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Globalization, Consumers, Citizens, and the “Private School Advantage” in Argentina (1985-1999)

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Abstract

Local actors' perceptions of curricular and management changes in two private schools and one neighboring public secondary school in the city of Buenos Aires, Argentina, are analyzed. An exploration was conducted of how, within an ideologically and politically pro-reform context and a widespread acceptance of the "private school advantage," principals, teachers, and students in these schools evaluated the changes (or lack of them) in management, teaching, and curriculum orientations of the secondary education sector.

Introduction

In the debate over implementing “choice and free-market” mechanisms to correct the deficiencies of public schools, it is often mentioned that in the eighteenth century, philosophers such as Adam Smith, Thomas Paine and John Stuart Mill had already advanced similar ideas (Wells & Stuart, 1993). Scott Sweetland (2000) noted that Adam Smith argued that the fairest, most efficient method of providing education was for governments to give parents tuition money and let them have the freedom to spend it at whichever school they chose. Yet, when seen in the context of Europe in the eighteenth century –where most educational services were “private and for-profit” and served only a small fraction of the population—Adam Smith’s original quasi-voucher idea, loses its contemporary appeal. Indeed, at that historic juncture the idea of educating every child was itself hotly debated, and was considered either, dangerously utopian or the key to a truly democratic society.

In some countries, and in spite of Adam Smith’s recommendations the once quixotic aspiration that every child had a right of access to schools, was achieved not by the growth of private education but through the expansion of government regulated and financed systems of public education. The history of such expansion in areas of Europe and the Americas during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is well known; however, it is important to note that private schools never ceased to exist, and for the most part those schools educated the children of the wealthiest citizens.

The coexistence of public and private schools as compatible providers of education, each targeting a different segment of the population was a state of affairs. At the same time, such coexistence was always marked by a sense of competition about which sector was providing the best education. In very broad terms, in both traditionally centralized educational systems (e.g., France and Argentina) and highly decentralized (e.g., the USA), privately managed schools were regarded as excelling public ones in student achievement and general quality. Despite this widespread commonly held belief, it is only in the late 1960s that the notion that the private sector would solve the public’s sector educational problems gained momentum and started to increase its appeal in academic and political circles.

By conducting an exploratory qualitative study of public and private high schools, this project aimed at obtaining insight into the “common sense” beliefs about private school’s academic advantages over public ones. The main goal of this research project was to explore local actors’ perceptions of curricular and management changes in two private schools and one neighboring public secondary school in the city of Buenos Aires, Argentina. The rationale for this project was to explore how within an ideologically and politically pro-reform context and a widespread acceptance of the “private school advantage,” principals, teachers, and students in these schools evaluated the changes (or lack of them) in management, teaching, and curriculum orientations of the secondary education sector.

The empirical data are drawn from three schools and, consequently, can not provide broad-based conclusions that larger studies using randomly selected sample of schools could. Nevertheless, this qualitative study can provide a more detailed analysis of local actors, motivations and reactions to changing environments, and suggest possible

explanations for patterns and activities which may be confirmed and further elaborated by larger studies. Finally, this study attempts to understand the organizational and curricular responses of a small number of schools, in the particular context of Argentina during the period 1985-1999; but it does so with the understanding that schooling is always a local enterprise which is embedded in regional and global contexts.

In the attempt to map and locate the changes happening simultaneously at the local and global level using a comparative approach the first section of this article will discuss the notion about the “private school advantage”. Section II will provide a summary of the relevant changes in the Argentinean context. Section III of this article provides a brief description of the methods used for data collection. Section IV presents the data collected during the field work, including a general description of the secondary education private sector, particularly during the 1980s and 1990s. Section V summarizes the results of this research and concludes this article by reexamining the perception of the “private school advantage” and the benefits of introducing market mechanisms in the provision of educational services.

I. The “Private School Advantage”

The notion that the provision of educational services should be regulated by the market or in a competitive environment is not new. Scholars such as James S. Coleman and Milton Friedman who provided empirical support and theoretical arguments supporting the notion that private schools are superior to public schools. The publication of the “Coleman Report” in 1966 presented empirical evidence about the supposed superior performance of private schools. This report resonated with the public’s common sense and expectations, and the validity of its claims became a subject of debate and controversy among scholars. The diffusion of Milton Friedman’s ideas had less popular impact, yet their influence is strong today. Friedman proposed that to reduce the inefficiency of the public system of schooling it was necessary to open the door to competition through a free-market system. Friedman was among the first to propose a voucher system, giving parents not only the right but also the means to send their children to the school of their choice. It is fair to say that since the initial reactions to Coleman and Friedman’s ideas, the debate over implementing market mechanisms for the provision and evaluation of educational services, especially through the use of vouchers, has intensified .

Perhaps no other work has contributed more to that debate in the USA and abroad than *Politics, Markets and America's Schools* by John E. Chub and Terry M. Moe (Gintis, 1991; and Glass and Mathews, 1991 for critical reviews). In this book, Chub and Moe developed a controversial argument regarding worldwide attempts to encourage competition in education. The principal claim of these authors that state mandated, democratic control of educational institutions promotes lack of autonomy and choice, impeding educational equality and upward mobility, is well known. In addition, Chub and Moe suggested that American society is full of people who could make excellent teachers, but oppressive state regulation and certification requirements ensure that most of them never teach. Clearly, these authors attempted to go beyond small or piecemeal reforms and attempted to "prove their point that democracy is the problem and not the solution" (Gintis, 1991, p. 382).

Chub and Moe’s proposed solution is to incorporate market-like incentives and

discipline in education through vouchers, increased “choice,” and privatized services because these give parents the right to choose and the power to make changes in schools. Using some of the arguments advanced by Chubb and Moe, Andrew J. Coulson (1994) summarized the pro-market position as follows:

The central argument ... is that the success of any human organization depends on the unification of its participants' goals. In the case of a school, this means uniting the goals of the teachers, principals, and support staff with those of the students and parents. The public education system fails to accomplish this task, often leading its employees to work at cross purposes with their customers. In sharp contrast to this system is the free and competitive market, in which employees must satisfy the needs of customers in order to prosper. Applied to education, this approach would alleviate most if not all of the problems discussed earlier.

The assumption is that a quasi-market will wisely solve contemporary educational problems since parents know best what is good for their children. Thus, if schools are accountable to parents instead of to an anonymous and bureaucratic public system, schools will act in the interest of children.

There are, however, numerous objections to the implementation of market-like proposals and to increase participation of for-profit educational initiatives (Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe, 1995; Glass, 1994; Lauder and Hughes, 1999). Among these objections are that competitive that a competitive school system: a) will tend to increase social, ethnic and gender inequalities, and b) will favor higher income families, and certain ethnic and religious groups that are in more privileged circumstances. To those and other criticisms, the advocates for market-like programs usually answer that stratification is already a problem that can not become worse, that previously implemented reforms have failed, and the absence of choice does not eliminate the inequality problem. Coleman responded to such criticisms thusly:

The emphasis on equality means that the focus in education is on the bottom of the performance distribution. My general conjecture is this: Policies that focus on high levels of achievement and rewards for high levels reverberate downward through the system, providing an incentive for students at lower levels to improve. (Coleman, 1992, p. 261)

The pro-market choice model advanced by Chubb, Moe, Coleman and others relies heavily on what Joseph Viteritti (1999) defined as the “private school advantage”. In comparison with students in public schools students attending private schools are expected to have:

- Better performances on standardized tests;
- Higher graduation rates;
- More rigorous academic environments;
- Safer schools;
- More opportunities for their parents to participate;
- More access to morally uplifting surroundings (very often in association with religious based teachings);
- More access to highly motivated teachers and administrators (motivation based on efficient and less bureaucratized hiring, retention and promotion policies).

The works of Chubb and Moe, Viteritti and others indicate that in general, there is a strong widely held perception of a “private school advantage;” however, as Rothstein, Carnoy and Benveniste, (1999) pointed out, it is not an easy task to determine why private schools appear to perform better than public schools:

Because private schools can select (and are selected by) their students, analysts have not been able to determine whether private schools’ apparently superior outcomes (like test scores) are attributable to superior private school practices or to more selective student bodies (1999, p. ix)

Rothstein, Carnoy and Benveniste also noted that solving the debate about the reasons for the supposedly better performance of private schools will depend on studies which can control for student background variables. Given the high political and economic stakes in the debate about markets in education (both in the USA and abroad) reaching consensus on this issue will be extremely difficult. Similarly, it seems very difficult to imagine that the re-resolution to this debate will emerge from an exclusively academic discussion. And yet, to dismiss the importance of theoretical argument would be a serious mistake. As Steven Klees wrote:

My reading of the theory and empirics of literatures concerning educational production functions and earnings functions, for example indicates to me there is not agreement on specification. Each researcher basically gets the results s/he wants, one researcher's results conflict with those of others, and there is no good reason to privilege one as any closer to some “true” measure of impact than any other. When a particular field becomes a focus for ideological contestation, the differences in “facts” become even sharper. (Klees, 1993, p. 7)

Privatization, market-like options, choice programs, and vouchers are at the forefront of the education agenda in several countries and will remain key elements in the near future (Pini, 2000). Indeed, it appears that increasing numbers of scholars (Sweetland, 2000, Viteritti, 1999), the media (Fischman, forthcoming), and the public seem to be accepting these quasi-market mechanisms and emulating private schools as the best hope for “fixing” public schools. Internationally this acceptance can be registered at two different levels: a) the promotion of different school voucher campaigns and other legislative initiatives, and b) the noticeable increase of for-profit initiatives, marketing strategies, and incursion of commercial interest into public schools (Fischman and McLaren, 2000).

Without doubt, these actions, which tend to the partial or total marketization of the educational sector constitute, diverse manifestations of efforts at school reform, in many cases presented as inevitable due to the mounting pressures of a globalized world. Several studies (Arnové, 1999; Rhoten, 1999; and Samoff, 1999) indicate that most of these reforms are centered on “restructuring” the educational systems, with the dual goals of producing financial savings as well as the thorough transformation of objectives, epistemological bases, methods, and procedures of schooling (Darling-Hammond, 1993, 1997).

These reform proposals are made not only by the staff of think tanks, the media, and government officials, but also by international financial organizations and different sectors of civil society. Undoubtedly, these proposals are happening in contexts in which

neoliberal economic policies and the continuous attack and dismantling of the structures of the welfare state operate at the level of the reconfiguration of governing practices (Popkewitz and Brennan, 1998). These changes in governing practices are having direct effects on the future of public education as a whole.

It is at this crossroads of global neo-liberal reform proposals, generalized beliefs about the distinct perception of public and private schools, and attempts to improve public education through privatization and “choice” that this study finds its focus.

II. Argentina’s Search for “Modernity”

Argentina is a country of 35 million people, and it has one of the lowest population growth rates (1.6% per year) in the region (UNESCO Statistical Yearbook, 1999). There is a relatively small population living in a large territory, with 12 inhabitants per square kilometer. During the first three decades of the 20th century, the country’s social and economic indicators developed at a rate and in patterns similar to the USA, Australia, and Canada, creating and extending public education and health systems. Those indicators supported the optimistic idea that Argentina was destined to become the “United States of the South.” However, six decades later the social and economic destiny of the country had greatly changed. By the 1980s, Argentina experienced an economic and social recession, dominated by pessimism rather than hope:

The old optimistic picture was eroded by a profound stagnation in production that led to a steep decline in incomes, social marginalization, and educational recession all of which have been abetted by decades of institutional instability and military coups resulting in ruthless repression. Today, the descendants of those who migrated to Argentina to build a future in this undisputed land of promise are opting out and going abroad, disappointed by the lack of prospects. (Schvarzer, 1992, p. 169)

Unfortunately, Schvarzer is not alone in his description of the country’s political, social and economic failures. There is general agreement that Argentina’s *democratic* and *modernization* failures are a result of a combination of successive political and economic crises. With respects to democratization, the situation in Argentina has never been clear. Between the years 1930 and 1983, a general consensus in support of democratic institutions was missing. The whole society—but particularly the most powerful corporative sectors, the armed forces, the Church, the business sector, the politicians and the unions—have been practicing what could be called the “politics of cannibalism and exclusion.” Guillermo O’Donnell (O’Donnell and Schmitter, 1986). argued that this is a consequence of the configuration of the Argentinean state which was dominated by corporate sectors of the civil society. This situation of dependance, O’Donnell contended has in turn weakened democratic insititutions in the country. Similarly, Enrique Peruzzotti called such a process the “Weimarization of politics”: “Weimarization amounts to a process of de-differentiation between social and political power. It entails the destruction of political institutions which lose all autonomy against the pressure of organized social powers” (Peruzzotti, 1993,p. 128). In a context of Weimarization of the society, constant antagonisms around which model of development the country should follow (e.g., capitalism, nationalism, socialism, non-aligned) and how to obtain the proper level of “social order” to become modern were often the central axis of the political and social discussion.

After World War II, as in most countries in Latin America, Argentina's society debated and in many cases suffered dictatorial imposition of models of development and social order based on a "modernization paradigm," which was a positivistic evolutionary approach. The supporters of the "modernization" approach often saw contradictions, multiplicity of standards, and lack of clearly defined rules as obstacles to overcome, as the "advanced" countries of the West had done before. The followers of the modernization paradigm pointed out that Latin America had to follow a straightforward path of development from traditional societies to modern ones, a sequence of political development that Jose Nun summarized as follows:

(1) social modernization (economic growth with the incorporation into the world market, urbanization, development of education, and the mass media of communication, geographic mobility, etc.), (2) diffusion of modern values (universalism, achievement, future-orientation, social trust, etc.), and (3) the installation of a representative democratic political regime. Modernization seemed a necessary condition for the emergence and stabilization of democratic government in the democratic-liberal sense. (Nun, 1993, p. 9)

Not surprisingly, during the second half of the 20th century, the prevailing models of development and "modernization" supported this evolutionary vision, in which social segmentation and poverty were characteristic features of societies in the process of modernization. More importantly, the illnesses of "traditional societies" such as authoritarianism, poverty, hunger, and illiteracy were seen as transitory problems.

In Latin America, the modernization approach required the identification of sectors or areas which were most likely to function as the engine of development. Politicians, investors and analysts considered the following as the key questions: Which sectors are capable of economic leadership in the modernization process? Are these economic sectors in a cultural and moral position to lead the process? Are the economic and cultural modernizers homogenous groups? For supporters of the modernization model, the answers to these questions were found in the development of a national and centralized State, able to lead the process, and guide societies to "modernity." However, that leadership role presupposes at least two parallel dynamics.

First, the State itself has to become modern and encourage appropriate civic behaviors through rational organization, efficient bureaucracies, and cultural and educational developments. The public education system, created in the 19th century with the specific purpose of developing a sense of citizenship, was also conceptualized as the engine of cultural modernization. Moreover, the provision of educational and social services has had a long history of redistributive effects (social mobility) as well as social cohesion. However, these effects are only half of the story. Argentina's schools did promote forms of educational and social equality and mobility, as well as the reproduction of social and economic inequalities based on the provision of different kinds of education based on students' social class, ethnicity, gender, and religious beliefs (Puiggrós, 1990; 1992). Second, the State should intervene, identify, and also create "modern sectors." In general terms, those modern sectors are identified with creation of commercial and industrial enterprises as the engines which will solve the economic and political "structural" problems. But it is also important to mention the need to discipline the population, in the sense of educating modern, literate, and economically consuming citizens. In that

sense, the national, lay, public, and free school system had to lead the cultural aspects of the modernization program.

Between the 1930s and 1960s, the Argentinean State played an important role in such a selective process, mainly by leading the process called “import-substitution industrialization.” The powerful role played by the State was a response to social demands, and it resulted in higher levels of productivity and almost full employment. Hence, the successive governments (particularly the Peronist regime of 1945-55) were important players, providing vast sectors of the population with social benefits. Those actions were part of a tacit agreement among the most powerful political, economic, and cultural forces in the country. Under the aegis of this tacit agreement, the Argentinean Welfare State was developed (Tironi & Lagos, 1991; Gerchunoff & Torre, 1992).

Nevertheless, this modernization model did not last long in Latin America and its weaknesses became most evident and explosive during the 1979 oil crisis and the 1982 debt crisis. During these periods, international interest rates rose dramatically and regional governments could not afford their debt payments. These stressful economic changes, along with the phenomenon of authoritarian regimes, led to the general characterization of this period as the “Lost Decade” of Latin America. (Note 1)

The financial crisis of the 1980s, the lack of social and political effectiveness of many of the dictatorial regimes in the region, coupled with the political resistance against the dictatorships are among the most important influences affecting the emerging processes of democratization. Undoubtedly, Latin American societies welcomed the re-establishment of governments elected by democratic procedures. However, these governments found that among the legacies of decades of authoritarian rule, the structures, power, and particularly, the legitimacy and perception about the power of the Latin American states has been weakened.

During the 1980s, the region witnessed a cycle of inflation, hyperinflation, and recession of a severity never before experienced. Faced with rising international interest rates, Latin American countries found it increasingly difficult to meet their debt repayment schedules. As part of the re-negotiation of their debts, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank pressured regional governments into adopting structural-adjustment policies to address balance of payment difficulties and fiscal deficits. It is difficult to understand these processes without a parallel analysis of the origins and purposes of the external and internal debt. In the Argentinean case, it must not be forgotten that an authoritarian and corrupt government (1976-1983) was the main actor in the generation of such a fiscal burden. Similar observations can be made about several private groups that increased their debts, only to have them later nationalized and transferred to the society as a whole (Aspiazu, 1985). The example of Argentina clearly illustrates the complexity and multiplicity of factors interacting in the processes of democratization and modernization.

Doubtless, the early 1980s were crucial in Argentina. The financial crisis, the Malvinas (Falklands) War, increased pressure from domestic and international human rights organizations, increased activism by labor unions, and a vast spectrum of social movements accelerated the rapid deterioration of the military regime. The process of democratic transition, as well as changes prompted by internationally induced structural-adjustment policies initiated in these years are among the key elements to examine and understand the changing role of the State in the emerging new model of

modernization. Structural adjustment is usually described as a broad range of policies recommended by the World Bank, the IMF, and other financial organizations. Although the World Bank differentiates among stabilization, structural adjustment, and adjustment policies, it acknowledges that the general use of these terms “is often imprecise and inconsistent” (Samoff, 1991, p. 21).

Nevertheless, this model of stabilization and adjustment which emerged after the so-called “Washington Consensus,” resulted in a number of conditions being imposed, including the reduction of governmental expenditures, devaluations to promote exports, reductions in import tariffs, and increased public and private savings. Key aims of this model are a drastic reduction of the State sector, the liberalization of salaries and prices, and the reorientation of industrial and agricultural production toward exports. The overall purpose of this policy package is to reduce the size of fiscal deficits and public expenditures, to drastically reduce inflation through strict monetary policies, and to reduce exchange rates and tariffs. In the short term, structural adjustment policies rely on exports as the engine of growth. To that extent, structural adjustment and subsequent policies of economic stabilization seek to liberalize trade, to reduce any distortion in price structures, to end any “protectionism” policies, and to facilitate free-market forces in the economies (Blackmore, 2000)

By the end of the 1990s, the policies of economic and financial stabilization and adjustment had also involved changes in the nation’s previous modernization model. Clearly, and contrary to the “old” modernization approach, the “New Modernizers” wanted the State to withdraw from the economic sphere. In the new model, the State was mainly responsible for the structural problems.

During President Carlos Menem’s governments (1989-1999), Argentina experienced an accelerated process of change and witnessed the implementation of a new model of development. The “popular-market economy” was the name of the new model of development. The most salient features of this model included the privatization of all public enterprises, deregulation, opening the social security system to market competition, and the decentralization of national health and education systems that had been initiated by the dictatorship of 1976-1983.

Most of those changes were justified as the only possible solution to the economic problems of the country because only they were attuned to the worldwide process of globalization. In this case “globalization”, was equated with “modernization” and implied the acceptance of the expansion of transnational capital, the supra-national character of productive decision making, the trend toward homogenization of information and cultural consumption, and the connecting of geographically and culturally distant places in such a way that local events are shaped, as well as influenced, by events occurring in remote places.

In addition to these economic measures, it should be noted again that the problem of achieving the “right amount of social order” was a key element of this discourse of modernity. The most important policy—in an attempt to promote internal peace and consensus—was the political pardoning of the commanders from the last dictatorship who were found guilty of crimes. However, this measure did little to solve real problems or to “put the past behind us” as repeatedly suggested by President Menem. (Note 2)

The macro-economic indicators have changed and according to external observers they

have improved (*The Economist*, 2000). However, with unemployment at approximately 15%, it is not an exaggeration to say that poverty and worsening living conditions are the everyday reality for a growing number of people in Argentina. There is ample evidence that Argentina's basic welfare indicators have fallen: in 1974 only 3% of the population was under the poverty line, and by 1990 after two hyperinflationary crises, the percentage rose to almost 60%. In the province of Buenos Aires, the largest and richest state in Argentina, the official percentage of households under the poverty line increased to 73% during the 1990s (INDEC, 1999). By the same token, other social sectors in Argentina enjoy the benefits of the application of policies of "liberalization" which give them access to the latest world-market technology and to the consumption of fashionable goods. The simultaneous increase of wealth for a few and the expansion of poverty for many are the expression of the striking economic segmentation and its parallel process of social polarization of the country.

Important transformations existed not only in the economy but also in the education sector. The "new modernization" discourse developed a strong educational tone, stressing the importance of higher levels of educational efficiency, and quality through school decentralization, autonomy, increased rigor, discipline, efficiency, efficacy, accountability, and higher levels of private sector participation in the delivery of educational services (Gentilli, 1994). Section IV below, after a brief presentation of the methods used for data collection (Section III), will explore the reactions, ideas and responses of principal, teachers and students in private and public secondary schools to the new modernization discourse.

III. Notes on Data Collection

The data for this research were gathered during two three-month periods and through school observations, interviews, and four focus groups with secondary education students. A series of open-ended interviews was conducted with 15 students and five teachers from two secondary private schools, and with 10 students and five teachers from one public secondary school. To protect the anonymity of all the participants in this study all names and locations are pseudonymous.

The selection of these three schools was based on geographical proximity and similarities in student population. The three schools are co-ed, medium in size, and to some extent serve a population of similar social and economic characteristics, academic orientation, and prestige. In other words, teachers, administrators, and parents have a more or less consistent opinion indicating that these three institutions are "different but they are good schools." The schools are located in a 20-block area (2.0 Sq. Km), within the same neighborhood in the city of Buenos Aires. This neighborhood is considered typically middle class, with a mix of residential and commercial areas.

It should be noted that—even though this limits even more the results of this research—none of the two private schools belonged to a religious order or denomination. In Argentina most private schools belong or are supported by religious institutions. This decision was made to produce as many similarities as possible among the students and teachers in the three institutions.

In addition to the activities carried out within the secondary schools, the researcher interviewed the director of the National Institute for Supervising Private Education, the

director of the Chamber of Private Owners of Schools, researchers and technicians of the National Ministry of Education who were working in the area of private education, and researchers and professors in the University of Buenos Aires and the University of Luján. General data such as educational financial policies, changes that occurred in the policies for public subsidies, enrollment, student achievement, and general evaluation about private education were obtained at the National Institute of Private Teaching (SNEP) and the National Ministry of Education. Finally, a large collection of articles published in newspapers (*La Nacion*, *Clarín*, *La Prensa*, and *Página 12*) and specialized Argentinean journals (*Revista Argentina de Educación*, *Educoo*, *Propuesta Educativa*, and *Cuadernos del CIE*) was collected.

IV. In Search of Educational Modernity

An anecdote illustrates some of the pivotal points in which the search for “educational modernity” was articulated during the period under study. What follows are transcribed notes from the researcher’s field-work:

May 1993: visit to the ministry of education for interviews. I have to wait for the “customary” 30 minutes. I asked one of the secretaries for any copies of the ministry’s advertising material to be distributed in secondary schools. I expect that the answer will be “there is nothing,” or at least nothing interesting, but I’m gladly surprised. The secretary provides me with a nicely designed package. The main material is a tabloid format of the newly approved Federal Law of Education, it is clearly printed and the text is presented in a “reader-friendly” layout.

Despite the content of this measure, the initial reaction of this researcher was: “This is a change from the past. At least now the government publicizes the laws it passes.” Yet, I was astonished to find and read a large advertisement on the back cover which promoted not the contents of the law, nor the achievements of the federal government but the ideas of the Argentinean Chamber of Textbooks’ Publishers. This chamber, a powerful for-profit organization, was using the back cover of the text of a national law, distributed by the federal government in schools, universities, libraries and community organizations to promote the free choice of books by teachers. Despite the novelty of the two intertwined procedures (i.e., massive publicity of the government actions in education and the somewhat strange media chosen by textbook publishers for their promotion), the pamphlet was intriguing. With its saturated text, it was not clear whether the government was endorsing the Chamber or the other way around.

These notes contain some of the tensions developed in the process of searching for a new model of educational modernization in the Argentina of the 1990s. As noted before, broadly speaking during the period 1985-1999, the goals of the “new modernization” discourse in education were promoted under the rubrics of “decentralization programs” and “quality improvement programs” in which the use of national evaluation programs was a key aspect. This “new educational modernization” was emphatically reaffirmed by the approval of two major legislative initiatives.

The first such initiative occurred in 1992 when the federal government developed a

process of decentralization by which it delegated the responsibility of secondary-school management (among other social services) to the provincial states. This process of decentralization was also presented as part of the needed modernization of the structures of government by creating a new smaller and leaner state. This program was publicized and presented to local and international audiences with the slogan, “A Ministry without schools.”

At first glance, through this transference the federal government, would transfer power by not controlling the administration of secondary schools and instead adopting a “managing” role. Nevertheless, as Dussel, Birgin and Tiramonti (in press) observed, the new ministry of education:

[H]as retained responsibility for four major areas: set of common contents, evaluation of outcomes, compensatory programs, and in-service teacher training. It also coordinates the activities of the provincial administrations through a special Committee, and monopolizes the negotiation and administration of foreign loans from multi-lateral financial institutions. Through all these measures, the Ministry has provoked a powerful re-centralization of the system, perhaps even greater than when it directly administered the schools. (p. 24)

There is a general consensus among researchers that the decentralization process initiated in 1992 parallels the administrative decentralization of elementary education undertaken by the military dictatorship of 1978 (see Rhoten, 1999 for a complete account of this process). The main rationale for both decentralization programs was related to fiscal crisis more than to the transfer of pedagogical or political decision-making (Hanson, 1994; Rhoten, 1999).

It is relevant to quote Hanson’s account of how the decentralization process took place: “The transfer of the secondary schools was a surprise move. The first notification that the attempt would be made came when the national budget was produced and distributed. The budget had deleted its historic financial support for secondary education. The outcry was so intense that the central government was almost obligated to delay the transfer while it developed a justification, held public debate, and passed a law. Few doubted that the results of the public debate would change the outcome, and it did not.” (Hanson, 1994, p. 4)

The second initiative was the sanction of the Federal Law of Education, the major legal education reform since the original Education Law of 1884 (which organized elementary education in Argentina). The new law introduced changes in the following areas:

The structure of the academic system: Previously, elementary school was mandatory for 7 years and secondary education required 5 years for completion (not mandatory). With the new law there is an extension of mandatory education from 7 to 10 years divided into an initial level (one year), and three levels of general basic education (three years each). The final level, denominated Polymodal Education, requires three years and it is the only one which is not mandatory for every child.

The curricular standards: The Law establishes the criteria for the development of the minimum requirements for each curricular area and each level, including teacher education. These curricular standards known as CBC (Curricular Basic Contents) were

developed by content specialists in consultation with different corporate sectors.

Teachers' Professional Development: A national network of teacher professional development activities to train school personnel. The network seeks the best offers for teacher training from different providers (public and private universities and other educational organizations). The training must respond to the Curricular Basic Contents developed for teacher certification.

Development and implementation of a national system of assessment: The national ministry of education is required to develop, administer and assess the results of national evaluation instruments. Samples of students in designated grades (3rd, 6th, 7th and 12th) have to be evaluated in mathematics, language, social and natural sciences. The results of such evaluations must be public. Beginning in 1997 all students in 12th grade in both public and private schools must take the national evaluation test and it is expected that by 2001, this will be a graduation requirement.

The economic-financial rationale and pro-private overtones of both laws were widely recognized in the media and within academic circles. Scholars from very different academic traditions and technicians and experts from private corporations such as ADEBA, FIEL, IDEA, agreed that the new Federal law did not substantially change the situation of the public sector but did include the old symbolic claims of the private sector. As a research team of professors at the University of Buenos Aires pointed out:

First of all, it is possible to say that the private education sector has benefited from the implementation of this new law, which incorporated many of their previous claims, such as: a) the law introduces the terminology that this sector uses to classify the distinct types of educational services, for example the use of the term "public" without regard for the type of administration. Thus, private-management or state management can both be referred to as "public." b) The interests of this sector are reflected in the role of the state in the provision of educational services. These services reflect: 1) the primacy of the freedom of teaching as one of the guiding principles of educational policies, 2) the explicit establishment of the private sector's rights to participate in educational planning, 3) the right of the private sector to receive "financial support" and not "subsidies," and 4) the inclusion of religion as an important aspect of the goals of the school system and development of the "person" (Nosiglia & Marquina, 1993, p. 89).

While debate of the law was taking place, the government was firmly committed to the implementation of a series of so-called "quality and accountability measures." The administration of president Carlos Saúl Menem, following recommendations made by the World Bank (Kugler, 1991) encouraged provincial administrations to evaluate their educational systems, and later implemented a general system of evaluating the quality of education --the "SINEC." It is important to clarify that when international financial organizations such as the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund recommend any given policy, it usually implies that loans or financial assistance are contingent on the application of such recommendation. The government of the province of Mendoza undertook the first attempt during the last months of 1992, followed by a nation-wide evaluation.

In all of these quality evaluations (Mendoza, SINEC National, and other smaller evaluations), the results were quite discouraging, and the national ministry of education did not want to publicize the results. On average, around 40% of all the students evaluated were unable to solve simple mathematical and language-related problems (Ministerio de Cultura y Educación, 1998).

More importantly, as the data in Table 1, 2 and 3 illustrate (especially given the objectives of this research) students in both public and private schools performed poorly. In addition, even though private schools scored better than public schools, the difference in performance between students at urban private and public institutions was not as important as the researchers and the public had predicted. It is also interesting to see in Tables 2 and 3 that public institutions are improving faster and, thus, closing the gap with the private schools.

Table 1
Comparative performance of public and private secondary schools in the SINEC evaluations (1994-1997)

Year	Public Schools	Private Schools
1994	56.46	65.15
1995	50.61	60.72
1996	50.61	60.72
1997	57.52	66.33

Source: Llach, J. J., Montoya S., and Roldán, F. *Educación Para Todos*, Córdoba, IREAL, 1999.

Table 2
Comparative Performance of 7th Grade Achievement Scores in Language of Public (Rural and Urban) and Private (Urban) Secondary Schools in the SINEC Evaluations (Selected Years 1993-1997)

School Modality	Language		Difference 93-97
	1993	1997	
Urban Public Schools	50.30	58.27	7.97
Rural Public Schools	41.87	50.26	8.39
Urban Private Schools	63.63	69.28	5.65

Source: Argentina Ministerio de Cultura y Educación (1998)

Table 3
Comparative Performance of 7th Grade Achievement Scores

**in Mathematics of Public (Rural and Urban)
and Private (Urban) Secondary Schools in the SINEC Evaluations
(Selected Years 1993-1997)**

School Modality	Mathematics		Difference 93-97
	1993	1997	
Urban Public Schools	51.05	53.18	2.13
Rural Public Schools	40.74	44.51	3.77
Urban Private Schools	64.95	63.33	-1.62

Source: Argentina Ministerio de Cultura y Educación (1998)

The initial outcry about the results was followed by a great media battle over whom to blame. Teacher unions were angry and were prepared to fight any attempt to scapegoat their members. The Ministry of Education was unable to explain the results, the causes, and future steps. The private sector declined to take a unified position and did not give much credence to the evaluations. Rather, it seemed each sector and each school was reaffirming its own institutional identity and defending its own merits.

In Argentina, the participation of the private sector in secondary education is quite important and enrollment in private schools makes up almost one third of the total (World Bank, 1995). The historical development of the private sector peaked during the early 1970s and has decreased since that time. Table 4 describes the situation.

**Table 4
Secondary Education Private Enrollment for Selected Years
(Percentage of Total Secondary Education Students)**

Year	Enrollment Percentage
1960	23.4 %
1970	33.1 %
1980	30.7 %
1992	28.1 %
1998	28.0 %

Source: Argentina Ministerio de Cultura y Educación (1998)

Since 1970, enrollment in private secondary schools has stagnated, yet the number of schools has increased in certain districts. In the more affluent areas of the country, the private sector covers almost 40% of the total enrollment. For instance, in Buenos Aires the public schools make up 29.4% of the institutions with 53.6% of the total enrollment, while the private sector has 70.6% of the institutions and 46.3% of the students. It is important to note that within the private sector, the vast majority of the schools (61%)

are regulated by the Catholic Church (Beccaria & Riquelme, 1986). The registered decrease in the percentage of students enrolled in private schools, accompanied by the increase in the number of private schools, could be interpreted as the process of “elitization” in which these schools are competing for the upper strata of the population. The above notes have provided contextual information. What follows are data gathered in interviews with principals, parents, students, teachers and a consultant for private schools.

The Principals

The interviews with the principals of the three schools revealed two main trends. The first trend refers to the importance of the funding role of the federal government in relation to the perception of the “private school advantage.” The second trend was a shared sense of uneasiness among the three principals about the implementation of federally mandated measures of evaluation.

The first trend requires some background information. What distinguishes the case of private schools in Argentina, compared with similar institutions in the USA is that the great majority of these private schools (secular and non-secular) receive public subsidies to pay teachers’ salaries. These subsidies can vary from 20% to 100%. In short, Argentina’s federal government is the largest source of educational financial resources in **both** the public and private sector. Such financial support was seen as a point of conflict by many of the professionals interviewed in this study. For those working in public schools, it was seen as an unfair advantage given to the private schools and the reason of their presumed superior performance. The principal of the public school (thereafter PS) observed in this study, commented as follows:

Principal Public School PS: It is scandalous that the government spends money in (name of private school 1 and name of private school 2) and then my supervisor tells me that there is no money for repairing the plumbing of my school. That is another proof of the lack of commitment to public schools.... See, ... if you go to a private school you pay for all the computers and balls (in reference to sporting equipment) and all the other nice stuff, then the government pays the salaries of the teachers, How can you compare? It is unfair, I know it is unfair, and everybody knows it is unfair.

For both principals in the private schools, (thereafter Mountain-view and Lake-view) the public subsidies were seen as fair and needed to survive the financial crisis.

Private School Mountain- View principal: The subsidies are important, without them we cannot survive ... and... the government should not make distinctions between schools, kids are kids, all of them students. We are doing a public service because we are educators. At least now that is recognized (in reference to the new Law of Education). Besides, private schools save public money because educating a kid in a private school is cheaper for the state than educating the same kid in a public school.

During the period 1995-1998 the school of principal of Mountain-view saw a small decrease in the number of enrolled students. The main explanation for the decrease was

an increase in the costs of school fees and the national economic crisis. In this regard it is interesting to note the opinion of an educational consultant working in several private schools, about private schools' strategies for increasing enrolment.

Question: In your opinion, is the private sector trying to reach other social sectors, the lower middle class for instance?

Private Schools Consultant: I do not see any interest in reaching the lower middle class, at least in the immediate future. Today's school fees, despite the difference of prices that private institutions are offering, are very high and many parents find it difficult to pay tuition and fees. Moreover, despite the fact that everybody wants a good education it doesn't mean that everybody wants to pay for that. In addition, the country is full of engineers that drive taxis, mathematicians in drugstores, and so on. That is sending a clear message. Sometimes a good education doesn't pay.

This consultant reflection pointed out to the sad reality of the absolute imperfection of Argentina's educational market. This expert describes some of the real problems and difficulties that—as will be presented later—other respondents also noted; the conflicted relationships between schooling and the job market in Argentina. The notion that the relationship between education and the economy is always a simple case of human capital enhancement, with the market always solving the equation in positive terms, does not readily apply in Argentina. In a nation where unemployment remains in two digits after a decade of structural adjustment programs and a good deal of highly educated workers do not find jobs that match their skills, it is understandable the skepticism of teachers and students alike about the value of education.

In light of the opinion of the private schools' consultant it is not surprising, then that the principal of Mountain-view did not have or did not want to share his plans for the future in terms of a new strategy to reach new sectors of the population. However, the Mountain-View's principal stated that one of his goals was to incorporate more and better students “regardless of economic origins, because the school has more space and the public schools are overcrowded.”

In the case of the principal of Lake-View school the subsidy was also seen as needed but with the addition of representing an instrument of control by the federal government.

Private School Lake-View principal: I would love to get ride of the subsidies, but we can't. No subsidies, no [private] school.

Question: What would be the advantage of not receiving subsidies?

Lake-View principal: Some schools are trying that. The first advantage is that there is no more regulation of what your fee should be, and from an investment perspective, if you could increase the price of your service, the margin of profit increases. But it is very complicated and I am not interested in the money making aspect, ... I am an educator. But if the government does not subsidize the school, the power, the inspectors, the tests, will be, how can I say, ... less threatening, and we could make more changes, and faster.

Despite the difference of opinion about the role of the state subsidies, the principals of the three schools expressed similar perceptions about the private schools ability to adapt to situations defined as critical. Critical situations were described as the economical and political crises that have affected Argentina's daily life, such as the hyperinflation (1989-91), military uprisings (1987-89), civil riots (1989), civil attack to a military fort (1989), and the chronic unemployment of the late 1990s. For example, answering a question about innovations in curriculum, the principal of one of the private schools stated:

Mountain-View principal: You know, in the private schools it is easier to find room for innovations, and in Argentina you always have to be ready for sudden changes and disasters.

When the first part of the fieldwork for this study was undertaken, the debate about education (or the crisis of education) was raging. Everyone was eager to express an opinion about the results of the Mendoza's evaluation or the recurring comments by education experts which appeared in the media. This environment provided an ideal opportunity for conducting this research. The questions seemed to be timely and gave interviewees an opportunity to express their opinions. The principals of one of the private schools and the public school principal used an almost identical argument when asked their opinions about the evaluations. The principal of Mountain-View reported the following

Question: How do you evaluate the performance of private schools in general given the results of the evaluation of the quality of education by Mendoza and other similar endeavors?

Mountain-View principal: The important thing here is to recognize that our school is doing the work. It is teaching . . . something you can't say about the public schools. You know, every other day teachers are on strike.

Question: How do you explain that on average the scores of students in private schools and public ones are not very different?

Mountain-View principal: Well the problem is the test and its evaluators. The tests were prepared by people who don't know how we [private sector] operate and that is the main reason.

Similarly, the principal of the public secondary school expressed discomfort when asked about the national system of evaluation:

Question: What do you think about the quality of education evaluations?

Public School principal: I don't like the use of these tests; it is all political... we need to ask why are they [the government] implementing these evaluations, They are trying to prove that public schools are doing a bad job. Besides, I'm sure that those who are preparing the evaluations have never visited a classroom. Try to teach math to 35 students and after that we can talk about evaluations.

As these testimonies indicate, the principals in the private and public schools shared concerns about the national system of evaluation, and also shared the belief (for different

reasons, though) about the private schools' advantages. It is important to emphasize that this belief was maintained even after the results of the national evaluations of quality showed that urban private and public schools have not performed in significantly different manners.

The idea that private schools have more flexibility than public schools to change or adapt the academic curricula than public ones was difficult to assess. Academic performance was a very important consideration for the three principals, and they all emphasized similar solutions for improving the performance of their schools, namely: better teacher preparation, updated educational materials (computers and textbooks), and better discipline in schools.

The three principals were very concerned with security and discipline as a way of improving the conditions in which the students learn. It is important to note that during the field-work, principals, teachers and students in the three schools did not report extraordinary disciplinary problems. Nevertheless, in many interviews particularly with the adults, the idea of schools being unsafe places seems to have replaced past, more romantic visions of Argentinean schools as the "second home," sacred places for learning.

It is very likely that the concern with discipline expressed by the principals was a response to a few violent situations that occurred in public and private secondary schools during the period 1989-1998, and which were prominently displayed in the media. Yet, the lack of any systematic study tracking the rise or decline of violence in schools does not permit drawing any firm conclusion. Nevertheless, the rise of levels of poverty associated with high levels of unemployment, and the rising statistics for street crime in general may support the perceptions that the whole society is less safe, including schools.

The Teachers

The interviews with teachers confirmed the trend about the "private school advantage" but also revealed discomfort with the educational system in general. Yet the reasons for the better performance of the private schools were not conclusive. All the teachers interviewed indicated that private schools have better programs or have advantages over public schools in creating better academic environments. However, when the questions searched for the main differences in curriculum development, evaluation, discipline programs, and incentives, teachers in both public and private schools had difficulties in pointing out specific modalities, beyond private schools' better facilities.

Teresa P., a female teacher, has been teaching history in private and public schools for more than five years and was teaching at Mountain-View when she was interviewed. When the issue of the quality-of-education evaluations was raised, her response was evasive. She did not know or did not want to take a clear position regarding that topic. For that reason, the questions focused on other differences between public and private institutions:

Question: Where do you feel better? At the public or at the private school?

Teresa P.: Nowhere; I have the same problems, the place doesn't matter, the same low salaries, the same country, the same old-fashioned curriculum, the

same lack of good supervision and the same general indifference about our work.

Question: Can you think about any difference?

Teresa P.: In the bathroom [laughing] and that is serious! I mean the lack of investment that you have at the national [public] school is disgusting, horrific and the first place that you notice that is in the bathrooms. In that regard at St. X [a Catholic private school] and Mountain-View that is always better and of course there [private schools] we have chalk and an eraser in each classroom, VCR and that kind of stuff. At the national public school we have to bring our own chalk, it is a shame! For the rest I think we need a general change, not only talking about schools, we need general changes in the country.

The testimony of Teresa P. exemplified a common pattern expressed by several teachers during the course of this research. The idea that education is not an isolated problem was frequently mentioned by teachers. This trend, which this research has termed “society first,” was equally salient for teachers in public or private schools, and it can be summarized as follows: educational problems are *dependent* on social problems and thus, educational solutions require country-wide extra- school, social changes.

A possible explanation of the “society first” trend can be found in the severity of the country’s financial and social crises, which were severely felt by teachers. In the words of Emilio Tenti, a noted Argentinean researcher:

There is a national trend of a prolonged decline in the real salaries of teachers from the mid-1970s to the beginning of the 1990s. The best years with regard to salary were during the first half of the 1980s, and a loss in the relative position of teachers’ salary compared to that of the salaries obtained by the average salaried workers in the formal sector of the economy has occurred. (1999, p. 270)

In the late 1990s, teachers were earning a third less than an average worker in the formal economic system (Tenti, 1999), and in most cases they held several part-time school jobs (a condition popularly known as “Taxi-Teachers”). Nonetheless, the precarious conditions of the teaching profession in general and the acutely critical circumstances of the mid 1990s did not prevent or protect teachers from harsh criticism (especially those working in public schools).

Teachers were blamed for declines in student achievement and lack of consideration about students’ welfare (due to their political efforts –a series of strikes, public demonstrations. For almost three years the teachers union held a political protest called the *Carpa Blanca*, (the white tent). The “white tent” was erected in front of the national legislature, and hosted teachers and activists on hunger strikes. This particular form of protest was first condemned, but later received more popular support.

It is in this context that the relationships between teachers and parents and teachers with administrators and educational authorities grew more tense. To some extent the teaching profession entered into a state of acute crisis. It is difficult to determine the extent of this crisis, but the decline of enrolment in teacher education programs, and reports pointing

out that more than 40% of teachers answered that they would choose another profession are clear indicators of its seriousness. (Birgin and Braslavsky, 1995; Fischman, 2000)

Returning to the central focus of this research, the comparison of the perceptions between secondary public and private schools, as noted before, teachers also supported the notion of the “private school advantage” as illustrated by the following extended testimony Carlos P. a mathematics male teacher who was working at Lake-View, and who had previous experience at public schools reflected on his career:

Carlos P. (Lake-View): I started my career full of energy! I felt that teaching was my mission, my goal in life. My first year I was lucky, I got three temporary positions at three large public schools, 12 hours in each. But one was in [the neighborhood of] Floresta, the other in [the neighborhood of] Devoto and the last one, my favorite in [the neighborhood of] Belgrano. After four years I ran out of energy, more than three hundred students, you know the time I needed to evaluate tests and homework. It was impossible. I was tired of being a “taxi-teacher.” And the money that you spend traveling! And the time! And the students. It was too much. Well, I went to MiddleTown [a large private school]. I started with 20 hours and then I got five more hours as a coordinator. It was less money but I negotiated and got more hours in one place. No more traveling, no more taxis. That is better in the private school.

Question: Anything else?

Carlos P.: Oh yeah! But it is not what you are thinking about! At Lake-View you have someone—the principal and the owner—you can discuss and negotiate with them—not money—because that is fixed, but everything else. The other element, perhaps the most important one is the pressure of parents on the kids. They [parents] are spending a lot of money and they don’t want the kids joking around. It doesn’t necessarily imply that those upper-middle class kids are better-motivated or better students [than students at public schools] but they sometimes behave as consumers and ask for good service. However, another thing is what they [students] think is a good service.

Question: What do you mean?

Carlos P.: Students, not all of them, but some, sometimes mistake the fact that they are paying for a service and therefore they assume that paying is equal to getting good grades or having the right to not do homework. That kind of thing. It is funny how sometimes they ask for grades! I paid and I deserve, like buying a CD!

Question: Do you consider that as a challenge or that this kind of pressure makes you change your teaching style from what you used to do at the public schools?

T.2PrII: Oh no! At the public school you have something similar, teenagers are always challenging us, but the reasons are different. How can I explain this? It is like, well, at the private school some students behave like

customers buying services and at the National [public school] some students, those who are more politicized, they ask for their rights. It is like . . . I know, they always start with “We have the right, we deserve this or that because we are citizens.” Well in both cases I feel like the ham of the sandwich.

This teacher’s testimony captures several key questions for this research. Is it possible to frame public and private schooling as the expression of competence between citizen rights and consumer rights? Do we have any chance of improving education without changing the working conditions of thousands of “taxi-teachers”? Given the results of the national evaluation tests: What is the importance of the structural conditions of secondary schools? What are the key material conditions that matter in schools? Better salaries? More VCRs? Good bathrooms? Granted all the above are important conditions; teachers deserve to be working in environments in which their main worries should revolve around learning and not VCRs or bathrooms.

Finally, in the interviews with teachers it is difficult to assess any significant difference in terms of private school teachers enjoying more autonomy or a more responsive environment to their professional or their students’ needs due to parents or market pressures. What Glass (1997) indicated was the case of the United States is also applicable in the case of these schools in Argentina:

Autonomy is an issue that does not clearly distinguish public from private education. The freedom teachers and administrators feel and the constraints they experience are complex. Many of the constraints experienced by public and private high school administrators and teachers are similar. Both sectors must work within the limits of a set of prescribed laws. They are equally subject to pressures resulting from limited funds. Perceptions of autonomy are individual matters, often experienced within a range of accepted constraints.(Glass, 1997)

The Students

The findings from focus groups and interviews with students from public and private schools revealed three main trends: a) a sense that their school experiences are not very pleasant, or very rich in terms of learning, b) the social group “teacher” deserves solidarity, but the teachers working at their schools less so; and c) private schools are better than public ones.

As in the case of the principals, a similar strong belief was reported about the private school advantage by students in both public and private schools. What should be noted is that for the students the sense of competition between the two systems was very strong. However, it was difficult for the students to indicate what were the specific bases that sustain the notion that private schools outperformed public schools. In some cases, students from private schools pointed to pressures from their parents (over them and the school) as the main justification; in other cases, students identified loosely defined “higher academic expectations.” Students in public schools indicated the access to better buildings and parents’ pressures. Yet, at the same time most students (in both public and private schools) indicated that they were not satisfied with their schooling experience. One female student asserted:

Student.1-Lake-View: my parents are always reminding me how much my school costs, and I tell them that given the [sic] 'crap' my teachers teach, they should save the money.

A male student in his last year of secondary public school reflected about his experience in the following terms:

Student.2-Public School: If you look around this school, you will see how depressing it is to be here. Teachers are tired, some are bored, but for the most part they are tired, and sometimes we don't help. I remember at the beginning when one of the teachers was absent or during the strikes we got really happy, it was fun, more free hours, and time to fool around. But lately it all seems a big waste of time. In some classes I cannot remember learning anything. I want to go the university but I'm afraid I'm not ready.

When questioned about possible differences between students in private and public schools Student.2 indicated that:

Student.2-Public School: If I have to judge from my friends that go to the private school, I think that they are as ignorant as I am...but, I don't know, I guess that they are better prepared ... I don't know, but I think so, they are better prepared.

The comments of Student.2 are illustrative of a strong tendency among the students. They do not know why, but the belief about the superiority of private schools is rather solid. However, it should be noted that students as a social group had a very definite tendency to present bold opinions.

The testimonies of Student1 and Student2 are clear examples of the disappointment with schooling, which in some cases was extended to the society and the government. When students pointed out their frustration with the government and society, they usually expressed an uneasy sense of solidarity with teachers. In other words, teachers in general were seen as "victims" of unfair systems, but their particular teachers were in many cases harshly evaluated, or even mocked. This last tendency was equally strong among students from both public and private schools. When asked about a recent demonstration and a possible strike by teachers, Student.3 gave total support. But a few minutes later when asked about his opinion of the teachers at his school, he replaced solidarity with mockery.

Student.3-Public School: I support teachers demands for better salaries, no doubt that the government lies all the time... there should be money about education... everybody says that education is the future, the priority and all that, but I think they are lying, they [government officials] are not committed...[Student.3- Public School continues criticizing the government]

Question: Do you think that your teachers are going to participate in the protests?

Student.3-Public School: My teachers? No, ... most of them are scared and

old-fashioned. They complain all the time, but sometimes I think that they are here because they are a bunch of losers, well they are a bunch of losers.

The notion that teaching is a noble profession—but somehow the real teachers working at real schools do not deserve much respect—was equally prominent among private education students. During a focus group with 10 students from the private school Lake-View, 8 out of 10 were very supportive of teachers striking for better salaries. Nevertheless, when asked the same question about the teachers at their school participating in a future strike, one of the participants (female student in 4th year at Lake-View) expressed these opinions:

Student.4-Lake-View: No, teachers here are teachers.

Question: What do you mean by “teachers are teachers”?

Student.4-Lake-View: ... They don't want to risk anything, they do everything the principal tells them to do, or follow the textbook, they are ... boring, really boring ... everything is always the same... .

Student.4-Lake-View: Yes, she is totally right, there are days we spend as much time sleeping in class as copying idiotic stuff.

The previous testimonies are consistent in showing dissatisfaction with schooling and authorities in general. During this research, in only one instance did students point to their own of responsibility in their own schooling when they recognize that cheating is a very common practice. During the first part of one focus group with 9 students from two secondary schools (5 from the public and 4 from Mountain-View private school) most participants agreed with the notion that “private schools are better, than public ones,” or as one of the students from the public school emphatically stated “It is a fact! If you can choose, you go to the private.” None of the other students seemed to disagree. However, almost at the end of the focus group and when questioned about the quality of education in general in light of the results of the SINEC evaluations, two students (one from each school) produced the following dialogue which drew the enthusiastic support of the other participants:

Student.5-Public School: It couldn't be different, we share the same teachers!

Student.6-Mountain-View: Yeah! Mr. Pepe teaches the same nonsense here [private school] and there [public school] and the same over and over. My brother was his student more than seven years ago and he can repeat Pepe's lesson on civics word by word. He [Mr. Pepe] is like a tape recorder!

Student.5-Public School: Besides, you know, we are experts!

Question: What do you mean?

Student.5-Public School: You know, cheating is very common; I think that when we finish school they should give us another diploma with the title, “Master Cheaters.” (Note 3)

To sum up this section, students from public and private schools consistently supported the notion of the private school advantage, but were not very clear in their reasons for such belief. They were also able to point to similar levels of dissatisfaction with their schools. It is also important to mention that notwithstanding the expressed dissatisfaction with their schooling, for the most part, students were not against teachers in general. However the sympathy and solidarity with the abstraction “teacher” were not felt for the teachers from their own schools. This last tendency can be understood as a way of compensating for the sense of frustration that some students feel about their school experiences.

V. Conclusions

This research was conducted to assess the extent of curricular and management changes in two private and one public secondary schools in the city of Buenos Aires, Argentina. The main goal was to explore the perception of local actors (principals, teachers, and students) of what was termed the “new modernization discourse in education.”

It is important to restate that this study did not intend to provide generalizable conclusions valid for all contexts and situations, nor to provide a single unifying narrative that explains the situation of all private and public secondary schools in Argentina. Rather it aimed at offering some clues about the perception of changes by a limited number of social actors and their understanding of how public and private secondary schools operate in a particular context.

After reviewing all the evidence gathered, the presumed capability of private schools in absorbing increasing numbers of students with higher levels of educational excellence could not be assessed. Furthermore, there is no clear evidence showing significantly important change in the population’s response to the promises of the private sector in terms of enrolment and yet, there is a strong belief among students, teachers and principals in the better performance of the private sector at all levels.

Besides supporting the “private school advantage” notion, both teachers and students in these three schools showed high levels of disappointment with the general status of secondary education. Those levels were not directly related to the relative poor performance of students in the national evaluation tests but with a system of education which seems to offer few opportunities for self and social empowerment and to be unrewarding for both teachers and students.

Contrary to what the “free-market” literature predicts, in the case of these three secondary schools in Buenos Aires and based on the perspectives offered by this small sample of students and teachers, it appears that private and public schools in the same geographic area are offering similar curricular options and having similar results. According to the marketization literature, this finding is somewhat surprising, because private schools should be able to afford “alternative” programs, having more flexibility and somewhat better working conditions for its teachers. Perhaps, the observed similarity can be explained by two conditions: a) 85% of the teachers in the two private schools were trained in public institutions, and b) the three schools are located in the same neighborhood and serve students with similar social and economic backgrounds.

The findings of this study are also consistent with the results of Glass’s (1997) study

about public and private schools in Arizona and Rothstein,, Carnoy, and Benveniste's (1999) study of public and private schools in California. In their study, Rothstein, Carnoy, and Benveniste (1999) concluded that:

[T]he social, cultural, and economic backgrounds of the parents and the community in which the school was located seemed to be the main determinant of variation, much more so than a school's public or private character or, within the latter group, whether it was religious or secular. Within these particular communities, the similarities between schools and the problems they confronted overwhelmed the differences (1999, p. 75)

The three schools studied in Buenos Aires operated in a context in which their pedagogical and administrative decisions were constrained by the emergence of a new discourse about "educational modernization." This discourse has assumed a clear pro-private schools tone, and its defenders contend that it is both a response as well as part of the conditions emerging from the process of globalization. In this discourse, educational modernization is a by-product of globalization, and both developed "naturally" as the only possible response to also "naturally" occurring situations. Therefore, in this discourse the implementation of programs of structural adjustment, legislative changes affecting the provision of educational services, and the strong support of international financial agencies, mainstream media, the political establishment and large sectors of the population for private education are presented as the only possible alternatives to "naturally" occurring situations, and not part of large and complex political and economical struggles.

The importance and influence of the current debate in Great Britain and the USA about markets and choice in education and the international financial agencies' role –which Joel Samoff (1991) has aptly defined as the "Financial-Intellectual Complex"–in tailoring the new modernization discourse in Argentina are two factors that should not be underestimated. As noted before at the turn of the nineteenth century the nation -state assumed the task of being the engine of capitalist modernization in Latin America. For the enterprise of modernization, national, publicly funded school systems were conceptualized as a key component. (Tedesco, 1989)

In the current globalized capitalism, the pressures to transform the models of modernization, the role of the state, and the functions and extent of national systems of "public" schools are greater than ever before. The phenomenon of globalization, with its compression of time and space , (Castells, 1997), has created a new set of conditions, some of which were severely felt in the Argentina of the 1980s and 1990s. The levels of autonomy of the national state are under constant scrutiny because as Jill Blackmore noted "Whereas the welfare state previously disciplined the market within its national boundaries, in a globalized context the state is now being disciplined by the international markets." (2000, p. 335)

Under these disciplinary constraints the contemporary Latin American state can be best characterized as a "conditioned capitalist state" (Fuller, 1991), which is not a less interventionist state but one that is conditioned by supranational forces (including the local elites connected to the transnational sector) constraining the national state's ability to operate within its national boundaries. In Argentina during the 1980s and 1990s given the circumstances of semi-permanent political and financial crises, Argentina's state as a conditioned state had fewer possibilities for developing models of schooling which did

not resemble the models developed and promoted by more powerful international financial institutions. (Samoff, 1991)

Financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund respond to the policies of the governments of the richest, most industrialized countries in the world (Robinson, 1999). In this scenario it is expected that the most likely educational policies to be developed by conditioned capitalist countries will therefore, resemble those educational policies developed in and favoring the continuous accumulation of capital by the G-7 countries.

Established Western societies are no longer optimistic that the Welfare State can effectively assist, or even understand, the problems facing working class and low-income groups. Individualistic market rules and materialistic preoccupation, earlier advanced by the classically liberal state, are gaining supporters from a widening range of social classes which see less and less meaning in centralized versions of the modern state. (Fuller, 1991, p. 141)

As the current North American debate over vouchers and choice initiatives shows, the pro- market initiatives are gaining momentum. In addition, proposals by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund calling for the privatization of schooling of the add more pressure and conditions the options of Argentina's public education system. When one of the most recognizable World Bank experts in education proclaims that the best way to solve the problems of public education is to "Privatize as much as you can" (Psacharopoulos, 1990), there is no doubt that privatization has become a powerful component of the new modernization discourse in education.

At this point, with the available evidence from this small research in Argentina, and the international experience from countries such as Chile (Carnoy, 2000), New Zealand (Lauder and Hughes, 1999), the USA (Glass, 1997; Rothstein, Carnoy, and Benveniste, 1999) and the United Kingdom (Ball and Vincent, 1998), it is legitimate to question about the advantages of marketizing education and promoting the replacement of the public school system by one dominated by private schools. In answering this question Martin Carnoy (2000) questioned these supposed advantages:

When the available information is assembled in the U.S. and abroad, the evidence suggests that "marketizing" education increases choice for a certain fraction of parents but most likely does little or nothing to improve overall student achievement. (p. 19)

The findings of this research support Carnoy's remarks. It appears evident, then, that in the case of Argentina before proceeding with the implementation of more "market initiatives" to improve public education, it would be important to have a better knowledge of the functioning of the supposedly better performing private schools. This is especially relevant at the secondary level where private participation is large and very heterogeneous.

I would, however, recommend that further studies about this topic follow Adam Przeworsky cautions regarding the application of economic changes –or educational ones– under "conditioned democratic situations." Przeworsky (1991, p. 138) wondered whether structural economic transformation can be sustained under democratic conditions, or whether either reforms or democracy must be sacrificed.

This is a threefold question: (1) What are the economic costs of such transformation? (2) Under what political conditions are such costs most likely to be tolerated? (3) What is the effect of transformation on democratic institutions? Przeworsky pointed out that these questions mainly involve speculation informed on the one hand by economic theory and on the other by fragile historical experience. Neither explanation appears to be very useful or provide the final word on this matter. He concluded:

We have no theory of structural transformation, and the empirical evidence is scanty. Market oriented reforms are a plunge into the unknown, a risky historical experiment born out of desperation and driven by hope, not by justifiable benefits. (Pzeworski, 1991, p. 139)

I would like to conclude that today, nine years after Pzeworsky's contention, the empirical evidence is far from being scanty, and it indicates that market reforms in education have not delivered "justifiable benefits," at least not in terms of better achievement and equality of opportunities for the majority of the population. Doubtless, there are excellent private schools in Argentina and elsewhere offering wonderful and meaningful educational opportunities for their students. But there are also wonderful public schools that today are threatened by political negligence, which is self-justified by the argument of the inevitability of globalization, as well as by blind faith in the marketization of schooling. To forget the latter, and the continuous uncritical acceptance of the "private school advantage," seems not only naïve, but also dangerous.

Notes

1. The notion of the so-called "Lost Decade" is very problematic and misleading. In Argentina, during the "Lost Decade" groups of people did extremely well and their "prosperity" was closely related to the impoverishment of the other sectors of the population. During the period 1975-1990, the top third of the population (in terms of income) increased its earnings by 26.2%, the middle class lost 9.2% of its income while the income of the bottom third of the population fell by 14.9% (Boron, 1992).
2. The continuous demands by several national human rights groups as well as the investigations of human rights abuses by international courts, expose the absurdity of the "historical amnesia" prescribed by the government of President Alfonsín and later by President Menem as the remedy to the horrors of Argentina's past.
3. Cheating in secondary schools appears to be very extensive. For some of my respondents (teachers, principals, parents, and especially students) cheating is an "institution," one more of the many rituals that shape the experience of secondary education. However, there are other voices that link cheating to the larger structures of corruption that typify the daily life of the country. In fact, corruption is such a visible topic that during the last few years, several books that dealt directly with this topic were on the best sellers list. In two books, cheating in schools was used as an example of the general level of corruption in Argentina. (See, Grondona, Mariano. *La Corrupcion*. Buenos Aires, Planeta, 1993 and Moreno Ocampo, Luis. *En Defensa Propia*. Buenos Aires, Sudamericana, 1993). In addition to these examples, at the University of Buenos Aires (UBA), one of the few graduate courses offered not only to university students but also to the public

was about “Corruption.” *Los Angeles Times* reporter William Long notes, “Universities sometimes come up with courses on subjects that reflect the spirit of the times. A while back, a hot topic might have been, say, guerrilla war. Or more recently rain forest ecology. These days the UBA is offering a seminar on corruption.” October 19, 1993, H2.

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