






The education of the artisan teacher. Crafts and fabrics to hold schooling

La formación del docente artesano. Artesanías y tejidos para sostener lo escolar

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Abstract

This article addresses teaching work in two public secondary schools; one located on the outskirts of the capital city and the other in the interior of the Chaco Province, in the northern part of Argentina. The students attending these institutions come from families that have been forced to migrate from rural areas to intermediate cities due to the substitution of human labor by agricultural machinery and the consequent uprooting of the rural population in Chaco.

The social, political, and economic changes generated by these processes have modified and affected the daily dynamics and working conditions of teaching in these schools. The discussions presented here arise from in-depth interviews conducted with eight teachers and an educational advisor. The initial results show that teachers employ artisanal strategies to support academic paths that are at pedagogical risk. Thus, the forms that teaching takes result from macro processes resonating in schools but also from micro-institutional processes that come into play through teaching and pedagogical dynamics presenting complex nuances, given the current situation experienced in these institutions.

Keywords: public teaching, high school, teacher education, teaching, crafts, factory.

Resumen

Este artículo aborda el trabajo docente en dos escuelas secundarias públicas; una de ellas ubicada en la periferia de la ciudad capital y la otra en el interior de la provincia del Chaco, al norte de Argentina. Las y los estudiantes que asisten a estas instituciones provienen de familias que se han visto obligadas a migrar desde el campo a *ciudades intermedias*, debido a los procesos de sustitución de la mano de obra humana por maquinaria agrícola y la consecuente desterritorialización del campesinado chaqueño.

Las modificaciones sociales, políticas y económicas que estos procesos generaron, modificaron y afectaron las dinámicas cotidianas y las condiciones de desarrollo del trabajo docente en estas escuelas. Las discusiones que aquí se presentan surgen de la aplicación de entrevistas en profundidad a ocho docentes y una asesora pedagógica. Los primeros resultados arrojan que las y los docentes tejen estrategias artesanales para sostener las trayectorias escolares que se encuentran en riesgo pedagógico. Así, las formas que asume la docencia son el resultado de procesos macro que resuenan en las escuelas, pero también de procesos micro-institutionales que se ponen en juego a través de la enseñanza y de dinámicas pedagógicas que presentan matices complejos, dada la coyuntura que atraviesa la vida en estas instituciones.

Palabras clave: enseñanza pública, escuela secundaria, formación de docentes, enseñanza, artesanía, fábrica.

1. Introduction

This paper presents the results of a research carried out in two public schools located in urban contexts in the province of Chaco, Argentina. The students at these schools are migrants, coming from families of rural workers who were displaced from their jobs and were replaced by agricultural machinery to collect cotton, among other raw materials (Castilla et al., 2019); situation called by some as deterritorialization of the Chaco peasantry (Sili, 2019; Manzano & Velázquez, 2015). As a result of the migrations, the arrival of this population to the schools modified and affected the daily dynamics and the teaching conditions. In this context, it is essential to conduct research on the pedagogical strategies of teachers to support the schooling of students who are at pedagogical risk (Acuña et al., 2021; Acuña & Grinberg, 2022).

Everyday life and teaching (Acuña & Grinberg, 2018), contribute to the question about teacher training in that they allow thinking about the ways this work takes in “times of crisis and school reconfigurations” (Acuña, 2022). If this applies generally to teachers in all schools, it is even more important in the northeastern region of Argentina, since there are numerous challenges for teachers, who not only must be prepared to take on increasingly complex tasks, but — often — do not have the economic and material resources to carry them out, in a context that conditions their performance (Zabalza Beraza, 2022). Several authors (Muñoz Carril et al., 2023), suggest that focusing on the formative and strategic-pedagogical processes enhances the recognition and analysis of practices, thoughts and emotions that go through it, highlighting the commitment to an innovation that is necessary for change and educational improvement.

This research describes the work done by teachers to keep institutional life moving and to accompany the school trajectories of students in secondary schools. To this end, more than twenty teachers from both schools were interviewed in depth and observations were made inside and outside the classroom. This paper presents the testimony of eight teachers, a pedagogical adviser, and the records of their classes from April 2018 to September 2019.

The paper focuses on the characterization of the daily work of these teachers from a “practical craftsmanship” (Acuña & Grinberg, 2023; Grinberg, 2015). This work unfolds between the managerial logics in-

involved in the constant search for economic resources and collective agencies (Deleuze & Partner, 1997), between the school and the neighborhood to work on the precariousness in the northern Argentina.

The notion of craftsmanship (Sennet, 2009) of teaching practices and school life in general is a way to approach the understanding of teaching (Schwamberger & Grinberg, 2021), as a way of practices that go through training and teaching in their daily development. Arendt (2016) refers to a craft practice that involves skills and development of individuals forms of teachers, often learned through trial and error, to give answers to the complexities and emergencies in these schools. In this way:

Schools go around the sterile state language and experimental, artisanal, intuitive, collective practices that cannot be said (...). Other languages, whose political quality lies in conferring legitimacy to real existences, as well as in creating conditions for new questions and reinventions. (Duschatzky, 2023, p. 115)

The hypothesis that guides this work suggests that the scenario, product of migrations, resulted in the arrival of new populations in schools (Morzilli, 2021) and in the deepening of inequalities and schooling conditions of students.

In everyday school life, institutions and teachers must seek different forms and modulations that allow them to sustain and accompany in a personalized way the student trajectories that are permanently interrupted by different causes, making the teaching process more complex due to the need to sustain student enrollment and the permanent recovery of school contents each time students return. A teacher says, “We used to talk to Gustavo, because he stopped coming for six months and started to work because he did not have enough to eat. Now he has picked up, looked for the best way and since he is in school, we are working again with the last content he studied.”

In the times of crisis (Southwell, 2020a), the concern to look for strategies and practices to hold schooling of students is fundamental for any institution; but when addressing the stories of adolescents and young people who live permanently situations of exclusion, it is also important to prepare teachers to generate strategies that favor more stable schooling.

In the next section, the methodological decisions will be developed, followed by the presentation

of the results with the main categories of analysis emerging from the field work. Finally, some conclusions will be presented that do not seek to be conclusive and closing, but rather encouraging when thinking about the pedagogical strategies that schools and teachers use in high socially vulnerable contexts.

2. Methodology

School life requires meticulous and artisanal teaching practices (Sennett, 2009), which model doing in schools and teaching (Calderón Solís & Loja Tacuri, 2018), strained between optimism and responsibility (Berlant, 2020; McLeod, 2019), which involves the act of educating and the ways of teaching (Grinberg, 2019; Acuña et al., 2023).

Analyzing the daily life of secondary schools considering these details, requires an in-depth analysis found in the qualitative approach with a descriptive view (Barnet-López, 2017; Quecedo & Castaño, 2002). The empirical information was obtained from the work in two public secondary schools in the province of Chaco, Argentina: a school of social management² in the capital and a school of state management located in an *intermediate city*. The information was obtained from in-depth interviews that took place between 2018 and 2019, in a work whose dynamics were different, given the characteristics of each institution. In the state management school, the fieldwork was marked by its short duration in time but great intensity (2-3 days *in situ*). However, the school of social management characterizes by longer stays and time-spaced visits.

Additionally, flash interviews³ and observations of different school spaces were used: socialization as the playground, teaching-learning as the classroom, artistic-pedagogical spaces as school events or community festivals. For this article some of these scenes were taken and, specifically, the interviews conducted with eight teachers and a teacher adviser, were distributed as follows: in the school of the capital four interviews were made to teachers of mathematics, arts, philosophy and literature, 1st and 2nd year of secondary level, while in the school of state management five interviews were done: the teacher adviser and four teachers of the subjects of history, economics, citizenship and music of the last years of the educational level.

Participant observations were made in both in-

stitutions (Guber, 2005) in the classrooms of 2nd and 3rd year of the capital's school and 4th and 5th year of the province's school. The teaching strategies used, the contents taught and, above all, the dynamics of linkage between students and teachers were observed from the pedagogical proposals offered. In the observation, it was decided to extract two stories of students that allow to give an empirical support to the article and contextualize, through the field diary, some scenarios that respond to the objective of this investigation.

Participant observation allowed us to record and contextualize the characteristics of everyday school life: student-classroom-teacher interactions and formal and informal encounters typical of school life. These stays in the field brought closer the life scenarios in the classroom to account for the forms of the daily school.

The analysis process consisted, first, in identifying emerging categories of information obtained in the field work from the instruments used, essentially in-depth interviews. The organization of the information was carried out using AtlasTi 8 program. The collection and systematization were possible by using Glaser and Strauss constant comparison method (1967). These analysis tools were instruments for constructing categories that go beyond the empirical dimension of data and the theoretical dimension, understood as central elements that go around the production of knowledge in science. It is pointed out that traditional science privileged two components in the production of knowledge called scientists: or empiricism or theory, which support each other, strengthen or refute, ignoring the experiential component from the perspective of the consciousness assumed by those who narrate their life to a foreigner —researcher— who uses action strategies of understanding and interpreting dialogues: between protagonists, researchers and available scientific knowledge. Hugo Zemelman (1994) refers to a movement, a logic of reasoning that goes beyond scientific rationality and moves towards a dialectical and historical rationality (...). Categorical thinking focuses on experiential categories -not only theoretical-, allowing critical distancing and expanding the understanding and historical awareness of the present (Quintar, 2018, p.18).

After the process of systematization and analysis, this work was organized from three lines: 1) the discussions around the work and the teacher training

in rural secondary schools; 2) teaching against all odds, accounting for the pedagogical strategies from which institutions, crossed by precariousness and urban poverty (Mantiñán, 2020; Langer & Machado, 2013; Besana et al., 2014), build teaching spaces that allow accompanying and giving schooling answers to students normally excluded from the school system and 3) the circulation of the word and democratization of space. Hence, we propose that teacher training and teaching in the 21st century is a craft that should consider all these aspects, as we will develop below.

3. Results

3.1 Discussions about the work and the teacher training in rural secondary schools

The social and agro-economic crises in the province of Chaco contributed to the emergence of neighborhoods in the outskirts of the cities, expanding their social and urban fragmentation or selective metropolization, as stated by Dafuncho and Grinberg (2013), resulting from the migrations of families and workers residing in rural areas. These processes have had a direct impact on the educational system, schools and teaching, since teachers must teach adolescents and young people who live lives that “resemble those of an adult, either because they work far from home or because they have even moved more than once to get a job,” as the teacher adviser narrated.

Facing this context, the daily school places the teacher at a crossroads regarding, on the one hand, the attention of the problems that reach the school as a social resonance box (Southwell, 2020b), and, on the other hand, teaching as a structuring axis of the teaching process. In this work, some interviewed teachers realize this through certain expressions: “How do I make the classes a more heterogeneous and flexible place but interesting enough for the contents to be learned by all children?” (philosophy teacher at the school of the capital, May 2018), or as another teacher wondered: “how to integrate students in learning spaces more enjoyable but not less close to their realities?” (teacher of citizenship at the school of the provincial interior, June 2019).

These and other questions model the daily life of a teaching that is “unembroidered”, in search of horizons for its work inside and outside the class-

room, as an art teacher from the capital’s school said: “Sometimes I come and see that they do not catch on and I feel overwhelmed, but, quickly, I look for other ways and strategies to get them back on board”. The overflow here has to do with the imbalance between the components of teaching work, in which they must deal with the “problems that come to schools” but, at the same time, not lose the centrality of learning in their task. For teachers to achieve this, it means “finding their way around so they learn, so they can stay and finish high school,” as one music teacher from the state-run school (2019) said.

According to Duschatzky (2023) “a school is not what defines it but what exceeds it, the representations that put everything in place. The school is sketched in its development, in the process of taking shape” (p. 121). Therefore, the school is not yet and will not become; it is in a permanent becoming, it is always being, that is its character, that is its condition and wealth. Wealth and condition assigned by the characteristic of craftsmanship that assumes the teaching work and that labels it as craftsmanship. The institutionality of the school is defined by its craftsmanship in link with other experiences, actors, institutions that weave the plot that allows to sustain the school, in the best of cases, or make it think, in others.

Teachers seek to guide students in their learning, respecting the times and forms of each one, understanding that they are schooling at a pedagogical risk given their living conditions. Thus, what is taught and that goes through teacher training cannot fail to be an activity that has to do with people and their rights, while assuming a heterogeneity that is conditioned by multiple factors (Zabalza Beraza, 2022). This almost artisanal work of searching and finding ways takes on an important value in these schools to achieve permanence. One teacher said:

Some students are absent for long periods, but they always come back, because they know that we accompany them here. However, when they come back, it is not an easy task, because when we locate them, we must do it considering the last taught content, looking for ways to get them back on track. It is to keep working from where they stopped (...). (in-depth interview, history teacher from the capital’s school, May 2019)

For achieving the objective of teaching and that students remain in school, teachers carry out

pedagogical strategies that contemplate an *ecology of feelings* (Osorio, 2017), which are nothing more than dynamics of monitoring and reconfiguration of teaching strategies, considering the characteristics of each trajectory. These are necessary so that once they return to school, they can improve and, above all, learn; as one teacher said, “we are seeing how to work or what we can do to improve and for them to improve, in my subject and in the others as well” (in-depth interview, professor of Economics of the interior school, August 2019).

The pedagogical dynamics and the teaching processes developed by these teachers are part of a collective work, since they know that their training is configured and improves from the work with other colleagues:

We always meet in the yard, all teachers, and discuss about our students, how to accompany them interdisciplinarily, especially those who return and who need them to stay and value why it is necessary to finish school. (in-depth interview, professor of citizenship at school of the interior, March 2019)

Previous research developed in the region (Delgado et al., 2020), identify secondary school teachers as those who try to provide a school experience that accompanies, listens, contains and prepares for life, prioritizing—above all—presence, since there can be no teaching without presence. The presence is not limited to school attendance as a physical space, but refers to the strategies that each actor, teachers and students, put into action to make something happen, so that the presence becomes a pedagogical and political act:

There is something that all students know, and it is irrefutable. They know they have to comply with attending school. We know they have problems, and we try to listen and help in everything we can. But for that, they have to be there, hand over the jobs and do their part. (in-depth interview, philosophy teacher from the capital’s school, September 2019)

Thus, the school becomes a place that requires presence; without presence there can be no bond, there can be no school, nor can there be school without mediation and teaching.

3.2 Teaching against all odds

The handmade work that teachers do with teaching at the school from the generation of spaces and practices against all odds, does not lose sight of the main objective that is teaching and working with content, as they point out permanently in the interviews obtained (conducted in 2018): “Sometimes I understand that they have had a bad day, so we go out to the playground, we talk but we always come back to work on the content.”

The complexity and problems of the contexts and the dynamics in the schools of rural neighborhoods do not escape the training of a teacher who must have the tools to approach the different events. These problems and complexities are something that students bring with them, as a burden, and that, often, teachers are the ones who address them in the classroom. One teacher said:

Although sometimes they come demotivated, I try to find ways to motivate them in the topic I will present. First, I listen to them, then I improvise: I change a dictation for a book, or we go out for a walk in the neighborhood, but we come back and write (...) We are always looking for other ways. (in-depth interview, philosophy teacher from the capital’s school, September 2019)

These search processes often flow indoors into institutions, silently, through *micro-precedents* or *micro-procedures* (Grinberg, 2019; Fallang et al., 2017) that make the school a place where ways of being, living, teaching and learning are created. These micro-procedures result in some teachers looking for their students at home to return to school and, other times, they consist of symbolic searches that are part of those improvisations that the teacher talked about.

It is then a job where teachers have to “juggle”, as a pedagogical adviser from the school of the interior (2018) said. On the one hand, this involves taking care of attendance and permanence, attending to the complexities of the lives of students, but, on the other hand, it implies that pedagogical decisions are crossed by constant reconfigurations, to accommodate the times and personal processes of each one. This round trip between students and teachers contributes to the craftsmanship teaching is configured, from a work articulated among colleagues and through the enabling of more democratic communi-

cation channels to dialog with the problems of students and a horizontal circulation of the word, as we will discuss in the next section.

3.3 Circulation of the word and Democratization of the School

The school as a place of pedagogical encounter, where the school takes place through the word and the encounter with others, assumes a characteristic: the horizontality in the links and a circulation of the word as “possibility of testimony”, paraphrasing Armella et al. (2022). The school witnesses the present problems, but also is an opportunity for autonomy, reflection, criticism, and responsibility on the part of the students (Ferreira-Koehler et al., 2021). This is so insofar as it is not a matter of “saying by saying, but of telling what happens to them so that they reflect and can advance on what is best for them and the best is that they study” (in-depth interview, teacher of citizenship of the school of the interior, May 2019).

The artisan teacher fulfills a fundamental role, not only as a witness of the word, but as one who accompanies in the school. To do this, one of the ways the teacher finds is democratic and horizontal communication, as one teacher said:

Here the word circulates freely (...) we all have a voice in the round table (...), because the word is not forbidden, but, on the contrary, it serves as another tool of participation and learning. (interview with philosophy teacher, capital school, 2019)

In many cases, the school is the only place where students can say, be and belong. However, in dialogue and communication, there must also be a share of responsibility finding balances between democratic spaces and the establishment of agreements on the different components that make up the pedagogical meetings. The mathematics teacher at the capital’s school, during an in-depth interview in August 2019, refers to “setting boundaries”⁴ so that students understand how far it is possible to negotiate, the words, spaces and ways of learning and the contents taught.

The artisan teacher must find a balance between establishing boundaries and building learning spaces from horizontality. This is not easy, if it is understood that students do not assume a passive role, but, conversely, raise their concerns and desires, as

happened in a literature class (August 2019). Here, as the teacher explained the homework to the students, one of them said, “This is boring. When are we going to do something else?” The professor said: “We are going to do something else when you can write a longer text, a more complex text. As long as you cannot do that, we are going to keep doing this” (a field diary note, capital school, 2019). Here the teacher sets boundaries but takes what the student says as a push to give a motivating message “You can, just try to write, for example, what do you see around you?”. A student answers, “I see Justin Bieber lives in my neighborhood, or I can say my neighborhood smells rotten.” School of the Capital, 2019). Humor is used as an explicit discursive strategy that works as a persuasive resource, resistance, and resilience for these students. Through the words expressed by the student, there is a way of coping with the daily uncertainties and the precariousness of the context (Segado Boj, 2009).

The scene continues: “What else is in the neighborhood?” the teacher inquires. Another student replies, “There are cardboard collectors in the corner.” Thus, teachers and students create an argument that brings together experiences close to the context in which school takes place. A story is created through humor and irony about the neighborhood that tries to fulfill the intention of the teacher: the teaching of writing.

Teachers are constantly looking for strategies and designing alternatives beyond the planned ones. About this, one teacher refers:

I am lying if I tell you that it works for me to plan. It is always going to depend on how the students are that day, what they want. We have to see how to motivate them. They change what you have planned. You may feel more confident about staying on schedule (...) but it actually depends on their times, their desire and how interesting the planned activity is for them (in-depth interview, philosophy teacher from the capital’s school, August 2018)

Teaching practices are crossed by resistance and questioning where, from the reconfiguration of what is planned, there are attempts to achieve interpretations of what enables a possible horizon of teaching. Teachers reflect on what motivates young people and that, sometimes, is not what they had

planned, but, nevertheless, they look for ways to be able to motivate them and not miss the opportunity to learn. This translates into negotiations and agreements of times, forms and spaces that allow them to be linked through dialogue. A history teacher said:

My nature is to always talk to students (...) Children have to know the history contents, but we negotiate a lot the ways in which they like to learn history, I explain, I make them research, I help them, I advise them. I try to address the human, social part, according to what they need, because I understand that school is, perhaps, the only place where they get their attention. (in-depth interview, history teacher at a school of the interior, April 2019).

The teacher chooses the dialogue, where conversations about contents and negotiations about how to approach them are also transformed into learning spaces of other abilities for students as protagonists, from a positioning that, as they know, is not the most comfortable but that, in these schools, is a potential with high educational power.

4. Discussion and conclusions

In the current context characterized by the post-pandemic period, there has been a significant increase in demands related to training and teaching. At the same time, future-oriented education, which goes beyond digital interfaces and virtual environments, faces the daily challenge of determining how to effectively strengthen education. This article has made it possible to problematize about a daily teaching that is reinvented, looking for detailed and handmade ways to accompany the schooling that attend schools and move beyond rigid institutions (Ball & Collet, 2022).

The complexity and craftsmanship of teaching practices account for the socio-educational inequality processes present in the region that affect educational institutions that respond to the schooling of populations that settle in these highly vulnerable territories (Benítez, 2018). In this framework, the work gave an account of the processes and small modulations, inventions and everyday creations that involve new ways that involve schooling and teaching.

Schools become areas of appropriation, experience and habitability (Ramírez & Pertile, 2017) that gradually enable spaces of permanence, meeting and community (Southwell, 2022). Returning to Ar-

endt (2016), a sense of belonging and welcoming of the newcomer emerges, where the school becomes an affective place (Berlant, 2020; Kaplan, 2022; Molano Caro, 2012), an area that welcomes in the middle of the structural situation that characterizes these schools. In these terms, school becomes a place to be safe, a "(...), personal and private territory where ways of doing are invented that acquire a dense, material and affective value (...)" (De Certeau, 2010, p. 149).

Thinking about the training of the artisan teacher shows the strategies and tools that they use to produce more and better educational opportunities, in the "juggling" they perform and the relationship they build between the working universe, the demands of the school space and those coming from the contexts where the schools are located to make them the best place where students can be.

The artisanal character of the teaching activity is crossed by the *presence* of students and teachers in the school space and by the construction of alternatives where word, voice and variety of stories take place. Thus, the craftsmanship of teaching practices involves a set of problematizations linked to the understanding of life in institutions as meeting and reception places (Arendt, 2016), which seek, act and manage so that their students can remain in them.

The school is configured in the coexistence of neoliberal logics (Grinberg, 2019), with "collective agendas" (Deleuze & Partner, 1997), which enable actions, meanings, and affections of those who are there. Thus:

The school as a body needs to reinvent itself, to stop being the redeeming institution that is sustained by courageous teachers and volunteers and that supposes shared codes between school actors and families (...) It is about finding what Muriel Combes calls "the most intimate of us", i.e., that which, experienced as a singularity, does not belong to a private sphere but to an impersonal terrain and relationships. (Duschatzky, 2023, p. 124)

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Notes

1. Intermediate cities are those that have between fifty thousand and one million inhabitants. They are centers of social, economic and cultural interaction; they offer jobs, services and collective infrastructure to the urban and rural population, and their role is decisive in areas away from the big urban centers (Schweitzer et al., 2018).
2. Social and cooperative management schools are those that are managed by social movements, political organizations, trade unions, cooperatives, popular high schools or other types of civil organizations that are organized collectively/communally and self-managed, with the shared interest of contributing to an educational transformation of the society.
3. Flash interviews are characterized by their brief duration and by being instances of informal conversation within the field (Arroba, 2000).
4. It is part of a regionalism that means setting boundaries, making agreements.

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