

The Assault on Public Education in Argentina

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The scene is a familiar one in any number of Latin American nations: poor results from chronically underfunded schools that are touted as proof that public education has failed by axe-grinding policy makers who use their legislative platform to disparage and undermine public school students and their teachers, with acts of complicity from corporate-owned media outlets. It would seem that in the perpetual rollback of the public sector under neoliberal ideological hegemony, expecting free, accessible education for every child has become a bridge too far. As the 2017 school year commences in Argentina the scenario is playing out yet again, this time with remarkable fury and a degree of rancor from the highest levels of government.

Politicians

The premise for the most recent escalation in the education debate is a fierce, ongoing public school teachers' strike in Buenos Aires Province, in response to the provincial government's inflexible offer to allow a pay increase of 18 percent to compensate for the previous year's inflation (which was over 40 percent) along with a simultaneous threat to discount any days spent on the picket line from teachers' paychecks.ⁱ Argentine President Mauricio Macri has thrown the weight of his political clout in the struggle behind Buenos Aires Province Governor María Eugenia Vidal, a staunch Macri loyalist whose positions fit in with his larger austerity program. While publicly maintaining that quality public education is necessary to ensure that all children have equal opportunities awaiting them, Macri raised eyebrows when he punctuated a presentation of public and private reading comprehension scores with the phrase "[the difference in scores] highlights the other fundamental problem that is the terrible inequality between those who can go to private school versus those who have to lower themselves to public school."ⁱⁱ People remained in shock when later that week he repeated his support for Videla in the "fight for public education" and reframed her stand against the teachers under her charge around gender rights: "In the province of the 'manly men' it took a woman to change history."ⁱⁱⁱ Vidal, for her part, has commented on the matter that "public education has nothing more to give" and that the province's public schools "have been privatized *de facto*." She deflected further discussion by pointing her finger at some teachers who she believes are only striking for political purposes and would sooner effect chaos to destabilize the Macri administration and "evade justice."^{iv} Vidal is alluding to the declarations of support for teachers and alleged meddling in the strike by ex-president and current opposition figure Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, who has

been formally charged in recent months with fraud, corruption, and money laundering for her actions while in office.^v

Media

Several of Argentina's principal media outlets—generally the same ones who also regularly print editorials supporting Macri—have been waging a campaign in favor of private education for years, often with little fanfare. One of these, *Clarín*, (Argentina's largest newspaper) ignited a firestorm in mid-March when it published a report of two young boys' progress in school in an attempt to present a comparison of their respective accomplishments as a metaphor for the woes of Argentina's educational system.^{vi} Titled, "They Began First Grade Together and One has a Two-Notebook Lead Over the Other," the article's featured photo displays Maxi, a public school student with dark, unkempt hair and dark skin, dressed in a t-shirt and the white lab-style coats typical of Argentine public schools. Maxi is admiring the work of Facu, a private school student with light skin and straight blond hair, who is wearing a polo and plastic watch that is so large it appears to inhibit his writing somewhat as he concentrates on the workbook in front of him. According to the byline, Facu is so much farther ahead in his classwork because he has attended 10 days of class to Maxi's five, apparently due to days missed by Maxi as a result of the public school teachers' strike. Questionable premise aside—the article itself does little more than describe the neighborhoods in which the boys live and add some token statements from their mothers—the piece reveals much about prevailing prejudices regarding the status of education in Argentina.

Education

Argentina has one of the longest public school traditions in Latin America, with the provision of obligatory, free, and secular public education being required by law since 1884 (the latter requisite being essential in the context of power struggles between the sovereign governments and the Catholic church in the region.)^{vii} Nevertheless, for many this tradition has gone by the wayside for a variety of reasons.

An often-parroted anecdote in Argentina, particularly in cases of conflict, is that parents increasingly switch their children from public to private school for the security of knowing that their children will not miss class because of striking teachers—hence the article in *Clarín*. There are also the widely-held and untested clichés that children have less structure and learn less in public schools, neither of which is empirically true.^{viii} These stereotypes are repeated by the media and rationalized by citing the Kirchner-era policy of focusing on indicators like percentage of GDP invested in public education and social inclusion in educational institutions, instead of quality per se.^{ix} However, these are not the only perceived problem with Argentina's public schools. With the rise of neoliberalism over the last several decades and the allotment of market values to incongruent subjects it came to be expected that schools be efficient and competitive—criteria by which open-access public schools are essentially guaranteed to fail.

More to the point, those who base their criticisms of public education on disparities in testing are ignoring the obvious roots of the performance gap in the socioeconomic

differences between students in public and private schools. How a child fares in school tends to be a direct result of their home life, according to factors such as the profession and education level of the parents, household stability, available nutrition, neighborhood safety, personal attention, and others, which are mostly determined by wealth and social access. This gives private schools a clear advantage, as they have the luxury of turning away prospective attendees who cannot pay tuition and focusing their resources on the best and the brightest. Public schools are then left holding the bag, being legally required to accept all students—including those whose brain function is hindered by malnutrition, lack of sleep, or mental anguish from less-than-ideal family situations in addition to those who cannot pay for a private school, and teacher strikes notwithstanding.

Virtually none of this has managed to affect the discourse concerning public education. By framing the argument around relative student enrollment and test scores (among other things), the media and the Macri government are grossly misrepresenting the heart of the issue, be it through ignorance or intent. Argentine public schools are far from perfect, but so are the arguments against them. As such the mediatic and political assault on public education in Argentina should be treated with skepticism, if not great alarm.

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^v Clarín, Cristina Kirchner salió a respaldar a los gremios docentes que están de paro y criticó a María Eugenia Vidal, March 15, 2017. Accessed April 1, 2017. http://www.clarin.com/politica/cristina-kirchner-salio-respaldo-gremios-docentes-paro-critico-maria-eugenia-vidal_0_B1nT2IDix.html ; Hugo Alconada Mon, Cristina Kirchner quedó imputada en la causa por la ruta del dinero K, La Nación, April 10, 2016. Accessed April 1, 2017.

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