidate asked himself whether or not getting a degree and going into teaching was at that time among his expectations.

Less than half of respondents reported having had an interest in teaching when choosing their college major. Despite this, a marked contrast was perceived between those individuals who had pedagogical training and those who did not have it (graduates, professionals, technicians). Among the former could be seen a bias towards the teaching profession as a vocation, as seen in the following testimonial: "For me being a teacher was the most beautiful thing in the world. I always thought teaching was wonderful work (...) I have always considered teaching as something sacred, a kind of religion; I am a priest of education" (Alfredo, age 43).

In contrast, those who had no pedagogical training assessed teaching as a labor perspective that primarily has to do with its character as "a secure job", in the setting of job insecurity and the height of regulatory mechanisms, set in motion by the implementation of neoliberal policies. Let us mention that a little over 20% of those working in middle schools are university graduates with no teaching degree (IIEP, 2000). This it can be seen in the testimonial of one teacher:

I chose the career by a process of elimination; when I was studying law, I looked at teaching as a secondary option...I never imagined that having the law degree, I would go back to school—I mean a degree that gives you the opportunity to have an independent profession (Eduardo, age 38).

Among these last there is a notable sense of frustration with the original profession, and teaching makes its appearance as a safety valve for an interesting segment of professionals, technicians and graduates:

Look at the case of the classmates I have in postgraduate work. Only a few of us work as teachers. Most do it in order to get on their feet...a lot of young women who plan to have children...and it is a job that lets them have the time, a fixed salary, social security (Analía, age 40).

The taste of nostalgia expressed in the interview above, where there was a yearning for the profession, is no longer perceptible. The original frustration given

by the breakdown of the framework that structures their existence as individualized, is not externalized now. The discontent and destabilization are exhausted in facing the adjustment and rearrangement of the regulatory mechanisms:

I decided because of financial pressures; I had no other choice. Really, I only thought about getting a degree when I began majoring in history (Estela, age 30).

Interest in teaching first came up mostly as a need to work, and then because I've always liked dealing with people, even with my classmates; I gave them support classes—but really, I have a degree as a technician. I studied in Tech School 1; I'm an automotive technician (Miguel, age 48).

You adapt to the circumstances that life puts you in. When I was a girl I wanted to be a teacher. In fact, I studied to be a teacher, but my degree is in architecture (Ana María, age 50).

Both in our research published in 1999, and in the present study, most of the interviewees stated that they had begun their studies thinking about becoming teachers. We hold, then, that the new socio-economic landscape, the shrinking labor market and the uncertainty of those in it, have a strong influence on the decision to enter the profession.

The character of “secure job” (despite the meager salaries) in a setting of employment restriction and limited opportunities in different professional fields would explain the aspirations of entering and remaining in employment even for individuals whose motivation is far from an interest in the specificity of the task. We emphasize these issues because of the impact they have on the school's institutional culture, the quality of education, and particularly on the strategies used by the actors involved, in the construction of each career path.

3.2. Entry, security and stability

All the witnesses agree that they had no problems in entering the teaching field. In any case the differences emerge if we refer to fulltime teachers or substitutes and temporary instructors. For the latter, the instability in which they live is in line with the evidence of our previous research (*Professional teaching careers in a context of a precarious labor market*, 1999).

What happens is that every year I change because of the mobility we teachers have. A few years ago I lost hours because I don't have contract hours; they are all temporary. So when the Annual Teaching Movement (MAD) comes, and some contracted teacher requests the hours, they replace me, and I have to go back to attend meetings every year. It is increasingly difficult to get hours, and that means feeling insecure about your work (Graciela, age 40).

My substitute taught a workshop, and when I went back, he was replaced and left with nothing. It's a pity, but otherwise I would have been out of the system. He was left out—left with nothing...well...but that's how it is (Miguel, age 39).

Work entry usually occurs in schools located in the *margins*, i.e. those with less experience enter as temporary or substitute teachers in contexts unfavorable for performance. The precariousness of these teachers' employment status; the uncertainty, anguish, anxiety, resignation, lack of benefits and limited work hours are still a constant.

What happens in the case of the fulltime teachers? All the interviewees found in this condition, expressed a sense of security in their job performance, and no less significant is the view of the one who says, referring to stability: "There is security; they don't throw you out unless you are intellectually or morally degraded" (Lucía, age 35).

The strategies I used and still use are very simple: I do not live on the margins of institutional life, I am committed to my work with my students...Somehow...That is, permanence in teaching has given me security, not omnipotence; that's why I'm taking the training, better said, the postgraduate work, with good intentions... (Andrea, age 38).

Today, teaching jobs are sought after (...) at one time I had a chance to get a job as architect in the municipality, but I chose to stay in teaching. The difference in salary was not that much, and the stability I have here I would not have in the other job (Alejandra, age 50).

The stories demonstrate the fragility of the employment status of this professional group, in spite of the stability imagined by many seeking this type of work. However, the employment status of the substitutes is the most delicate, and they do not enjoy the benefits of fulltime teachers. As we will see farther along, the uncertainty and risk of unemployment have worsened since the reform in the Province of Buenos Aires. Regulations produced in the labor market have reached the sector, and although the traditional mechanisms of insertion are still valid, anxiety is widespread concerning the threat of changes in procurement systems, in spite of which, the feeling of insecurity has limited the involvement in protests, perhaps for fear of reprisals.

3.3. Professional training: rupture or continuity?

As we pointed out in the previous work, one of the reform's strategies to ensure new standards for the regulation of teaching was the control of training. Thus, teachers were compelled to join the *restructuring process* as a condition for ensuring their continuity. In the Province of Buenos Aires this process took place through the implementation of programs for teachers in all branches and levels, with hefty expenditures by the state, and financial aid from international organizations guiding reforms in Latin American countries. Preoccupation with training appeared repeatedly in the stories of that time and the evocation of their career paths (for both teachers and professionals); they saw the passage of the Federal Law of Education and the implementation of educational reform as a time of rupture.

I have professional training, I'm an engineer; I have taken many courses, made presentations, I have published works specifically on teaching; I have been teaching since '82, and now the Province of Buenos Aires is making me take postgraduate work to teach me how to be a teacher, that is, we have been invited—compelled—to get that title. After 2001 there will be no teaching positions for professionals who do not have it. In reality, nothing is clear. I do not want to increase my hours; theoretically, to keep the hours I have, I shouldn't have to, but nobody knows—the situation is up for grabs! At my school, all of us who don't have a degree in education are getting one. The Vice Principal, who has a doctorate in chemistry, is studying for his degree right alongside me, and so is everybody else, with at least 15 years of teaching experience. In terms of quality, I'm working on my B.A. in education in a private institution, and so I am *paying*, but my colleagues are studying in a public institution, and it's the same. To sum it up, I would tell you that our years of experience make us better teachers than the ones who are giving the course (Horacio, age 49).

You are absolutely pressured! I was extremely pressured about the degree, because I already had a degree, but it was not in education; that is, I took the Cycle of Teacher Training in the university school where I got my degree, and I received the title of Professor. In spite of that, I had to take all the training courses that appeared since '95 here. The last one was Restructuring. It was very sad and humiliating. I never, ever saw professional people humiliated the way they were humiliated there, for a minimum wage...They play with people's needs (Oscar, age 44).

The current survey shows that teachers are still expressing concern about professional development. The obsessive character assumed during the first years of the Federal Law of Education's implementation has been gradually diluted. While some opinions are more critical than others about the form training took, there is a certain consensus denoted in legitimizing the mechanisms it assumed.

The idea of *ongoing training* configures the common discourse when defining strategies for the conservation of the labor supply. The turning point the reform produced in teachers' everyday work, the feeling of humiliation, the lack of respect and the fear our interviewees explicitly showed they felt during the previous study, appear to have been surmounted, and spaces have been created for adaptation and accommodation. The dissatisfaction has not been undergoing any change with regard to their acceptance of the guidelines they must follow, at least for most of subjects interviewed—even more evident if one considers that the demand for wages is manifested in almost none of the testimonials.

That changed my whole professional life, and influenced in my private life. And where I am now, I'm better off than I where I was before. I've evolved, and always behind something bad there is something good; [...] there came the parallel adjustment of all charges, then seeing that my job was in danger, I settled in here. Nobody is moving me away from here; this is a shock, a conflict, and out of every conflict there has to come something good—that's what I hadn't realized (Marcela, age 36).

The interviewees have relocated, and most have a great many work hours. The situation is different from that of those teachers who have been displaced by the creation of areas, the change or deletion of courses, the incorporation of teachers retrained for the third year of EGB, or others who have only agreed to temporary hours or to work as substitutes.

We hold that this process of teacher-retraining carries with it the political intention of shaping a new subjectivity in teachers; operates as an effective mechanism to do violence to diversity; and cannot be analyzed outside the social-change project of which it is part. The interviewees' feeling of dissatisfaction, though widespread, has not, however, led them to search for alternatives to the formal proposal; all have been subjected to this requirement driven by the concern for keeping their jobs.

3.4. University students with pedagogical training: a particular situation (primary-school teachers versus upper-level/university teachers)

It is those upper-level/university people with a teaching degree who continue to express their indignation in opposition to those who achieved responsibility in the third year of EGB, whether they be primary-school teachers, professionals, technicians, etc. We note that the "competitive bidding" gives way to helplessness and resignation, since they have already taken most of the training available. In the voices of the subjects, a common theme is gaining ground: the deterioration of the results of teaching, at the same time as the breakdown of institutional fences and the loss of spaces to which to belong.

The reform affected me adversely because I had to move from the junior high school to the primary, and I had to understand the codes, such as those that many directors protect. They believe that containment is more important than students' learning. I had never experienced that kind of pressure before. You see, primary education is compulsory; so the kids have to be in school, like it or not. I felt like I was fighting windmills. I've often thought about giving up the EGB hours (Mercedes, 51 años).

There are many people who have no calling, and have gone into education just as a job. Doctors, lawyers, technicians, etc...people who have no training at all. The same thing happens with the teachers...they teach everything, and you kill yourself for four or five years studying at the university, and they take away all the jobs away from you. Then too, there is the problem of tertiary courses that train people who put you out of work. Today anybody and everybody is a teacher (Horacio, age 49).

The reform sees EGB as an integrated unit, so that the first two years of the middle level of the old system are included in the third year. This raises disputes over who are the ones qualified to fill jobs in the new structure. The struggle for the labor space generates tensions that cause confrontations between teachers of different levels: primary-school teachers and junior-high-school teachers, and the training offered to both groups reappears as a legitimizing case in point:

I think the worst of the restructuring, regardless of whether it was right or wrong because (there have been different experiences), was putting the primary-school teachers who took it on an equal footing with the secondary-school teachers to give classes in third-year EGB. I, in addition to being a professor of Media, work at the university, and our upper-level students are involved in a very disloyal competition, are in the midst of a spurious competition about degrees; they are really hampered. Moreover, I believe that whatever the quality of the restructuring, you cannot replace the training a teacher gets in a five-year degree program, with just studying for three school quarters, which were really only two months long (Nélida, age 45).

Besides the repercussions of the situation imposed by changes in the educational system and quality of teaching, we are interested in the impact of these aspects on teachers' work; the ways their chances of getting a job are changed; and the strategies they find themselves obliged to use in order to stay employed.

Since this had not happened in their previous work histories, they perceive a loss of control over the processes of work and teaching, blame their colleagues (elementary-school teachers, technicians) for the quality of the task results. The culture of competitiveness and efficiency displaces the feeling of solidarity, and in the struggle for work, the place of real responsibility is also displaced. Elementary-school teachers, upper-level/university professors, professionals, technicians—are all involved in a dog-eat-dog struggle over jobs.

3.5. In pursuit of stability: acceptance of new conditions

We have mentioned that the impact which state reform has had on the labor market, the employment crisis, as Birgin (1999) notes, “has a strong controlling effect; it operates as a constant pressure toward the acceptance of the new working conditions and the loss of historical rights” (p. 49). To maintain stability, teachers are also forced to accept working conditions that have not been publicized.

The disappearance of some subjects and the incorporation of others by the creation of guidelines, brings about movements in the teaching staff. As is clear from the stories, this profoundly affects emotional stability:

The loss of hours due to changes in the curriculum is a big deal; there are many colleagues who have been relocated to areas they are not trained for, and what are they going to do? Facing losing their jobs, they try to study, and they can't get out of the situation. This is terrible! What are we doing? (Daniel, age 32).

I am an architect, I took a few hours of physics in a tech school, but since the “reform”, I find my Physics hours dropped into a whole area of Natural Sciences. When the *conversion* happened at the Mar Del Plata National University, my uncertainty was (...) that because of my training, I should have taken courses in Mathematics, but because of where they put me to work, it was more appropriate for me to do the conversion in the area of Natural Science, where I had my teaching hours. So, I took the conversion courses in an area that had nothing to do

with my training, but that guaranteed me continuity. It knocks you off balance (Graciela, age 41).

The curriculum changes have led to loss of employment for substitutes and temporary teachers, because of the disappearance of classes they used to teach; and for teachers who were asked to teach subjects for which they are unprepared. Although this situation appeared more distressing in the previous research, and current interviewees showed a sort of resignation to the new rules, the topic still comes up in their comments. The uneasiness they feel about the insecurity of addressing subjects for which they are not trained, besides the deterioration in the quality of education, a situation that seems not to matter to those in charge of educational management, means the acceptance of humiliating working conditions.

3.6. Everyday practices and increasing dissatisfaction

In the stories invariably appears something that has to do with new rules that redefine everyday practices and change the meaning of coexistence patterns:

The family is being restructured, there is a shift of responsibilities, the children are alone or with a brother or sister who is a little older, Mom is away all day, etc. At school we have to be aware that this is happening, because it has an impact in the classroom, and especially on the knowledge and on the kids' willingness to learn. These things totally overwhelm the teachers; we are not prepared to face it—the impact is devastating. The level keeps going down; we have to think of some kind of way to connect. The teachers are confused and upset, overwhelmed—we wonder if we are really in the wrong place. On top of the low pay that makes them try to get more work hours, they have to run back and forth because they can't get all their hours together in one institution. This is not only a time problem, but it also affects their sense of belonging and their commitment to the institution...How do you deal with a difficult group of students, with no help or control on the part of the families, no motivation for school work, and with aggression and violence! (Teresa, age 28).

Work conditions are awful. More and more, we live with fatigue. You can't get over it—maybe it has to do with job insecurity—constantly having to think about what little course you can take, what little certificate you can get to help you keep your job. There are many people who are working more than 60 hours week, and that is impossible, especially because of the number of students you have to work with—and with performance levels going down and down. Teacher evaluation, mandatory days off, meetings, curriculums—and in the classroom, less every day. The pressure of the system leaves you less and less room for imagination, to innovate, to generate other forms of contact with students. I feel like we are saturated, alienated, in a race to get more hours if we have to kill each other to do it (Marcelo, age 40).

Teachers show themselves overwhelmed by the increased workload, and a sort of guilt-feeling about the declining standards of student performance and the deterioration of relationships. Dissatisfaction with the loss of professional autonomy and of control over the outcome of the task, is mixed with recognition of

some responsibility for the acceptance of unwanted conditions and the paralysis caused by the fear of losing their source of income.

3.7. From talking about quality, to flexibilization

In spite of the rhetoric about the *professionalization* of the teaching role that characterizes the reform's discourse, the general feeling of those interviewed is the loss of autonomy for carrying out the task:

We know that students do not arrive at the polymodal level with the necessary mathematical tools, nor are they familiar with logical reasoning. This flaw has to do with the work in the third year of EGB (people say they have been put back into primary school). I am talking about my subject, but in all of them it is the same. Nobody respects your decisions. In the schools they pressure you to promote students. You know what the new evaluation regime has been (the make-up test for the make-up test for the make-up test) and the kids take your time. Now they are trying to change, but what has not been achieved has not been achieved. We are leveling down. We work more and more, and we have less autonomy to decide what to do, and the results are worse (Mario, age 32).

As shown in the testimonials in the previous study, teachers feel they are victims of a new form of managerialism that displaces leadership and establishes a culture of vertical and hierarchical organization, in which decisions and implementation recognize different persons in charge:

The lack of respect for your work is shown in many ways, including the requirement to promote the kids, because since 8th and 9th are mandatory now and, well, the statistics have to close. Moreover, if schools begin to lose students, teachers lose hours; it's ugly to have your boss come to you and say, "Well, try to promote them, because otherwise next year you will be without a job, and a course that closes is a course that will not reopen." It's always the responsibility of the teacher. The inspectors are the ones that pressure the schools to promote, and you are reluctant to promote a student who doesn't have even the minimum amount of knowledge—although we are getting used to a minimum that is increasingly minimum (Testimonial from the 1999 study.)

The feeling is one of subjugation of professionalism and increase of the unprecedented bureaucratic burden. The loss of control over processes that make up the specificity of the task, occurs in a context of labor flexibility that determines the acceptance of situations, which, however, bring professional identity into play.

We have appealed to the literal transcription of some accounts on the grounds that the protagonists' words are more eloquent than the interpretations we make of them. We find in their expressions the sense that educational change has shocked their professional careers, and has acted as a pivotal point that marks a "before" and an "after" the introduction of the reform. The itinerary traversed between this event and the present moment is characterized by the interviewees as the most critical and uncertain they have ever had to go through.

IV. Conclusions

Eleven years after the enactment of the Federal Law of Education in Argentina, it seemed important to us to analyze the impact of the educational transformation on teachers' working conditions. This topic has been addressed by our group and in that sense, we have taken as background, earlier studies carried out at a time when the Province of Buenos Aires had not yet completed the implementation of the total reform. At the conclusion of this, we revisited the analysis and drew on official data concerning the results of this implementation at the national level, in order to compare them with the view that the teachers of the General Pueyrredón District hold concerning this process.

We were interested in reviewing their own perceptions, in an attempt to construct meaning based on their memories, interpretations and experiences. Thus, we turned to the biographical approach to condense the *career paths* of a group of teachers, whose testimonials allowed us to analyze continuities and breaks in their professional lives, based on the incidence of a series of events in the setting of the reform.

Aware that it assigns meaning to individual practices, we used structural analysis. From this perspective we hold that educational reforms are the effects of social practices, inasmuch as they form part of their historical relationships, and can be understood only within the context where these practices are developed. The education system, compelled to respond to new demands produced by the changes in the social system in recent decades, maintains the role of guarantors of governance. In this regard, we have argued that the educational reform, while a regulatory mechanism, has begun the process of achieving this goal.

A historical look at the development of the profession shows that teachers' work has been located in the context of changing structural relationships. Our concern revolves around the impact these changes have had on teachers' working conditions; we therefore appeal to their voices to reconstruct their careers, in an attempt to uncover the underlying social forms and determiners of their practices.

As in our previous research, despite differences in the age, sex, age and credentials of the teachers that made up the sample, we found certain similarities in the span of their careers, ranging from when they obtained their diplomas and began teaching, and the enactment of the Federal Law. We then maintain the idea that this event has been a turning point that allows pointing out a "before" and "after" in their professional biographies.

The evaluation of teaching as a profession has changed in the interviewees' perception. The restructuring of the labor market has made it an attractive area of insertion (*secure job*) as opposed to the view of it as a complementary activity expressed earlier by professionals, or of women's contribution to the household budget. In this regard, we find in the official data that 30% of the country's teacher population is made up of professionals with no teaching degree, data which

matches information obtained about teachers in our district. Concern about increasing work hours is a constant which is justified by the precarious job market, and which goes beyond the particular interest in teaching as a profession, blurring the *vocationalist* profile that once characterized its image.

Despite the imagery generated around stability, the situation of interim and substitute teachers is more and more vulnerable, and there is observed a deterioration of working conditions, even for full-time teachers. We pointed out in the earlier study that one of the ways in which the system imposed control is expressed in the demand for obtaining a new degree, or the “conversion/reconstruction” of the sector, regardless of what professional degree each teacher may have held. Today, this condition has been met; however we find in the testimonials of those interviewed currently, a concern for continuing in training circuits as a strategy for insertion or being maintained in the system. The competitive struggle leads to wiping out ties of solidarity, to generating clashes: primary-school teachers versus upper-level/university teachers, technicians and professionals fighting for jobs.

The restructuring of the system is cited as another factor that threatens access to jobs and the quality of the task. Enabling primary-school teachers to take positions that previously could only be occupied by upper-level/university people, the establishment of the EGB as an integrated unit under the direction of a primary-school teacher and the implantation of the polytechnic level, which reduces the cycle of secondary education to three years, are elements questioned by the upper-level teachers surveyed in the previous study, and repeated as critical in the present one. In this sense there is mentioned turning the EGB into primary school, the lack of connection with the polymodal level, and the consequent drop in the educational level. These features make performance conditions more difficult, a consideration pointed out mostly by teachers with university education.

Despite the widespread consensus about the need to extend the period of compulsory education, everyone agrees in criticizing the way it has been resolved. Although official data indicate that in assessing the educational reform, positive views are grouped in only two aspects (pedagogical innovations and teaching methods and content), and a small minority consider as positive the level of coverage achieved by the system, all the District's teachers surveyed in our study agree also upon an aspect critical in these matters.

The most significant themes emerging from the interviews have to do with a feeling of dissatisfaction over not finding room to participate in the decisions; seeing their autonomy get overwhelmed and their professional identity blurred; and the general deterioration of working conditions. These considerations appeared in our previous research, and were repeated in the current survey. This is compounded by a sense of uncertainty about future work, a feeling shared by teachers who took the nationwide survey, and those of our district.

The testimonials of the interviewees led us to be critical about the impact the educational transformation has had on the regularity of their career paths. Our data show higher rates of dissatisfaction than do the data collected in national research. Perhaps this last point is associated with the coercive way the reform was implemented in the Province of Buenos Aires.

We have tried to accompany with our reflections the multiplicity of experiences reported by teachers whose work scope has been cut into by the changes the educational reform has inflicted. The teaching collective constitutes a high percentage of public servants whose earnings have dropped to below minimum wage. However, the drop in wages does not appear as the only indicator in defining the deterioration of working conditions: control mechanisms, the disqualification and intensification of work, the competitive struggle for a job—all are common denominators in the concerns expressed by teachers.

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¹ In Argentina the educational system is divided into levels: *beginners* (3, 4 and 5-year-olds). *basic general education* (EGB), which runs from first to ninth grade; *polymodal*, consisting of first, second and third year; *non-university tertiary*, and *university*.

² NOA means "Northwest Argentina", made up of the provinces of Salta, Tucuman, Jujuy, Santiago del Estero, and Catamarca.

³ In September of 2005, the Northamerican dollar was valued at 2.90 Argentine pesos.