

EMBRACING EDUCATIONAL MODERNISATION IN MERCOSUR: AN INSTITUTIONAL ANALYSIS OF ARGENTINA'S INTEGRATION OF INFRASTRUCTURE AND HUMAN CAPITAL

*ABRAÇANDO A MODERNIZAÇÃO EDUCACIONAL NO MERCOSUL: UMA ANÁLISE
INSTITUCIONAL DA INTEGRAÇÃO DA INFRAESTRUTURA E DO CAPITAL HUMANO NA
ARGENTINA*

Facundo Guadagno¹

¹Universidad de Buenos Aires (UBA), Ciudad de Buenos Aires, Buenos Aires, Argentina. E-mail:
facundo.guadagno@gmail.com ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0892-6732>.

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how Argentina has integrated its infrastructure and human capital into educational modernisation. It explores whether collaborations with other regional countries have existed and their impact. The central question is: How is Argentina embracing new technologies in education? Using an institutional approach, the paper highlights that incentives are one of the main challenges to improving Argentina's educational position. Data from the country's latest census, the Aprender educational test, PISA, and specialised literature are utilised to add robustness to the investigation. The prognosis is adverse; in most provinces, students lack access to essential services and adequate technological devices, leading to difficulties in understanding basic texts or performing simple calculations. Economic stagnation and increasing poverty exacerbate the situation, with educational institutions focused on retaining students rather than promoting academic content. The paper also considers how collaboration with Mercosur countries might alleviate the problem under optimal conditions.

Keywords: Comparative politics; regionalismo; education.

RESUMO

Neste artigo, examinamos como a Argentina integrou sua infraestrutura e capital humano na modernização da educação. Consideramos a existência de colaborações com outros países da região e seu impacto. A pergunta central é: como a Argentina está adotando novas tecnologias na educação? Usando uma abordagem institucional, destacamos que a falta de incentivos é um dos principais desafios para melhorar a posição educacional da Argentina. Dados do último censo do país, o teste educacional Aprender, PISA e literatura especializada são utilizados para agregar robustez à investigação. O prognóstico é negativo; na maioria das províncias, os alunos carecem de acesso a serviços essenciais e dispositivos tecnológicos adequados, resultando em dificuldades para entender textos básicos ou realizar cálculos simples. A estagnação econômica e a crescente pobreza agravam a situação, com instituições educacionais focadas em reter alunos em vez de promover conteúdo acadêmico. O artigo também considera como a colaboração com países do Mercosul pode aliviar o problema em condições ótimas.

Palavras-chave: Política comparada; regionalismo; educação.



INTRODUCTION

As the 21st century advances, Argentina struggles not to continue falling in educational tests in the region. We can see it clearly with a cross-country comparison, a tool the Pisa test can give us. This will be used only as an introductory illustration to address how severe this issue is. Like every Latin American country, Argentina is statistically below the OECD average in reading, and it could be compared with Jamaica, Colombia, Bulgaria, and Montenegro (OECD, 2023, p.55). Argentina and Brazil are among the worst twenty countries in science (OECD, 2023, p.56). All of the countries in Latin America are below the average score in Mathematics: the mean is 472, but from the lowest score, Dominican Republic (339), to the highest, Chile (412), we see that the countries involved are between a score of 300 and 400 on their performance in mathematics (PISA, 2023, p.61). The members of the Mercosur scored as follows: Chile (412), Uruguay (409), Brazil (379), Argentina (378), and Paraguay (317). The results are more than alarming.

We see that there is a trap in the region that is supposed to be cooperating: the Mercosur is not even near the mean of the PISA score. This is an introduction, like a brief illustration of the problem's severity. The results speak for themselves. Our case will be Argentina and its integration into the Mercosur to analyse the educational collaborations among these countries. Therefore, how is Argentina embracing new technologies in education? Using an institutional path shows the main challenges to improving Argentina's position on education. We used the country's latest census and specialised literature to add robustness to the research. The prognosis is adverse. We see students needing help understanding a primary text or doing a simple calculation. As the economy decreases, poverty increases, and educational institutions are organisations for students to eat instead of making them study the contents. How could a collaboration with countries of the Mercosur alleviate the problem in the best of the scenarios?

Institutions, in the context of this study, can be defined as formal and informal rules, together with their enforcement mechanisms and the expectations of agents, that structure social, economic and political interactions within a society. Following Douglass North (1971), these rules and norms establish the framework that reduces uncertainty in human exchange, providing a structure for interaction. Daron Acemoglu (2005) adds that these institutions are fundamental



to this definition of development in innovation, investment, and long-term economics. The perspective of Ludwig Lachmann (Lavoie, 2005) adds to this definition and underlines the importance of the subjective expectations of individuals acting within that institutional framework. In this sense, institutions not only establish the "rules of the game" but are also subject to diverse interpretations and uses by individual agents, resulting in trajectories of path dependence that can be crucial to understanding dynamics such as financial crises. In short, an institution is (i) a social rule, formal or informal, (ii) created by individuals or groups that provides (iii) incentives or disincentives for social agents and (iv) develops cognitive or learning processes over time.

So, in this neoweberian aspect, institutions matter. However, we can follow a materialistic author as well, focused on state consolidation, such as Mazzuca (2021), who states that the essential aspects of weak state consolidation in Latin America were that they were built as trade-led, while in Europe, the first generation of states had to be vital to overcome wars:

In early modern Western Europe, state formation had multiple linkages to state building. Violence monopolization required great efforts at fiscal extraction, which in turn caused the abolition of the intermediary power of local potentates and incited social demands for new public goods. In Latin America, the obstacles to the development of state capacities were the result of mutually convenient bargains struck by central state-makers and peripheral potentates, who, far from being eliminated during state formation, obtained institutional power to reinforce local bastion (Mazzuca, 2021. p.2).

This sentence states how Latin America released agents from the burden of enforcing uniform control across the area and permitted them to create governments without Weberian characteristics. Instead, it allowed them to join and exclude regions based on complementary political calculations rather than geographic imperatives (Mazzuca, 2021, p.3). Before analysing our case, we will explore how the specialised literature dealt with the issue:

LITERATURE REVIEW:

An essential work about MERCOSUR is *Regional Organizations and Social Policy in Europe and Latin America: A Space for Social Citizenship?*, by Bianculli and Hoffman (2016); nevertheless, in this book, we only see, in the chapter by Botto (2016) the impact of one scheme, Mecanismo Experimental de Acreditación para carreras de Grado (MEXA), from 2002 to 2006, while the rest deals with bureaucracy and at what degree an idea was emulated from Europe (Bieber, 201;



Perotta, 2016). Bernal-Meza (2008) thoroughly examines Argentina and Brazil's political and economic dynamics in light of regionalism and the Mercosur bloc. It sheds light on both countries' cooperative and competitive strategies, highlighting their pivotal role in South America's geopolitical and economic integration. The paper's strengths lie in its comprehensive historical overview, which provides valuable insights into the complexities of the Argentina-Brazil relationship and its analysis of Mercosur's contribution to regional cooperation, economic progress, and political stability.

However, the paper does have limitations. While it touches on the theoretical aspects of regionalism and the practical outcomes of Argentina and Brazil's policies, it would benefit from a deeper analysis of Mercosur's current issues, such as internal disputes, external economic pressures, and the bloc's expansion strategy.

Additionally, the paper could offer more detailed recommendations for enhancing the effectiveness of Mercosur and addressing the disparities between its member states. Finally, given the rapidly changing global economic landscape, an updated assessment of the external factors influencing Mercosur, such as China's increasing presence in Latin America, would enhance the paper's relevance.

Yrigoyen and Fronton (2012) thoroughly examine Argentina's commercial policies in the context of Mercosur, detailing the progression of trade agreements and negotiations. Its strengths include a comprehensive overview of Argentina's trade relations and strategies, providing valuable insights into Mercosur's role in regional integration and the impact of these agreements on Argentina's international trade dynamics. However, the paper could be further enhanced by a critical analysis of the challenges and limitations faced by Mercosur countries in implementing these agreements, such as economic asymmetries and political disagreements. Moreover, it may benefit from a more forward-thinking perspective on the future of these trade relations in light of global economic changes and the emergence of new trade blocs.

In their 2010 publication, Patomäki and Teivainen critically analyse the responses to neoliberal globalisation in the Mercosur region and propose a path towards cosmopolitan democracy. The authors present a nuanced critique of cosmopolitan democracy models, highlighting their detachment from real-world processes. Focusing on Argentina, Uruguay,



Paraguay, and Brazil, the paper identifies a dialectical development of political consciousness to address the impacts of financial globalisation and governance challenges. The paper deeply explains the region's political evolution in response to globalisation. It also innovatively links local political responses with broader democratic aspirations, offering valuable insights into the potential for cosmopolitan democracy in a globalised world. However, the paper underestimates of the complexities of translating theoretical models into practical strategies within diverse political landscapes. Additionally, while it brings forward the notion of radical reforms beyond legal frameworks, it could further explore the mechanisms through which such reforms might be realistically implemented, considering the current global economic structures and power dynamics.

Sergio Caballero Santos' paper titled "Identity in Mercosur: Regionalism and Nationalism" delves into the intricacies of the relationship between regionalism and nationalism in the Mercosur bloc. The paper's comprehensive historical analysis provides a nuanced perspective on the complexities involved in the interaction between national and regional identities. Santos adeptly employs a constructivist viewpoint, emphasising the dynamic process of identity formation and its impact on regional integration.

The paper includes an overreliance on theoretical frameworks that may not fully capture the practical challenges of implementing regional integration policies. While the theoretical approach enhances the analysis, the argument could be strengthened by incorporating more empirical evidence or case studies to provide concrete examples of how regionalism and nationalism are manifested in policy and practice within Mercosur. Additionally, the paper could benefit from a broader consideration of external factors, such as global economic trends and geopolitical shifts, that impact Mercosur's internal dynamics and its members' nationalistic tendencies.

Feldmann et al. (2019) present a detailed and nuanced exploration of Argentina, Brazil, and Chile's foreign policies in response to democratic crises in Latin America, with a specific emphasis on Honduras (2009), Paraguay (2012), and Venezuela (2017). The authors employ a theoretical framework that blends the logic of consequences and the logic of appropriateness to analyse the motivations, strategies, and outcomes of these interventions. The paper benefits from



comprehensive case studies and offers a thorough analysis of the role and effectiveness of regional mechanisms in supporting democracy.

However, the analysis could be further enhanced by considering the broader geopolitical context and its influence on the decision-making processes of these countries. Additionally, while the paper effectively addresses the complexity of political dynamics in Latin America, it may benefit from a deeper examination of the internal political factors within Argentina, Brazil, and Chile that impact their foreign policy decisions. Finally, while the focus on specific case studies is insightful, a wider examination of similar situations in other regions could offer valuable comparative insights.

In Gardini's (2006) meticulous exploration of Mercosur's formative years, the complex interactions between governmental decisions and business sector responses are thoroughly examined. The strategic manoeuvres of Argentina and Brazil are highlighted as they balance democratic aspirations with economic integration goals, showcasing the nuanced role of business in shaping the trajectory of Mercosur. The use of interviews and unexamined documents provides a rich, detailed account of the negotiation processes and the evolving dynamics between state actors and the private sector.

It is important to note that the focus on Argentina and Brazil, while understandable given their central role in Mercosur, may overlook the broader implications and reactions from other member states. Additionally, while the paper provides a solid historical and political analysis of Mercosur's development, it could benefit from further exploration of the long-term economic impacts of government-business relations, particularly in terms of regional economic disparities and integration challenges. It is also essential to consider that the reliance on interviews may introduce bias based on the perspectives of the interviewees, and thus careful interpretation of these subjective viewpoints is necessary.

Regarding the relationship between democracy and the Mercosur, the existing papers are scattered in old publications that are insufficient to add something to the discussion or they are too vague. It would be redundant to name them all. However, there are many examples of articles that consider Mercosur as democratic (Oelsner et al., 2024; Luciano & Ramanzini Júnior, 2023;



Willis, 2021, among others), and they forget entirely about subnational regimes and their relation with citizenship, which puts democratic quality in deep trouble.

THE BUREAUCRACY DAMNATION:

The countries that form MERCOSUR have one property in common: they are all rentier states with low accountability (Mazzuca, 2013). The two biggest economies, Argentina and Brazil, converge in the path of provinces ruled by *caudillos* without any checks and balances regarding their administration, forming a solid machine of clientelism (Mazzuca, 2021). The public system is controlled by machinery that can be more fluent in poor states or provinces, that is, the subnational administration of the country.

In this sense, we have to differentiate the existence of the state of *state capacity*. The latter term refers to the efficiency of governing and providing good quality public services (Gomide et al., 2018). In these cases, the ones from MERCOSUR and Latin America entirely², there is a predatory elite controlling the province's commodities, which results in poor public services (Acemoglu et al., 2005). The territory's administration is not to maximise votes or improve citizens' lives but to demand political loyalty. Public administration in Latin America has damnation, a struggle against merit and political favours.

We care about how institutions work, but what lies beside them? Bureaucracy and state capacity. Whether this concept is indeed discussed, as in Cingolani (2013), but as a latecomer states, in Latin America, there is a historical weakness of the state to provide public goods, which could be translated as the state formation without Weberian properties because of a lack of geopolitical competition, in comparison with Europe: no internal standardisation, instead, political calculations to form coalitions with no uniform control through territory (Mazzuca, 2021, p. 3). Argentina has this issue: There is no doubt that we are talking about a democratic country, but internally, there are despotic controls with a powerful machine to gain votes.

These controls are from subnational administrations, that is, provinces, and this is not a new property to the country; on the contrary, it has a historical legacy of being a predatory elite,

² Chile, Uruguay, and Costa Rica could be the exceptions. Still, the rule is the opposite of what these countries could do. with their public goods.



at least at this level (Mazzuca & Munck, 2020). Institutions are made of people, so they are in the cognitive process of establishing how to insert themselves into an organisation. They learn, repeat, take risks and discover possibilities (Lavoie, 2005), but the clientelistic machinery in Argentina is fluent even before democracy returns to the country in 1983 (Ferraro & Massey, 2011; Grindle, 2012).

In the nineteenth century, Argentina faced the dilemma of what came first: democracy or state? Civil wars eroded any possibility for new governments to operate within a standardised territory; therefore, in this case, the state came before democracy because political security to administrate the country was a priority for the governing elite (Mazzuca & Robinson, 2009). The formation of the state did not happen within a geopolitical environment that obliged actors to compete for defence, as in Europe; the state's construction, in the Latin American case, occurred to enforce inner pacification, leading to a trade-led administration. The provinces far from the trade centres, such as ports, or those that could not offer commodities to the external market, were trapped in a poor bureaucracy that continues today.

Institutions are indeed the game's rules regarding how society works (North, 1991). Nevertheless, what if those institutions encourage patronage, a political career, instead of a competitive bureaucracy? Then, it would be more than difficult for an individual to change how a system works because these practices will fall upon his intentions, developing as a *social fact* (Durkheim, 2023). There are no incentives to improve how a public servant can overcome these issues. Political coercion is aligned with the power that the subnational government has because it controls commodities or has provided tax benefits for a specific industry (Giraudy, 2013).

In this sense, the ruling party has control of the commodities and local businesses with captive regulation (Stigler, 2021); that is, the governor will decide who can enter or leave the market and establish barriers when considered favourable. This strange subnational democracy where the government has the rent of economic resources, whether natural or not, goes together with low levels of urbanisation and poverty (O'Donnel, 1993; Linz & Valenzuela, 1994; McMann & Petrov, 2000). The economic hierarchy of these societies is built by the state: public employees, police officers, and the unemployed who perceive money transfers (Gervasoni, 2010).



One of the traps of subnational regimes is their tendency not to be democratic if they own commodities, industries, or receive transfers from the national government. Gervasoni (2018) shows that this pattern occurs in Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, and Canada. It is observed that subnational regimes from poor states use public goods for their electoral machinery, and civil rights, such as freedom of the press or political competition, are permanently blocked. Since these are poor provinces with a small private sector to develop their economic activity, politicians can attack them through the media or impose several taxes. This behaviour is explained because the government in these states or provinces, as a predatory elite, will maximise power, and to achieve that objective, money is needed (Robinson, 1999; Diamond, 2008). These practices allow the formation of a bureaucracy that does not have to be efficient regarding checks and balances but only as a political machinery that answers to political needs.

As this is a pattern in Latin America, integration is more than a challenge: there must be explicit projects about what countries with large areas of poor provinces can do. It is not a matter of poverty but of inefficient bureaucracy, far from being democratic, and with the power to lock political competition to obtain economic profits and make the clientelistic machinery supporting the party in government more fluid. So, what can be done in education?

Within this scenario, it is difficult to provide a good education, and that is not due to the content of the programmes or the teacher's preparation; it is because children are suffering from unsatisfied basic needs, such as food or even a secure floor to stand: in some provinces, they have to step in mud. Nevertheless, the lack of an efficient bureaucracy gives the public school an outcome far from acceptable, even by the country's standards. Salaries are low, infrastructure is poor, sometimes teachers do not finish their higher studies, and in most cases, they have to pay loyalty to the government. In the latter case, it could also be the access to a career in public administration, in this case, from teacher to school director, because of a political network and not by merit.

According to the theory, *something* would be necessary to establish a competitive democracy to embrace a competent bureaucracy. Nevertheless, those empty words could rely on "institutions" without any empirical correlation. We will examine the case and propose viable solutions that, we hope, will be useful for policymakers.



EVALUATING THE CASE: ARGENTINA'S PERFORMANCE

Argentina is in a socio-economic crisis. It is challenging to have a consensus on when it started³, but it is a reality. High inflation and 40% of poverty - more if we add indigency - cannot positively affect education. Social background is a cause for discrimination among peers, as well (Tuñón & Poy, 2020). Since the 1970s, there has been a relationship between economic decay and a downward trend in education due to constant growth cycles and severe economic crisis (Jorrat et al., 2023). Consequently, poverty, low human capital, and psychological issues are transmitted due to poor primary sociability (De Minzi et al., 2013)⁴.

According to official measures, 40% of kids are poor in Argentina, while others place the number at 60%⁵. Here, institutions play an essential role: for example, schools are not just a place for studying rather than eating; there is little research on this, and when we find something, the results are negative: public policy programs for eating in public schools for low-income families cannot guarantee academic success (Adrogué & Orlicki, 2013). This situation begs the question: Is the school an incentive for families and children in Argentina? Can teachers or the government improve the situation?

The first question can be answered by a detailed look at the last Argentinean census⁶: How are the living conditions of the inhabitants? If we look at the country's total internet coverage, we will see that 78% of the population has internet, but only 60% have computers or tablets, while 90% have a mobile phone with internet. The basic standards are not covered as well.

³ For some authors is because of a lack of a solid and loyal party tradition (Snow, 2019); for others, it is due because of embracing a protectionist economy (Della Paolera & Taylor, 2003); while some scholars argue that the Argentinean capitalism reached its limits (Sartelli, 2014).

⁴ There are worst cases that deal with a severe risk to life in a tight relationship between the state and mobs, like in inner Colombia (Álvarez, 2004). Although there is a vast literature on it, it would take a different paper, with different objectives, questions, and samples, to evaluate programs of integration in Latin America *in toto*.

⁵ Bordigoni, A. (2023, September 2). *Casi el 62% de los niños y adolescentes son pobres, según El Observatorio de la UCA*. Perfil. <https://www.perfil.com/noticias/politica/casi-el-62-de-los-ninos-y-adolescentes-son-pobres-segun-el-observatorio-de-la-uca.phtml#:~:text=Si%20bien%20es%20un%20poco,un%20alarmante%2061%2C6%25>.

⁶ In terms of living conditions, we are using the publication of May 2023, because in the November publication of the same year, the official institution decided to join the use of mobile phones, tablets, and computers, in a single variable; therefore, on the surface, it looks like Argentina is having a developed infrastructure, while if we isolate the devices, the use of tablets and computers is poor with low internet coverage as well.



If we pick a poor province, Chaco, 30% of their population does not have their floor covered - that is, they live in mud -and from the total of inhabitants, 56.3% male and 47.6% female still need to finish high school. Moreover, the total of the country never finished high school is astonishing: the range that goes from 25 to 40 years old, 37.8 left high school, 41.6% for 40 years old and 61.1% incomplete for 40 to 60 years old (INDEC, 2023, p.13).

Scholars are concerned with bilingual education for Chaco and their indigenous people (Medina & Hecht, 2015; Unamuno, 2014), which is something to celebrate. However, nowadays, it is only possible to research and submit an assignment for school with a computer, and more than half of *chaquenses* do not have one, while internet coverage is poor. According to the Aprender tests, students from secondary schools are 24.1% under a basic level in maths, while in Literature, 11,9% are under basics (Aprender, 2022, p.27). There is not much investigation about it, but the relationship between technological devices in the household, such as a computer, predicts better performance in education - at least between 8% and 18% - (Formichella et al., 2020).

Chaco is part of the Argentinean North, a significant but poor area concentrating the worst numbers in social indicators. As expected, the critical trajectories of individuals with low-skilled jobs, lack of infrastructure, and dependence on landlords or *caudillos* to obtain work are causes of the transmission of low human capital (Lacunza, 2014). This area of Argentina has some unique properties, but for the wrong reason: they had no economic interest in the political entrepreneurs of the prosperous port, but they were conquered to gain political power. According to Mazzuca (2021), Argentina and Brazil are trade-led states, with wool in the first case and coffee in the second. Pacification came through trade and made it possible to develop the state formation, but it was far from state-building: the weakness of integrating peripheral territories created long-term instability. Both states were created as port-led: "marked by an expansionary drive provided by a central port willing and able to incorporate a vast array of peripheries. The pathway leads to simultaneity in territory consolidation and violence monopolization" (Mazzuca, 2021, p. 108). The port continues to be the wealthiest area of the whole nation and could claim a recession if required only because of economic benefits.



Nevertheless, the trajectory of public servants in provinces far from the trade centres is embodied in a patronage relationship. For example, in Formosa, a province with the same governor since 1995 and several accusations of corruption and criminal affairs⁷, the government has the necessary power to mobilise or demobilise social protest (Lapegna, 2013). In 2018, a child student of the public school dedicated a poem to the governor, Gildo Insfrán, referring to the governor as “captain”⁸. This is a common practice in the northern area of Argentina, the poorest of the country, and naming more examples will result in redundancy⁹.

The North of Argentina is the poorest area of the country. This paper will use the latest census and the Aprender tests in order to analyse some severe issues regarding education and life quality. For example, in Formosa and Chaco, only 61,9% and 70,4%, respectively, have a covered floor with cement or wood. If we consider the whole Argentinean North, 75.17% of floors are covered, 53.34% are connected to sewers, 86.51% have safe piped water, 67.77% have an internet connection, and 50.4% have a computer, laptop or tablet.

In every province, without considering if it is rich or poor, public schools always perform worse than private ones, and this happens in the two subjects evaluated Literature and Mathematics. There is a division between urban and rural schools, and it is essential. However, if we guide ourselves based on the results, it would be basically the same not to discriminate from where the institutions are: The lower performance levels, 81.7% - urban - and 91.9% - rural - respectively, are concentrated in the lower performance levels. In Literature, students at the lowest performing levels (Below Basic and Basic) increased from 38.3% in 2019 to 43% in 2022. There was also a deterioration in secondary students' learning achievement in mathematics. In 2019, 71.4% were at the lowest performance levels (Below Basic and Basic); in 2022, this share

⁷ Roberts, C. M. R. (2017, July 23). *Formosa: El Reino implacable Del Todopoderoso Gildo Insfrán*. La Nación. <https://www.lanacion.com.ar/politica/formosa-el-reino-implacable-del-todopoderoso-gildo-insfran-nid2046357/>

⁸ Infobae. (2018, November 18). *Una Nena de Siete Años Le Dedicó un poema a Gildo Insfrán en un acto Político y causó indignación en las redes sociales*. <https://www.infobae.com/politica/2018/11/18/una-nena-de-siete-anos-le-dedico-un-poema-a-gildo-insfran-en-un-acto-politico-y-causo-indignacion-en-las-redes-sociales/>

⁹ Some of the vast literature that can be read is Poma (2020), Casas (2021), Murillo et al. (2021), among others.



rose to 82.4% (Aprender, 2023, pp.8-9). The Covid-19 pandemic worsened school performances in Argentina (Maturo et al., 2020).

Some aspects of education in Argentina are more than severe. For example, regarding the comprehension of a text, only two of ten students could solve activities that are required to understand the interpretation of the communicative function of a journalistic chronicle (Aprender, 2023, p. 43). The results are even more problematic in mathematics, but we will mention only a few to avoid redundancy. Only three of ten students can scale a negative number with a decimal part on a number line, or surprisingly, two of ten can make inferences from information provided by bar graphs or pie charts and argue with concrete data (Aprender, 2023, pp. 50-51).

There are issues within the subnational regimes. For example, Moreno, one of the poorest districts of Buenos Aires, faced the severe problem of students leaving school, most of them pregnant, so the school, located in Cuartel V, had to design a methodology to keep students and the strategy was to increment sex education, and to encourage these young mothers to study from home (Ramos, 2023). The outcome was that higher education could be finished. However, the controls on who could pass the year became more flexible, resulting in poorer performances¹⁰¹¹.

Another severe issue in Argentina is that, in some cases, high school students have to work and study simultaneously. This is a cause for school dropouts or leaving studies for a determined amount of time and returning to them with the plan Fines¹². Sadly, we do not count on studies having a follow-up on individual trajectories, only scholarly works describing the program¹³. The individual background is heterogeneous, and disadvantaged environments could highly influence

¹⁰ "Although in some cases, they were supported and clearly saw the help that the school gives them to continue attending, some requested that they be given practical work at home and that they not be left free, they considered it important to be informed about the absence regime so that they would not drop out. The same applies to the justification of absences in the presence of pregnancy difficulties" (Ramons, 2023, p. 22).

¹¹ Braginski, R. (2023) *¿Buena o Mala Noticia? los alumnos repiten menos y Baja El abandono, Pero No Aprenden, Clarín*. Available at: https://www.clarin.com/sociedad/buena-mala-noticia-alumnos-repiten-baja-abandono-aprenden_0_plwL3aK0iE.html (Accessed: 05 January 2024).

¹² *Plan fines 2023* (2023) *Argentina.gob.ar*. Available at: <https://www.argentina.gob.ar/educacion/fines> (Accessed: 05 January 2024).

¹³ For example, Brunetto (2020), Correa (2020; 2021), Tagliabue (2020), Villa (2021).



scholar development; nevertheless, we only find articles that describe the situation without any follow-up¹⁴. In that case, we can only rely on the Aprender tests and, as we have seen, the results keep worsening yearly.

INTEGRATION AND... SOLUTION?

It seems naive that states with similar issues would converge with solutions. What happened with the Mercosur and education? The weak regulatory approach of every party involved from 1991 to 2016 shows no improvement, as Bianculli (2018) demonstrates. Nevertheless, the paper asks an essential question: “From free market to social policies?”. This requires, in detail, some critical elements about the Mercosur.

Many authors claim that Mercosur is a left turn to globalisation to alleviate its evils (Beeson, 2007; Telò, 2001; Deacon et al., 2010; Kaasch & Stubbs, 2014; Yeates & Deacon, 2006): that seems like an ideological claim because, as seen at least in Argentinean case, the numbers are getting worse. The focus could be on the development of each country and if it is possible to converge in integration policies. Something similar is proposed by Perotta (2016, p.190), who emphasises that the asymmetries within the countries are the key to integration, which, in this case, is negative due to the different relationships between GDP and public expenditure. It would be redundant to name every regulation that the MERCOSUR imposed, that could be read in Bianculli (2018), but since its creation in 1991, the only successful program was the MEXA implemented from 2002 to 2006 (Botto, 2016), with accreditation in medicine, engineering and agriculture. Nevertheless, these processes had obstacles with the institutions of the countries involved - in this case, Argentina, Chile, and Brazil -.

According to MERCOSUR's official website¹⁵, educational achievements make it possible to study abroad, but the treaties still need to be validated. For example, the “Acuerdo sobre reconocimiento de títulos de grado de educación superior en el MERCOSUR” - Agreement on recognition of higher education degrees in MERCOSUR - is not currently valid.

¹⁴ For example, Correa (ibíd), Jacinto et al. (2016), Terigi (2020)

¹⁵ 6 - educación. MERCOSUR. (2022, December 7). <https://www.mercosur.int/6-educacion/>



MEXA and ACUSUR are the only successful programs MERCOSUR developed in education, adding associated countries like Bolivia and Chile. In the case of MEXA, the characteristics that make this program unique are the same ones that make it restrictive: it is destined only for university students, and the only achievement was the possibility to study abroad within MERCOSUR countries, considering how advanced a student was in their career¹⁶. MEXA was positive in the sense that if some countries, such as Paraguay, did not have a specific policy determined to make it easier for students to study abroad, with this policy, the country was obliged to have one. It was a success, with the Agencias Nacionales de Acreditación (ANA) creation by 2006 and sixty-two careers approved (Barreyro et al., 2016). As MEXA successfully achieved its objectives, ARCUSUR was the following policy taken in MERCOSUR and associated countries that, since 2008, established the accreditation system for universities, that is, a permanent device to adopt (Solanas, 2019).

As ARCUSUR kept growing, in the sense that in 2015, degrees in economics, pharmacy, and geology were added, as well as membership in Ecuador, some of the benefits were not complete. For example, practising the profession in accredited countries was impossible if the local professional did not approve it. This bureaucracy establishes that ARCUSUR only validates a title but requires another step unrelated to MERCOSUR to see its benefits. Simply put, the system is only a gateway to make teaching and studying abroad easier.

Things were not easy for ARCUSUR. Brazil did not have an independent organism to certify universities due to the country's low population in higher education (Barreyro et al., 2016, p.12). However, Brazil could manage this scenario by creating organisms to execute the required task: the objective was achieved as the country could integrate seventy-eight careers in their evaluation system (Hizume, 2013). The same can be said for Paraguay, and Uruguay was the exception: the proposal of ARCUSUR was not accepted (Barreyro et al., 2016, p.16).

¹⁶ Editorial (no date) *ReDiU, Revista Digital Universitaria del Colegio Militar de la Nación*. Available at: https://www.colegiomilitar.mil.ar/rediu/pdf/ReDiU_0207_art3-El_mecanismo_experimental_de_acreditaci%C3%B3n_de_carreras_universitarias_del_Mercosur.pdf (Accessed: 05 January 2024).



What about Argentina? Due to the country's long history of higher education control, reform, and professionalisation, creating an independent organism, CONEAU, was easy (Solanas, 2015, p. 432). Integration was successful because the university population was higher before MEXA or ARCUSUR was created (Lagoria, 2013). Nevertheless, high school students are experiencing performance decay due to poorer conditions of life, especially in poor provinces. So, the reason to be happy because of ARCUSUR is misleading: How is Argentina in terms of performance ranking? Considering the QS world ranking, the Universidad de Buenos Aires (UBA) is the third one leading the ranking, while no other Argentinean university is on the list¹⁷. So, the outcome could be negative even if Argentina's higher education population is high.

According to a 2020 report by the Observatorio de Argentinos por la Educación (Observatory of Argentines for Education), only 12.4% of poor students go to university - it does not mean that they finish it - while 48.8% do not work and do not study¹⁸. After all the debates and the years passed, the institutions created by the MERCOSUR benefited only the elite. Understandably, the MERCOSUR tried to replicate the UE in several aspects, but the European Education Area is not focused only on higher education and has some attractive policies. The preparation of teachers is designed for competitiveness and has a monitor to follow up on the decisions taken¹⁹.

One of the possible solutions to educational inequity in Argentina and other MERCOSUR countries is to follow the virtues of the European model. With monitoring or follow-ups, programmes that have already started or are about to start would not be left half-finished, allowing for effective integration. On the other hand, access to education at all levels is a problem

¹⁷ Published by Statista Research Department and 18, A. (2023) *Higher education in Latin America: Top 15 universities 2024*, Statista. Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/703764/leading-universities-latin-america/> (Accessed: 07 January 2024).

¹⁸ Fernández, M. (2022) *Solo 1 de cada 10 jóvenes de los sectores más pobres llega a la Universidad en la Argentina*, *infobae*. Available at: <https://www.infobae.com/educacion/2022/01/20/solo-1-de-cada-10-jovenes-de-los-sectores-mas-pobres-llega-a-la-universidad-en-la-argentina/#:~:text=Entre%20los%20j%C3%B3venes%20de%20los,a%C3%B1os%20estudia%20una%20carrera%20universitaria.> (Accessed: 07 January 2024).

¹⁹ Education and training monitor (no date) European Education Area. Available at: <https://education.ec.europa.eu/about-eea/education-and-training-monitor> (Accessed: 07 January 2024).



for Latin America as a whole. Only a programme that encompasses the integrity of education in the MERCOSUR countries can make an assessment, diagnosis, and concrete measures that act at the supranational level, that is, beyond the lack of democracy faced by sub-national regimes. There can be no integration without deciding on concrete measures that attack the root of the problem and aim to overcome the barriers of undemocratic regimes within countries that effectively seek integration beyond administrative formalities or free trade regimes.

CONCLUSION:

In this study, we dug into the complexities of Argentina's travel towards modernising its education framework through infrastructure and human capital advancement. We looked at its integration inside Mercosur and the broader effect on regional educational collaborations. Our findings light up the complicated interaction between Argentina's regulation system, socioeconomic challenges, and educational changes, all inside the setting of regional participation.

Argentina's battle with educational modernisation is profoundly established in its institutional and socio-economic landscape. The country's execution in worldwide instructive evaluations, as highlighted by PISA scores, reflects an emergency in education and a broader socio-political and financial entanglement. Access to essential services and satisfactory technological assets in numerous areas worsens instructive challenges, resulting in numerous students requiring assistance with essential education and numeracy aptitudes. This disturbing circumstance is complicated by the stagnating economy and rising poverty, which have turned educational institutions into mere asylums for survival instead of learning centres.

The institutional approach embraced in this paper underscores the importance of motivating forces in driving educational changes. In any case, Argentina's vailing socio-economic conditions and bureaucratic entanglement pose severe impediments to incentivising educational progression. Compared to the European model of state-building, the legacy of trade-led state formation has cleared out Argentina and its neighbours in MERCOSUR with a disjointed approach to educational integration. The inconsistency between the hypothetical potential of territorial collaboration and the viable substances of executing viable educational methodologies is stark.



MERCOSUR's role in this context is both critical and complex. The regional body's efforts in educational collaboration, as evidenced by programs like MEXA and ARCUSUR, demonstrate a commitment to fostering educational mobility and accreditation across member states. However, while valuable, these initiatives predominantly benefit the elite and fail to address the systemic issues plaguing primary and secondary education in poorer regions. This misalignment reflects a broader challenge within MERCOSUR – the need to harmonise diverse socio-economic landscapes and educational needs across its member states.

The European model of educational integration offers important lessons for MERCOSUR. It underlines comprehensive educational reforms that span all levels of education, coupled with rigorous checking and assessment components. This approach might guide MERCOSUR to create more comprehensive and viable instructive approaches that cater to the differing needs of its part states.

In conclusion, Argentina's travel towards educational modernisation inside the Mercosur system is full of challenges. The exchange of financial incongruities, organisation inactivity, and bureaucratic complexities underscores the requirement for a nuanced, multi-level approach to instructive change. Regional collaboration, guided by comprehensive arrangements and vigorous observation instruments, can be the key to unlocking the potential of instruction as a catalyst for social and financial advancement in Argentina and over Mercosur. As this study proposes, the way to instructive excellence is not just a matter of approach usage but, moreover, a reflection of the broader socio-political texture in which these approaches are implanted.

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