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Institutional Practices: A Key Factor for Improving School Effectiveness

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Introduction

Our paper presents the development of research carried out in the context of the ANPCyT¹ program and the Ministry of Education of the Nation for the improvement of education in the provinces of Argentina. The target of the analysis was the internal performance of the schools belonging to the first three years of secondary education (called Basic Cycle²).

We pose a complex, very relevant problem in our country: what factors inherent to the institution affect this performance. By internal performance we understand the degree to which schools achieve satisfactory results in their student's school careers, regardless of the operational definition adopted of these results. We study the problem from a sociological approach.

Sociology of Education has shown in numerous studies that the contextual factors, in particular the cultural capital of students' families, their type of primary socialisation, their objective living conditions, etc. decisively condition school performance. The influence these typically school-related factors have has not been studied in the same measure from this perspective.

Our study attempts to contribute some knowledge to this issue. We set out to explore, from a sociological perspective, what role institutional practices of school organisation and learning evaluation³ play with regard to schools' internal performance. The analytical instrument developed by Basil Bernstein to study the process of reproduction, production and legitimisation of culture in formal education was our theoretical reference framework, in particular the categories relating to the *pedagogic code* and *pedagogic discourse*.

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¹ National Agency for Scientific and Technological Promotion.

² The Basic Cycle is the first stage of secondary school education, articulated with primary school. It is three years long and provides students with the basic education they need for their personal, civic and social development.

³ Given the relevance and complexity involved in studying transmission practices, we shall address them in a complementary study.

For Bernstein, the importance of these practices lies in that they are both transmitters and generators of *codes*. The *official pedagogic code* is instilled through school-related practices. He defines them as a web of social relations that directly influence the behaviour of teachers and students alike, and through it condition the school's internal performance.

This research was of an exploratory nature. To reach our objectives, we applied a design combining quantitative and qualitative strategies.

1. Objectives of the research

Our general purpose was to explore the relationship between the internal performance of the schools and the way two types of practices are developed within them, that of organisation and that of the evaluation of the students' learning.

We set ourselves the following specific objectives:

- To classify the schools according to their level of internal performance, measured on the basis of effective repetition rates in the three years of the Basic Cycle.
- To explore, from statements of the school actors (directors, teachers and students) how the practices of school organisation and learning evaluation are developed in each group of schools.
- To analyse in each group of schools how teachers position themselves with regard to their task.
- On the basis of the results of the research, to develop proposals for action aimed at improving school performance.

2. Theoretical framework

Bernstein's interest in describing and explaining the process of transmission, reproduction and transformation of culture stems from his concern for social inequalities in relation to education. He set out to unravel how this process operates, firstly in the family, then at school, in order to explain the school failure of working class children.

On the basis of his sociolinguistic orientation, Bernstein analysed socialisation in the family and verified that, depending on the social strata the family belongs to, the child is socialised within a *restricted* or *elaborated code*⁴ (the former is prevalent in the working classes, the latter in middle and upper classes). Since the elaborated code has been institutionalised in schools, the main cause of school failure lies in the differences between the family's *code* and the school's *code*. That is to say, the failure is not the result of an intellectual deficit on the part of the child, but of the cultural differences between the two agencies.

a) *The concept of code*

⁴ The *restricted code* is characterised by possessing particularistic meanings, depending on context and directly related to a specific material basis. In the *elaborated code*, meanings are universalistic, relatively independent of context and are indirectly related to a specific material basis (the capacity for abstraction and generalisation of the socialised subject is greater in an elaborated code). Anyone with an *elaborated code* handles complex sentences and has a richer, more nuanced lexicon. This allows the child to convey his or her ideas, thoughts, feelings, etc. with greater accuracy and clarity, and to express him or herself more fluently (Bernstein, 1975).

The *code* is a regulative principle of the subject's experiences which is tacitly acquired during the socialisation process. *Codes* are not taught, they are inferred from speech and practices, that is, behaviours. This behaviour regulating principle selects and integrates *relevant meanings, forms of realisation* of these meanings and *evoking contexts*. Having the *code* involves mastering the *rule of recognition* and the *rule of realisation*. These respectively enable the agent to identify the context and meanings relevant to it, and to produce behaviour appropriate to this context (Bernstein, 1993).

At the subject's level, the *code* translates to orientations toward meanings, that is, deep subjective dispositions for thinking, acting and feeling in a particular way. The meanings are expressed, are *realised* in practices, that is, when we act. Omissions and silences are behaviours, and as such also express meanings (Bernstein, 1993).

At the macro institutional level (the school in our case), the *code* defines the social order belonging to a context, which implies that the behaviour of the subjects is subject to social control. Therefore, changing the *code* is equivalent to changing the social order (other relevant meanings are imposed and what are considered legitimate realisations – behaviours – in this context also change).

b) Code classification and framing principles

The *code* generates two principles, that of *classification* and that of *framing*, which Bernstein (1975) associates with social power and control respectively. The principle of classification regulates relations between categories (subjects, actors, agencies, roles, spaces, discourses, etc.), designates the power to define categories and to establish limits between the different categories, defines the dominant and dominated categories and provides the subject with a *rule of recognition*. *Framing* regulates communications, establishes legitimate forms of communication, suitable to the different categories and contexts, regulates the communicative practices of the social relationships between transmitters and acquirers, provides the subject with the *rule of realisation*, that is, it establishes the form in which a message will be made public and the nature of the relationships inherent to this message.

Both principles may acquire strong or weak values. In the *strong classification* power relationships and hierarchies are explicit; it is quite clear which the dominant and the dominated category are. In the *weak classification*, on the other hand, power relationships exist but are masked, hidden from the subordinated category. Strong *framing* values place communication control with the transmitter, while weak values place it with the acquirer. Between the strong and weak ends of *classification and framing* there may be different degrees from an analytical point of view (Morais, 2007).

c) The pedagogic code: curriculum, pedagogy and evaluation

This code typically belongs to institutions of formal education. It is a principle that regulates three message systems: *curriculum*, pedagogy and evaluation. All three impact on subjective consciousness creating within it orientations toward meanings. Thus education acts as a regulator of the experiences of the subject and the school becomes a powerful agent of social control (Bernstein, 1998).

As an elaborated code is institutionalised in schools, the educational relationship is asymmetrical, the *pedagogic code* generates strong *classification* and *framing* principles. What may occur in practice is a weakening of these principles, but always within the strong *classifications* and *framings* typical of the elaborated code of the school context.

The curriculum

Bernstein (1975, p. 79) defines it as “[...] the principle by means of which certain periods of time and their contents are placed in a special relationship with each other.” There are two types of relationships that are fundamental in characterising the *curriculum*: between time and contents, and between contents. Also important is which contents are mandatory and which are optional.

The *curriculum* is the visible reality of the code. According to the predominant type of *curriculum*, Bernstein distinguishes two modalities of the pedagogic code or code of educational knowledge: *collection code* and *integration code*.

“Framing tends to be strong in a *collection code*, as there are few options for teachers and students as to the control of what is transmitted and acquired within the context of the pedagogic relationship. In an *integration code*, framing tends to be weaker, as teachers and students can avail themselves of a greater range of options within the context of the pedagogic relationship.”
Morais and Neves (2007, p. 17)

A student’s success at school depends on two things: on one hand, on his or her having “incorporated” the *pedagogic code*, that is, that he or she has the rules of *recognition* and of *realisation* considered legitimate at the school (this will enable him or her to recognise relevant meanings and produce suitable behaviours); on the other, possessing socio-affective dispositions (aspirations, motivations and values) that are suitable for learning. Without this, a teacher is unlikely to get the student to learn. The teacher must also possess suitable subjective dispositions, in this case, for teaching.

In short, for pedagogic communication to be effective, the student’s interest in learning is as necessary as the teacher’s interest in teaching. There is a mutual influence between these two dispositions and the school’s coding orientations (Morais and Neves, 2007).

Pedagogy

This designates the how of the transmission, the manner of communication of knowledge considered legitimate within the pedagogic context. As we shall see later when referring to *pedagogic discourse*, this practice is subject to an internal logic regulated by two types of rules: *regulative* or *hierarchical* and *discursive* or of instruction. *Regulative* rules define what being a teacher and being a student involve within the educational institution; they set the degree of control teachers and students have over the transmission-acquisition process of the *pedagogic discourse*. *Discursive* rules regulate the *selection*, *sequence* and *rhythm*, and *criteria* of pedagogic transmission.

For each of these rules, the *framing* principle regulates the nature of this control, whether it is exercised predominantly by the teacher (*strong framing*), or whether the student is given some sort of participation (*weak framing*). As the teacher-student relationship is by definition asymmetric, a weakening of the *framing* does not mean this asymmetry disappears, but rather that the student does not notice it. By means of different strategies, the teacher may disguise, mask or hide the asymmetry.

On account of their behaviour-regulating nature, these *hierarchical rules* are always predominant over *discursive rules*, establishing the conditions of social order for pedagogic communication; they regulate the form of communication between subjects in different positions (teacher-student) in the relationship.

Among the *discursive rules*, those of *selection* regulate the choice, within the prescription of the official *curriculum*, of the contents the teacher decides to privilege in the transmission process, the activities to develop, etc. Those of *sequence* and *rhythm* establish which contents are delivered first and which later, and what the expected acquisition rate is within a particular timeframe. Those of *criterion* establish the criteria upon which own behaviours and that of others are evaluated. There are criteria students are expected to assimilate applied to their own practice and to that of others. On this matter Bernstein (1993, p. 75) states:

“In every teaching relationship, what is essential is to evaluate the acquirer’s competence. We evaluate whether the criteria placed at their disposal are enough, be they criteria regulating social order, character or manners, or instructive and discursive: how, this or that problem is solved, or whether an acceptable sample of reading or writing is delivered.”

When these rules are explicit, students can monitor continually what mistakes they have made, what is missing for their production to be acceptable or correct. If they are implicit, the only one who knows them is the teacher and the students never know why their production has been accepted or rejected.

Evaluation

This is what counts as valid verification of knowledge. In it the *curriculum* and the pedagogy come together, it is never independent of what is transmitted and of the form of transmission.

Relationships of classification and framing in pedagogic social contexts

CATEGORIES	RELATIONSHIPS	POWER/CONTROL (Classification-Framing)
<i>Spaces</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Teacher’s-Student’s ▪ Different students’ 	Ci Ei <i>(i=internal relationships)</i>
<i>Discourses</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Among disciplines ▪ Within a discipline 	
<i>Subjects</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Teacher-student ▪ Student-student 	
<i>Agencies</i> <i>Discourses</i> <i>Subjects</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ School - family/community ▪ Academic - non-academic ▪ Teacher - peers 	Ce Ee <i>(e=external relationships)</i>

As indicated in the chart, the macro-institutional (organisation) dimension is given by the relationship between subjects, discourses and spaces, and the micro-interactive by the relationships among subjects. With the concept of *classification* we analyse the organisation dimension (relationships of power between subjects, discourses and spaces); with the *framing* we analyse the interactional dimension (communication relationships among subjects).

Multiple combinations are possible. The *classification* in teacher-student relationships is always strong, owing to the asymmetry of the pedagogic relationship, therefore the differences in this relationship correspond to different degrees of *strong classification*. The same may occur at the level of relationships among discourses.

d) Pedagogic discourse: basic rules

Transmission of the pedagogic code is realised by means of *pedagogic discourse*. This discourse is part of a major device, the *pedagogic device*, made up of a set of

hierarchically related rules which distribute forms of awareness from the distribution of knowledge⁵.

Pedagogic discourse (PD) is a recontextualisation rule, a “principle by means of which other discourses are appropriated with the aim of their selective transmission and acquisition.” (Bernstein, 1998, p. 63). It is made up of two discourses, one of a technical-instrumental nature called *instructional discourse* (ID), and another of an expressive-moral nature, called *regulative discourse* (RD). ID is subordinated to RD, creates competences, abilities and skills. RD is predominant; it creates order, relationships and identity, transmits attitudes and values, establishes and inculcates some sort of control and discipline. The distinction between ID and RD is analytical; school processes involve reciprocal relationships and influences between these two discourses.

RD is predominant *because it establishes the rules of the social order that govern the educational process*; it fulfils two fundamental functions: *i*) it creates criteria that give rise to the subject’s character, ways of acting, postures; it indicates to the student what the appropriate and legitimate behaviour and the suitable *text* are within a given context; and *ii*) it provides the internal rules of ID (selection, sequence and rhythm, and transmission criteria). The teacher, as he or she instructs (transmits knowledge and develops competences), instils, without deliberately proposing it, ways of thinking, feeling, acting (RD).

e) Code, discourse and institutional practices

By definition, the code entails meanings, realisations and contexts. As it is an abstract principle (invisible reality), it cannot be observed directly, it is “inferred”, “discovered” from practices. The *pedagogic code*, implicit in the *official pedagogic discourse*, is transmitted by means of the practices proper to the school context: organisation, transmission and evaluation.

Analytically, different contexts can be distinguished in schools. The most relevant contexts are that of organisation, that of transmission and that of evaluation, each with their specific meanings and realisations, transmitted by means of specific types of practices: of organisation, of transmission and of evaluation. The three occur jointly and are dialectically related between them. In our research, we analyse only practices of organisation and evaluation.

Practices of organisation

These correspond to the macro-institutional analysis and constitute the structure of the school: distribution of subjects, spaces and discourses, and their relationships. The relationships between the categories that operate at this level establish the general context for the development of school processes. It is a very particular context because its general matrix is not defined in the school but at the ministerial level, and it is bureaucratic in character.

Formally, the pedagogic social context answers to a bureaucratic matrix. The distribution of subjects, disciplines and spaces, the functions and tasks proper to each actor, etc., are laid down by the authorities of the educational system. There is a mandatory normative framework which prescribes when, who by and how things must be done at school. This is why all schools have a similar organisation. However, there

⁵ The rules of pedagogic device are three: distributive, of recontextualisation and of evaluation. Pedagogic discourse is the rule of recontextualisation, it is subordinated to the distributive ones (Bernstein, 1998).

are no two identical institutions. The differences lie precisely in the practices, that is, in the actual way in which the directives are executed, as a result of the relationships configured in each institution. According to the theory, practices have a generative power of school organisation, that is, they give rise to forms of organisation that do not answer exactly to what is formally stipulated (Tyler, 1988). Although the bureaucratic matrix does not determine actual school organisation, the bureaucratic component strongly conditions the development of pedagogic practices.

As the theory stipulates that *classification* and *framing* values vary independently, it is possible for the frameworks regulating control of communication within each of the school contexts to weaken, even though the *classification* at the macro-institutional level continues to be strong (separation and hierarchies between categories). For example, directive management may give rise to egalitarian rather than hierarchical relationships (among head teachers, and between these and teachers), within the strong classification of functions and tasks imposed by the bureaucratic structure. At the level of the “discourse” category, the *classification* between subjects can be weakened creating curricular spaces made up of various disciplines, and maintain strong *framing* in the relationships between professors delivering this space. Combinations may be multiple, but whatever the case, the school never abandons the elaborated code that is proper to it (strong *classification* – explicit exercise of power – and strong *framing* – explicit control of communication). Consequently, what pedagogic practices generate are different modalities of code.

Thus the theory makes it possible to work at different levels of generality, which enables the researcher to go in greater depth into the constitutive principles of the *code* and how these operate, as from the practices, generating different modalities of code, which in turn mark the differences between schools, including their internal performance.

Evaluation practices

These are crucial in education. They habitually pose difficulties for teachers, cause uncertainty in students and disconcert them, and often generate conflicts between teachers and students, among teachers, and between teachers and some parents.

According to Bernstein, evaluation forms part of the pedagogic practice as a whole and may vary in many ways, depending on the interplay of the *regulative rules* and *discursive rules* that govern the transmission of the *pedagogic discourse*. Different modalities of pedagogic practice emerge from different combinations of strong and weak *framing* values at the level of each of the PD rules. Thus *framing* may weaken with regard to the *regulative rule* (for example, the student may request a better explanation of a topic from a teacher), while this value continues to be strong regarding the sequence and the rhythm in the transmission of the topics (the teacher develops the subject without consulting the students as to whether they are able to follow him or her).

Evaluation criteria are a crucial feature of pedagogic practice; the criterion rules regulate the measure to which the student gains access to the legitimate text. *Framing* is strong when evaluation criteria are provided to the student and weak when they are known only by the teacher.

These criteria refer to both the instrumental order of behaviour (ID) and the regulative one (RD). Theoretically, the student is evaluated in the learning of the whole of the PD: the knowledge and competences he or she acquired (ID), and the mode in which he or she behaves, that is, his or her social dispositions (RD). Understanding the criteria helps

the student to produce the legitimate text, and therefore achieve the appropriate instructional and expressive performance (Morais, 2002).

It is fundamental that the teacher be clear as to the evaluation criteria so as to be able to communicate them to the students. Teachers often have difficulty in establishing the criteria, and even more so in reaching a consensus about them with their colleagues. This results in evaluation becoming an unknown factor which the students must work out for each teacher. This partly explains why students tend to experience evaluation as something arbitrary and subjective, disconnected from their learning, and even from what they are taught in class.

When the criteria are not clearly laid out, the most negatively affected are those students from the least favoured social strata, because they have the greatest difficulty in incorporating the school's elaborated code.

According to Bernstein (1990, 1993, 1998), evaluation condenses the pedagogic practice; it is the *what* and *how* of educational transmission. On it depends the accreditation of the learnings (instructional and expressive-moral), and therefore also the students' school career and future social possibilities. If they pass just because they "make an effort", "don't bother in class", "are good classmates", etc., it becomes evident that the acquisition of knowledge (ID) is no longer a *relevant meaning* in the school, which is simply fulfilling a behaviour regulating function (the students learn to obey, but do not acquire knowledge or competences).

3. Methods and data

We developed the research between 2008 and 2010, using a design that combines quantitative and qualitative strategies of data collection and analysis. Our analysis units were all the secondary schools under state administrations in the city of Cordoba (n=113), Argentina, offering the Basic Cycle (BC). We worked on a random sample of this universe, using primary and secondary statistical data, plus a corpus of qualitative information from interviews with head teachers, and focal group discussions with teachers and students. We posed the work in two stages, in keeping with the goals proposed.

a) Determining the schools' internal performance

In the first place we determined the schools' internal performance. We measured performance based on the repetition rate per class of the BC. On this basis, we grouped the schools as a function of this variable. The choice of this indicator is justified in that Argentina has not yet reached a fully satisfactory rate of coverage of the middle school. Consequently, we were unable to make use of more accurate indicators, such as those used in countries where said coverage is ensured (for instance, results of standardised tests).

To determine the internal performance we sounded out a total of 113 schools. We had originally planned to use official statistical data. As it was not possible to gain access to them, we conducted our own surveys applying a questionnaire that took into account the information the schools supply to the Ministry of Education on a monthly basis.

We calculated the repetition rate on the basis of the number of students per BC class, disaggregating new enrolments and repetitions. We also surveyed data relating to the functioning conditions of the schools: the state of the infrastructure, equipment, social security services offered, and the existence of management support associations

(cooperatives, parents associations, etc.). Of the 113 existing schools, we accessed data from 91; of the remaining 22, the heads did not allow us to conduct the survey, even though we were authorised to do so.

Using the repetition rates per BC class, we drew up the average number of repetitions per school. We ranked them and classified them into three strata according to performance: High (HP), Medium (MP) and Low (LP), using the interquartile values of this ranking ($Q_1=HP$; Q_2 and $Q_3=MP$; $Q_4=LP$). We then applied a simple random sampling technique on each stratum to select a total of 20 schools: five HP, ten MP and five LP. We handed a self-administered survey form to five BC teachers who volunteered to answer (one per subject or area). Mathematics, Language, Technology, Social Sciences Area and Natural Sciences Area. In short, the sampling procedure was mixed, with a random first stage ($n=20$ schools) and a second stage of voluntary participation ($n=100$ teachers, 5 per school). We processed the school data and those from the teacher surveys with statistics programs (SPSS and Infostat) to obtain a general description of the institutions and the teachers' answers. The information corresponding to this part of the survey was subjected to quantitative analysis.

b) Revision of the official regulations for the middle school

The school institutions studied are part of a system articulated, organised and controlled by the provincial State, through the Ministry of Education. Different types of documents are generated there that regulate the activities of the level. We consulted this regulative framework to better understand the way schools operated as regards institutional organisation and the evaluation of learning.

c) Studies of the teachers' positioning and expectations

The survey applied to BC teachers of the 20 schools in the sample was aimed at fulfilling this objective. The survey was made up of 52 closed questions and 2 open questions. Besides requesting some personal data, we questioned them on different issues, always related to the school at which they received the survey: a) perception of their practices (teaching, evaluation and accreditation of learning of their BC students); b) opinions/expectations regarding the members of the educational community (head teachers, colleagues, monitors, students and parents/tutors) and the role of each in the school; and c) their view of general aspects of the institution (institutional projects, internal regulations, issues faced, "institutional atmosphere", etc.).

We handed out 100 surveys, of which 98 were answered. The selection mode of the sample enables one to assume an acceptable representation of the universe under study, therefore our analyses may be considered an approximation, with no great bias, of the perception all BC teachers in the city of Cordoba have of the issues taken into account in the survey. It should be pointed out that the data supplied by this instrument reflects only the teachers' subjective appreciation, not the actual reality of each school.

The teachers' responses were analysed using different strategies. We built a table and graphs to show the distribution of the responses in the total number of schools and in each performance group, which enabled us to identify thematic nuclei relevant to our objectives. This disaggregated form of analysis gave us a detailed description of the whole and of each group, but we needed to produce more theoretically inclusive results, suitable for interpreting likenesses and differences among the three groups being compared. For this we built one-dimensional indices which, as with compound indicators, brought the data of various theoretically related items together. Thus the

indices enabled us to make comparisons at a greater level of abstraction than that corresponding to each item of the survey.

We built the indices as follows:

- We selected the items (each question contained several items) of the survey that, according to a theoretical definition adopted for an index, we considered relevant indicators of the attribute we wished to measure with this index.
- In order to analyse the teachers' perception of the organisation practices and regarding the institutional actors, we dichotomised the variables (items of the questions incorporated into the index) and converted each teacher's responses to these items into two values: 1 = "positive" teacher perception (some degree of presence at his or her school of the attribute being considered); and 0 = "negative" perception. This enabled us to glean a score for each case, which could be turned into comparable measures between the three groups of schools. The aggregate of these dichotomised values constitute the index's categories. This is expressed in an ordinal scale, therefore each category represents the degree to which the attribute in question is present in the school, according to the teacher's perception. Each category is a value in a range of values whose upper and lower boundaries vary for each index. We built five indices, of which only three yielded meaningful results.
- When analysing the teachers' perception regarding evaluation practices, we operated in a slightly different manner. In these cases we generated four categories (0 to 3) which reflected the degree to which the attribute was present in the responses. The value assigned to each teacher in the index was also built as an aggregate.
- For the different indices we calculated the median of the distribution of the sample (n=98), and the median of each performance group. Since it was an ordinal scale, the median is the most representative statistic of the behaviour of the whole in the index.
- Finally we compared the distribution of the records corresponding to each performance group with regard to the median of the whole. We thus observed the power of the index to differentiate the behaviour of each group.

The index building methodology proved appropriate to take advantage of the vast amount of information collected by the survey, enabled us to make meaningful comparisons and made it possible for us to ground our explanations on how certain institutional practices lead to more satisfactory results. The indices "*exercising the role of head teacher*", "*existence of institutional organisers*" and "*existence of explicit rules of order in the institution*" were the ones that came out on top as having the greatest differentiating power.

d) Analysis of the organisation and evaluation practices

The responses to the survey and the construction of indices were insufficient for the analysis we needed to make to fulfil the objectives of the research. They reflected only the teachers' perception which, as with any perception, is subjective and therefore does not concur exactly with actuality. In order to minimise this possible bias, we complemented the above by concentrating on a few cases, intentionally selected, with the aim of exploring in depth the view of the main school actors (head teachers, students and teachers) regarding some of the topics included in the survey.

We selected two schools from each group (n=6) and applied qualitative techniques to each institution to survey the data: a) semi-structured interviews with an institution's head teacher; and b) discussions with focal groups, one made up of students and one of teachers. In all cases, we requested them to expatiate on issues relating to school organisation and the students' evaluation processes, always in reference to the BC.

4. Main Results

The study showed the partial validity of the hypothesis that oriented our research. We posited that institutional practices are a determining factor in the internal performance of schools. We found sufficient evidence to state the validity of our hypothesis only with regard to organisation practices. Against what we assumed theoretically, evaluation practices bore no relation whatsoever to performance, at least in the case of the BC in Cordoba.

a) Findings related to organisation practices

We observed important differences between schools with dissimilar levels of internal performance with regard to these practices. The main contrast between the different groups is the figure of the head teacher. Most of the features of the head teachers, which we point out below for schools with better performance (HP and MP), do not appear among those of schools with low performance (LP).

The manner in which the head teachers exercise their specific roles appears to be a highly relevant factor. Those managing the schools with higher performances are people whose commitment to the institution is recognised by teachers and students alike. Their most frequent expressions on the head teachers were: "they are always in the school", "they are very attentive to what goes on", "they generate institutional projects", "they encourage team work", "they give the institution a direction". The students highlight the following among other attributes of the head teachers: "they make us feel comfortable at school", "they support us when we want to do good things for the school", "they know us", "they are interested in us", "they control us to make sure we comply".

With regard to parents, the head teachers of these schools (HP and MP) use different strategies to attempt to commit them to their children's schooling, keep them informed on their performance and attempt to involve them in institutional activities.

The former is further reinforced upon analysing what is expressed in the interviews with the head teachers of the higher performing schools themselves. We verified the following: they use the scarce margin of autonomy formally allowed to them effectively; they attempt to prioritise the pedagogic function over the administrative function, despite the vast amount of bureaucracy they have to comply with; they try to observe lessons regularly, advising the teaching staff, accompanying them as they develop their tasks, supporting their decision-making processes, monitoring that they fulfil their obligations before the students. Although they feel that the educational authorities do not support them sufficiently, and are critical of the validity and convenience of many of the measures the authorities impose, they seek to get the students to learn rather than just "get them through" school. They consider this to be the school's main function and that their responsibility as heads is to fulfil it.

Another feature of these head teachers is their awareness of the limitations and the hurdles they must face to fulfil their roles. Even though a large proportion of the

problems stem from the environment, these affect the development of their tasks in the school and jeopardise the fulfilment of their specific function.

It is also worth noting that the schools with higher performance generate diverse institutional projects whose organising function of institutional activities is remarkable. Teachers at these schools positively value the ordering role these projects fulfil. In the same sense, teachers and students perceive their behaviour to be effectively controlled by explicit and precise *rules of social order* which the head teachers take upon themselves to enforce.

Another important feature of the schools with high performance is how the departments with related subjects function. Although the structure of the middle school does not facilitate departmental work⁶, heads and teachers in these schools attempt to reach basic agreements in these departments for the teaching and evaluation of the learning process, embodied in different projects (the production of working materials, flashcards for students, etc.). These actions open up alternative spaces to change teaching methods and prioritise the transmission of knowledge, something that appears to have lost relevance at schools nowadays. Heads and teachers alike express a genuine concern that “students are not learning anything”. They attempt to reverse the situation, they regard the school as the only place where students can acquire the tools they need to manage in the future. Teachers of schools with low performance express the same concern as their colleagues in the other schools, but admit to a feeling of “helplessness” in tackling the problem: “not much can be done with these children”, “they’re not interested in studying”, “they see no usefulness in schools”, “they don’t have the minimum basis on which to acquire secondary school knowledge”. In general they express discontent regarding the students’ bad behaviour and are discouraged by the conditions in which they do their job.

b) Findings related to evaluation practices

Contrary to what we posited theoretically, we found insufficient empirical evidence in the schools we studied to state that there is a clear relationship between evaluation practices and school performance. The homogenous nature of these practices in the three groups is greater than the differences. Teachers and students claim that some of the difficulties encountered in evaluation might be generated by the teaching-learning process. In this sense, evaluation and its results are defined during the process of transmitting knowledge.

Teachers put their teaching difficulties down to the students (they study little, they are not interested in the topics presented in class, they are ill-disciplined). Students admit they are “lazy” or that they do not like studying, but put this behaviour down to their teachers: “they don’t explain”, “they don’t make the subject interesting”, “classes are boring”, “they use difficult words, no one can understand what they mean”, “they teach topics that are utterly useless”. In short, they can all tell, each from their own viewpoint, that their expectations regarding the school remain unsatisfied.

We were also able to observe, from different indicators, that the transmission of knowledge does not occupy a central place in teaching. It is not surprising, therefore, that teachers should have difficulty in evaluating the learning process. If the students do not access knowledge (because it is not transmitted to them or they do not study), what they know cannot be evaluated. This has determined that teachers assign a greater

⁶ The main obstacle lies in the designation of teachers per teaching period and the low concentration of teaching periods teachers have in a school.

relative weight to *regulative discourse* (behaving correctly in class, keeping their folder updated, complying with assignments, bringing working materials, etc.) than to *instructional discourse* when assigning the score that will define accreditation in a subject. Consequently, what is achieved is that students acquire certain habits and ways of acting, but finish their school career without having incorporated the knowledge and skills needed for their individual and social development.

5. Some aspects for consideration to improve school performance

This research supplied sufficient empirical evidence to state that the internal performance of the secondary schools studied depends to a large extent on how they are managed by their head teachers. Consequently, some decisions should be made oriented towards ensuring the conditions necessary for good school management in all schools. Below we mention those that emerge from our study with respect to this issue.

- *Organising the middle school differently.* This involves granting greater autonomy to schools, restructuring the function of the head teacher, changing the manner of designating teachers, reducing the amount of curricular space and distributing students differently.
- *Articulating primary schools with secondary schools.* It is indispensable to guarantee that students begin the BC armed with the dispositions and knowledge necessary to respond to these requirements. The teachers consulted claim that it is impossible to work with students who do not have a “work discipline”, “lack fundamental study habits”, “do not understand what they read”, “cannot express themselves”, “cannot solve simple problems”, etc. They take it for granted that all of this should be supplied by primary school.
- *Strengthen the function of head teachers.* Different actions would make this objective possible: a) to prepare head teachers to respond to the new demands; b) to make available to schools professionals qualified to solve specific issues, generally those derived from the objective living conditions of many students; c) to alleviate head teachers from administrative tasks by assigning other institutional agents to perform them; d) to ensure that schools have the necessary human and material resources such that they are able to fulfil their specific function.
- *Train teachers to respond to the new demands.* The incorporation of new social sectors to the secondary school constitutes a challenge for the school and the teachers because new demands have emerged (inclusion, attention to individual and cultural diversity, student containment) that are hard to reconcile with teaching. Teachers are expected to respond to multiple problems of a diverse nature, without taking into account that they have only been trained to teach. It is therefore urgent to reconsider teacher training and adapt it to these new demands.
- *Modify some practices at the management and supervision level of the education system.* According to the head teachers, some of the difficulties schools encounter originate in the Ministry of Education, among others: pertinence / opportunity / applicability of the measures imposed on schools; the manner and timing in which institutions receive official directives; sluggishness of the educational bureaucracy to solve the multiple and varied institutional problems; lack of adequate attention to school problems on the part of supervisors.

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