Institutions, Service Delivery and Social Exclusion: A Case Study of the Education Sector in Buenos Aires

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January 2000
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This paper was written based on research conducted during the summer of 1999 while a Visiting Researcher at Centro de Estudios para el Desarrollo Institucional (CEDI). Support from the Fundación Gobierno y Sociedad and the PREM Professional Development Program at the World Bank is acknowledged.
I. Introduction

Access to quality services varies substantially among different groups in society. Thus, very often “the poor” lack access to certain services (or have access to services of lower quality) and as a result their capabilities to benefit from the opportunities available to others in society are diminished. In that sense, education is a particularly important service because of its strong impact on earning capacities as well as how it enables individuals to participate and control their social and political environment.

Institutional factors are extremely important in determining who gets what type of service: the processes by which decisions are made on the allocation of resources, the incentives faced by the providers of the services to serve specific groups with different intensity, the incentives faced by different groups of users to demand specific services. Institutions (both the formal and informal arrangements that determine how individuals and organizations behave) can be “inclusive” —in the sense that they promote the participation of the weak—or, alternatively, “exclusionary”.

An important characteristic of education services is that the public sector is typically its primary provider. Thus, the analysis of institutional arrangements requires one to focus on issues of governance and public sector performance.

The paper is motivated by one basic question: how institutional arrangements are operating to exclude (or include) certain groups (“the poor”) from quality education. Lack of access to schools is an extreme form of exclusion. But access to poor quality schooling is also a form of exclusion —and one that is more characteristic of urban areas such as the ones considered in this paper which will, correspondingly, take this broader definition of exclusion.

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The terms “poverty” and “poor” can have different meanings to different people: insufficient income, relative deprivation not only in the income space but also in access to public goods, exclusion from social and political rights, etc. In this paper, I am abstracting from those distinctions and use the terms “poor” and “poverty” more as a metaphor (e.g. the disadvantaged) than a well-defined “target” group in society. This license is not, I believe, a serious limitation in a case study such as this. But it is one that should be addressed in a more systematic analysis of the hypotheses I will be discussing in the paper.
This is a case study: it focuses on one metropolis, in one country and analyzes how those institutional mechanisms are operating in practice. In that sense, it has more of a demonstration goal than the pretension of being representative of national or international trends.

The paper focuses both on questions dealing with the distribution and use of resources within the education system. Perhaps the most obvious way in which certain groups in society experience limited opportunities to receive a good education is associated with the way in which resources are allocated to different schools. Thus we would like to know whether schools in poor districts or neighborhoods receive less (or worse) inputs. But, more importantly, we would like to understand the means by which that may happen: how are institutions operating to allocate less (worse) resources to poor schools. As important as how many (and what type) of inputs are available is how those inputs are utilized. The implied question is whether schools that cater mostly to poor students are less effective in using the resources they get to produce good results. This leads us into the question of how schools are managed. Are “poor schools” are run differently than non-poor ones? If so, what are the incentives leading to these different behaviors?

Given the federal nature of the governance structure of education in Argentina this analysis requires consideration of behaviors/decisions by more than one level of government. In fact, there are many agents involved in the management of schools. Their actions and patterns of behavior are likely to have important effect on the inclusion of students with disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. This opens up a complex series of hypotheses that need to be tested. For example, do administrators and supervisors in the education system manage differently their relationship with poor and non-poor schools? Or is the dynamics of power relations (e.g. directors/teachers vs.

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2 The same definitional ambiguities I recognized in terms of the use of the term “poor” apply when referring to “poor schools” (see footnote 1). Essentially, I am referring to schools with high concentration of poor students.

3 Many of the outcomes we observe are related to patterns of behavior and decisions by users (i.e. poor families) and not the design of institutions in the education sectors. Our approach, however, is to take those factors as given and consider to what extent the institutional arrangements in the schooling system take into account those “demand-side factors” and design compensatory measures or interventions to alter behavior.
parents/students) different depending on the socioeconomic background of students attending the school? Do the poor in non-poor schools experience differential treatment? Do authorities and teachers in non-poor schools face incentives to foster inclusion of poor children?

We also know that there is substantial heterogeneity among schools within (relatively) homogenous districts: some schools are better able than others to mobilize resources, and more effective at using those resources. We would ideally like to understand better the factors that explain that capacity to mobilize and manage resources.

The paper will provide some initial, exploratory, responses to several of these questions. The field work for the paper took place during the months of July and August of 1999 and it involved some two dozen semi-structured interviews with authorities in the education systems in Provincia de Buenos Aires (the Province) and Ciudad de Buenos Aires (the City), experts, union leaders and other key informants, and visits to schools in the Buenos Aires metropolitan area.

Section II presents a brief description of how the education system operates in the Province and in the City. Section III presents the main arguments on how the rules of the game in the education system tend to include/exclude certain groups. Section IV concludes.

II. The System Today

Argentina is not a poor country (its GDP per capita is US$8,200) and its main education indicators indicate so: complete coverage of primary education, a gross

\[^4\] I would like to thank the following people for sharing their experiences and views during our interviews: Dardo Becerra, Delia Bisutti, Cecilia Braslavsky, Hugo Carranza, Roberto D'Amico, Graciela Di Marco, Maria del Carmen Feijóo, Fanny Alicia Greiding de Knopoff, Eduardo Macaluse, Federico Mejer Alejandro Morduchowitiz Daniel Prades, Silvia Ruiz, Patricia Sarlé, Jorgelina Seminario, Graciela Strassio, Juan Carlos Tedesco, Guillermina Tiramonti, Father Juan Torrella, Gerardo Tozzi, and Maria Lucrecia Tulic. I hope I have succeeded in interpreting their very diverse perspectives in a consistent fashion. I benefited from many discussions with my colleagues Mariano Narodowski at CEDI and Sandra Cesilini at the World Bank who also helped me organizing my field work. Claudia Kulish provided extremely valuable research assistance. Comments from Mariano Narodowski are gratefully acknowledged.

\[^5\] Escuela No.25 Martin Güemes, Isla Talavera, Campana; Escuela Media No. 1 Joaquin V. Gonzalez, Don Bosco, Quilmes; Escuela No. 43 Ricardo Rojas, Don Bosco, Quilmes; Escuela No. 29, San Fernando; in Provincia de Buenos Aires; and Escuela No. 2 Máximo S. Victoria, Distrito 11; Escuela No. 4 Distrito 21, and Escuela No.10 Distrito 19, in City of Buenos Aires.
enrollment rate at the secondary level that approaches 80%, an average of 8.7 years of schooling among adults.

But, as in most countries in Latin America, income distribution is highly unequal. As a result, Argentina presents relatively high levels of poverty: the latest, unofficial, estimates indicate the incidence of poverty (defined as income of less than $495 per month for a typical family) in the Buenos Aires metropolitan area to be 27%. Its education performance (coverage and quality) is below that of countries of similar levels of income (World Bank, 1999).

There are important equity concerns with respect to the operation of the education system. School attendance, particularly at the secondary level, is lower among children from poor households (Morduchowitz, 1998). Provincial level data (Aguerrondo, 1993; World Bank, 1999) shows that children from poor households also experience higher rates of repetition and late entry (which combined result in significant over-age among those attending school) and worse results in tests (see below). Furthermore, from a dynamic point of view, the education system is not effective in compensating the large income and social gaps that exist and, thus, it does not contribute to a narrowing down of such gaps over time. In other words, the education system is not acting as an “equalizer”.

Responsibility for primary and secondary education has been decentralized to the provincial level. After 1976, a military government completed the forced transfer of primary education to the provinces and the City of Buenos Aires. In the early 1990s a new process of decentralization (this time under a democratic regime) transferred responsibilities for secondary education. A new federal education law was approved in 1993 that regulates the distribution of responsibilities between the nation and the provinces that now play the leading role in financial, pedagogical and administrative matters. A key element of the 1993 law was the introduction of a three level system consisting of one year of compulsory initial education, a nine-year compulsory basic general education, known as Educación General Básica or EGB, and a three-year

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optional\textsuperscript{7} middle level, the \textit{polimodal}, with a variety of orientations. Provinces have until the year 2000 to implement these reforms, a matter of substantial controversy. \textsuperscript{8}

The Buenos Aires metropolitan area, the object of this case study, falls under two different jurisdictions. The City of Buenos Aires (which since 1996 has an autonomous government and thus secured a status that, for all practical purposes, is not different to that of a province) has a population of 3,000,000 and an education system consisting of approximately 700,000 students (57 \% in the public system). The Buenos Aires province, with a population of almost 13,000,000 is the most populated in the country (it concentrates close to 40\% of the national population). Its education system consists of approximately 3,700,000 students (70\% in the public system). The \textit{Gran Buenos Aires} covers 19 \textit{partidos} (counties) that form a belt around the City and that, in many ways, constitute an integral part of the city. About two thirds of the student population in the province concentrates in \textit{Gran Buenos Aires}.

The management structure in the two jurisdictions shares some common elements but also some important differences that are worth mentioning as they have potentially strong implications for the way services are delivered.

In the Province, a Directorate of Education (\textit{Dirección General de Cultura y Educación} or DGCE) with ministerial status has the overall responsibility for the education system.\textsuperscript{9} The administrative and pedagogical control is deconcentrated to the level of 134 districts (that coincide with electoral districts) of widely different size. Sixteen Regional Chiefs (\textit{Jefes Regionales}) for each branch of the system, appointed by the DGCE and reporting to the under-secretary for education, oversee the operation of District Inspectors (\textit{Inspectores Distritales}), selected on a competitive basis, and Inspection Secretariats (\textit{Secretarias de Inspección}), also at the district level. These are responsible for the bulk of the administrative work. Quite often, though, Inspectors have

\textsuperscript{7} The Province is making the \textit{polimodal} obligatory.

\textsuperscript{8} The City of Buenos Aires has, so far, resisted the implementation of this reform.

\textsuperscript{9} The Director General is also the president of a General Education Council (\textit{Consejo General de Cultura y Educación}) with advisory functions. The provincial executive branch nominates ten members (four of which are proposed by teachers) for a period of one year—with possible re-election—and the provincial legislature approves the nominees.
simply too many schools under their responsibility and, thus, very limited capacity to become substantially involved in pedagogic matters.  

A somewhat different structure exists in the City of Buenos Aires that is divided into 21 districts for primary education and 8 regions for secondary education (neither of which coincide with the electoral districts in the City). Once again, most administrative and pedagogical functions are in the hands of district supervisors (the equivalent of the inspectors in the Province) that report to a Directorate corresponding to their branch (e.g. primary, secondary, adult, etc.) within the City's Education Secretariat (with Ministerial ranking).

The separation of administrative and pedagogical functions by branch is very strong in both jurisdictions. Each branch has developed its own “culture” and “identity”. The clashes between the primary and secondary branches became quite transparent in the Province with the implementation of the reform that required an unusual level of interaction between the former “primary” and “secondary” branches. Furthermore, within school units, the fact that staff belong to different branches (e.g. school counselors to the “psychology” branch, physical education teachers to their own branch, etc.) constitutes an important barrier to the effective integration of the teaching community under the leadership of school directors.

One important difference between the two jurisdictions is the existence of elected School Boards (Consejos Escolares) at the district level in the Province. School Boards do not have an established managerial role and play mostly routine administrative functions. Typically they become intermediaries vis-a-vis the municipal (and sometimes the provincial) authorities mostly to mobilize resources for schools in their districts. They do not have budgets of their own although they receive funds from the

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1 In the San Fernando school district, for example, 2 inspectors are responsible for 37 EGB schools with 18,000 students. About a fourth of the schools are located in isolated islands in the delta for which a school visit involves a full day of dedication, while for the other schools half a day dedication is a reasonable average. Thus, assuming inspectors spend half of their time performing office work, they can visit schools once a month.

11 The City has started a process of decentralization to the district level under which some type of elected school board might be established. The fact that existing school districts do not coincide with electoral districts is likely to present a particular problem for implementation of these plans.

12 The DGCE appoints a technical secretary to the Board.
DGCE (through the so-called *Fondo de Servicio Alimentario*) for school canteens. Given the limited power of board members, these slots tend to attract the least successful in the "Peking order" within the political world. Two recent changes appear to have had a positive effect on the quality of school boards: the requirements that all candidates be teachers and the increased electoral competition between parties in the province (and the appearance of a third party—the Frepaso—that challenged the old balance of power between the two traditional parties).  

Another important difference between the Province and the City is the existence of municipal governments in the former. While these only have a significant quantitative participation in the delivery of education services at the pre-school level (10% of the official enrollment at this level), the presence of municipal governments provides an additional source of funding in the Province, mostly for some infrastructure work and other minor expenditures. Some municipalities have set up education secretariats or councils that have started to play an active role within their limited formal authorities.

The Province and City of Buenos Aires, each in their jurisdictions, provide the bulk of the funding for public schools. An *Asociación Cooperadora* exists in every school to which parents contribute a monthly fee ($5 to $10 a month in most schools) but its collection, in many cases, is not enforced. The *Cooperadoras* sometimes organize small fundraising events for the school. Contributions from private sources are not common, although they are not unheard of. Good estimates of the overall funding envelope for public schools (i.e. one that includes all the sources referred to above) is not available. A report prepared by Unesco for the city of Campana (IIEP, 1999) estimates that contributions by *Cooperadoras*, the municipality and private sector companies amount to 15% of total expenditures. This, as the authors recognize, is unusually large because of the very large contributions by companies in the area (SIDERCA and others).

The payment of salaries is centralized at the Province/City level: a central office processes checks based on personnel records and assistance data collected by the

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13 In our interviews it became apparent that in the San Fernando district, for example, a sharp improvement has been felt in the quality of board members over the last few years.

14 The School Martin Guemes in Isla Talavera referred to in Box 2 has been extremely successful in mobilizing contributions from a large number of private companies.
education administration. Each jurisdiction has its own salary scale (on average the Province and the City pay salaries that are close to the national median for teachers). The salary is calculated on the basis of a basic amount and bonuses for tenure (20-30% every 5 years to a maximum of 120% after 22 years in the City or 24 years in the Province) and attendance -presentismo- which has become a de facto automatic bonus in the Province although not in the City. The Province pays a bonus for unfavorable location (zona desfavorable) which can be up to 60% of the basic. Overall, the basic salary represents approximately one third of the total salary cost, followed by the bonus for tenure (Ministerio de Economía de la Provincia de Buenos Aires, 1995). Besides the increases due to job tenure (or moving to an “unfavorable” zone in the Province) the only way a teacher can obtain a higher salary is by qualifying for a non-teaching managerial position (i.e. school secretary, vice-director, director) as there is no grading of teaching positions for salary purposes nor any type of performance payment (Morduchowitz, 1997).

Each school has a fixed allocation of teaching positions (the so-called POF) determined by the central authorities in the system. The selection of new teachers for an open position is ruled by the teachers’ statute or Estatuto Docente (with every province having a different statute under the general guidance of the national one approved by a law in 1958). The key aspect of the statute is that decisions on the professional career of teachers are handled by the teaching profession through special boards (Juntas de Calificaciones in the City and Tribunales in the Province) of which only teachers can be members. These boards use a system of points in which diplomas, tenure and courses constitute the main factors. Those applicants with the highest scores have the first right to select among open positions. School authorities (or for that matter school staff or parents) have no voice in the selection process.

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15 Each school is ranked on a scale from 1 to 5 according to how “unfavorable” its location is. This mostly reflects distance from urban centers and the cost/time involved in commuting.

16 Some of the teachers (a minority) in these boards are selected by authorities. In the City, for example, there are two Juntas and each one has 10 members, 6 elected by teachers, 3 by the secretariat of education and one by the union. See Morduchowitz and Marcón (1996). However, as both majority and minority lists are represented in these boards, there is potential for more complex alliances between elected and appointed members.

17 The Juntas rely on input from a special commission (formed by representatives from the major unions) that establishes points for different diplomas and courses.
To a large extent, large construction work remains centralized in the two jurisdictions while funds for smaller repair and maintenance work are decentralized to the school level through the cooperadoras. In the City the Secretariat centrally executes 70% of the annual infrastructure budget of $43 million, and the rest goes to the cooperadoras for small repair/upgrade works. In the Province, until recently, the Ministry of Public Works and an agency in charge of special projects in the Gran Buenos Aires (the Ente del Conurbano) handled most of the large construction work in a centralized fashion. Recently, the DGEC has gained a more prominent role in this area, leading the construction works for the expansion secondary education, adopting a less centralized system in which cooperadoras of the selected schools tend to play an active role in defining and supervising construction work. Maintenance work beyond what is handled by cooperadoras through their own resources, however, remains centralized.

Full-day primary schools (which, with few exceptions, exist only in the City) and a large number of half-day schools operate canteens (comedores escolares) for which they receive subsidies from education authorities. In the City, each school is allocated "fellowships" to cover the cost for students in need selected by a school committee. The funds are paid directly to private companies that cater the services --which cooperadoras and school authorities monitor. In the Province, qualifying schools receive a per-student allocation and funds go to the Cooperadoras and it is typically school personnel that buy the food.

Children enrolled in the public system are supposed to attend the school in their district (the so-called radio escolar). As will be discussed in more detail below, the process by which students are admitted to different schools is far from being transparent, with school authorities retaining significant discretion to select/re-direct students. In most cases, the existence of several schools at short distance within the same district implies that a complex (and mostly informal) system for student distribution has developed over the years. But, particularly in the City, there is evidence of families (particularly professional parents) that are able to circumvent regulations and through personal contacts enroll their children in schools with good reputation completely outside their radio.
Private schools represent a sizable part of the education system in the two jurisdictions. In the City private school enrolment is only slightly less than public enrollments (43% and 47% of the total for primary and secondary schools respectively). In Gran Buenos Aires, it is approximately one third of the enrollment. A special department in each jurisdiction regulates private schools. A large percentage of private schools receive official subsidies in the form of salaries for teachers. In the City, for example, these subsidies amount to 13% of the education budget of $900 million. Many of these subsidized schools are run by churches (e.g. in the City, the escuelas parroquiales, that serve approximately 25,000 students, receive 100% of the salaries for teachers, excepting those teaching religion and some special subjects).

Over the years, many compensatory programs that seek to provide special support to disadvantaged schools/students have been created. At the federal level, the Plan Social Educativo (PSE) established in 1993, constitutes the national government’s flagship initiative to compensate unequal conditions for learning among children from poor households. Since its creation, it has allocated approximately $700 million for nine programs that involve construction/upgrading, provision of didactic materials, support of special school initiatives, training and, recently, fellowships for poor students attending secondary schools. Over the years it has grown in coverage (while not in funding) to cover over 11,000 schools serving almost 3,000,000 students. The funds are transferred directly to participating schools, which are selected by provinces. The allocation of funds between provinces is such that, on a per-student basis, it does not represent a major quantitative contribution in the two jurisdictions under study.

Each jurisdiction has its own set of compensatory programs and interventions (that not always form a consistent package with those generated from the national level). For example, as part of its efforts to expand coverage of the polimodal schools (which involves major investments in school infrastructure), the Province has established its own system of fellowships (100,000 fellowships of $900 per student/year the first year of operation) complemented by technical assistance to targeted “needy” schools. The City does not have a similar fellowship program, although one is being considered for next year. It’s flagship initiative in this area operates under the banner of a Program to Support Priority Zones (or ZAP) that concentrates on at-risk-districts within the city.
Operating at a relatively small scale, the ZAP program focuses on school level initiatives (such as an oral history project).

Starting in 1993, a national system of evaluation is in operation. Every year a large sample of students in 3rd, 6th, 7th and 9th grades in the EGB and 3rd grade in the polimodal are tested in mathematics and language. In addition, all students in 3rd grade of polimodal are now tested. A set of 700 complementary variables is collected, including information on socio-economic conditions of students, on characteristics of teachers and school directors, on inputs and on pedagogical processes. The results at the provincial level show a high negative correlation between average scores and poverty incidence. Individual-level data also show lower scores among students with disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds (Ministerio de Cultura y Educaci6n, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c). Furthermore, econometric analyses show that the average socio-economic condition of classes and schools have an impact on scores beyond that explained by the socio-economic background of individual students. In other words, while poor students tend to have lower test scores, those attending classes/schools with high concentration of poor students have even lower scores on average (Ministerio de Cultura y Educaci6n 1996, 1997).

However, the analyses also find significant variation in test results among schools with similar socio-economic backgrounds. Those variations seem to be associated with school characteristics as diverse as the length of service of the school director or the perception of teachers regarding their own responsibility (as opposed to the child's) for student learning outcomes. The potential of this type of analysis together with more qualitative inquiries of the type presented in the following section is very large.

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18 For example, using the 1997 test results for 3rd grade of polimodal, the correlation index between the index of basic unmet needs (NBI) and average scores in math and language at the provincial level is −78%.

19 This is particularly true at the district level where quantitative information can both inform and test the validity of hypotheses that focus on the decision-making processes. For an interesting example see IIEP, 1998.
Box 1: Julito does not come because he doesn’t have pants

The two schools are about 100 meters from the border of *Villa Itati*, a slum of about 60,000 people. Students in the elementary school come from the poorest families in Itati and *Villa Azul* (nearby and even poorer than Itati). There are approximately 2,000 students in the elementary and secondary schools.

The elementary school. The building speaks of a dignified past now almost forgotten. The *villa* appeared 30 years ago, the middle class left the school and even those in the *villa* that can afford it send their kids to other schools paying for the bus tickets. Only those that have no alternative go to this school. During the month of July there was a full week of rain and the kids practically vanished. The entrance to the school is locked with a chain. Two police cars are parked in front of the school in response to recent robberies. The floor in the school is filthy dirty even though there is a staff of 11 in charge of cleaning. The library has practically no reading books for children (as in many other schools I visited, prominent in the shelves is the *Lo se todo*, an encyclopedia that my generation grew up with thirty years ago). The only recent books are materials for teachers sent by a national program (the Plan Social Eduativo). The maps are disorganized, several lying on the floor. The noise level is so high that it is difficult for us to listen to each other. I can see children running around the corridors with teachers that look at them without seeing them. Kids in this school bring a heavy baggage of poor material and social conditions. A second grade teacher realized that Julito was not coming to school because he didn’t have pants. She sent a pair of pants. Julito is still not coming.

Where is the pilot? The school director has traveled to Switzerland to visit her daughter about a month ago. School staff tells us they can’t notice the difference. What they did notice is that out of the $7,000 a month sent by the school district for the canteen (35 cents a day per student) only $1,000 was spent on food (5 cents a day per student). Kids get only a small sandwich and no drinks. They are still trying to figure out what has happened to the other $6,000. The director might be in Switzerland but the school inspectors and the district authorities are not: they still don’t show up at school. The mayor comes when he wants to use the school facilities to meet with the people from the *villa* (particularly now that there is an election). We check the school records and pick a class at random: 21 out of the 43 students enrolled have already missed 75 days this year. Nobody has checked on them: the social workers are afraid of going to the villa. So they send a letter. It is unclear whether the postmen do get into the *villa* (or if parents know how to read).

The Berlin Wall. The entrance to the secondary school is through a long and narrow corridor around the elementary school. A door connects the two schools but it is locked with key and a protective bar. The secondary school was built 30 years ago around the same time as the *villa* appeared. The kids from the *villa* never made it to secondary though. At some point in the early seventies this corridor was built to make this separation complete.

The secondary school is clean. Half jokingly we are told that it is because there are only 2 people, not 11, in charge and thus they must work hard and cannot spend time arguing about who will clean what section of the school. There are no students walking through the corridors and it's us that generate the noise. The school is not rich but the contrast with the elementary school is sharp.

A new construction project is being planned. The school requested a few additional classrooms, a sports field and the elimination of the corridor (as a result of the recent reforms that changed the structure of public education the two schools are supposed to be integrated). The provincial authorities developed their own blueprints that include more classrooms than requested, no sport field and nothing to change the corridor. It is not clear why there are funds for this upgrade but they are having a hard time getting funds to build a canteen so that kids can eat at the elementary school.

In a special room I notice tens of computers (not a single computer is available in the elementary school). The school’s secretary heard through a colleague in another school that the Province was donating computers. She finally located the office in charge. They said that if she came the next day she could pick up ten computers and a printer. She did. In the same fashion she is now “shopping around” for internet access. I ask, why are you calling it a donation if, after all, it is your Ministry that is providing the equipment. She explains that, formally it is a donation to the school’s *cooperadora* and not to the school I leave the school wondering whether the use of the term “donation” reveals the distance between the system and the school that makes everyone perceive this as a donation. The school, the community, the students do not have rights. For the villeros the state does not provide, it donates.
The provision of education is widely recognized as a critical tool for social development: education can act as an equalization instrument that offers opportunities to all irrespective of their family background.

Many education systems, however, fail to deliver on this promise. The most extreme manifestation of this is when large segments of the population are completely excluded from having access to schools. But, more generally, education systems fail if they are unable to provide the quality/type of education that will allow children from disadvantaged backgrounds to gain the skills, knowledge and confidence required to benefit fully from economic opportunities as they enter the job market as well as to affect their social and political environment.

The motivating question for the analysis reported here is whether the rules of the game under which the education system operates indeed contribute to such equalization of opportunities. The focus on rules of the game means that what we should look at is the overall direction of the system, the generic incentives faced by the relevant actors – teachers, administrators, politicians, parents, etc. Obviously, this does not mean that all actors will respond to those incentives in the same identical way.

In what follows the paper uses two different points of reference with respect to which institutional arrangements are assessed. First, to what extent the rules of the game tend to favor the poor and the disadvantaged. The presumption is that if the education system is to equalize opportunities, the rules of the game should be such that actors in the system have the incentives and tools to counteract the handicaps with which poor children come to the school. The reality of the urban marginal areas that constitute the object of this study is one of extreme poverty and marginalization. The stories in the boxes give hard examples of the extreme social conditions under which schools operate: it is what some authors are now referring to as “the school as frontier” (Duschatzky, 1998).

A second point of reference is whether the prevailing rules of the game tend to discriminate against the poor and disadvantaged. Here, the point is not whether the education system will be able to contribute to reverse social inequalities but to what
extent it will reinforce them. The two questions are very much related and underpin the main stories discussed in this section of the paper.

The way in which institutional mechanisms such as the ones described here operate is very dependent on local conditions: history, politics, and culture matter. This is particularly true in a decentralized setting such as the one prevailing in Argentina. By concentrating the empirical analysis on two jurisdictions, we are gaining in our capacity to identify the specific mechanisms through which social exclusion operates within the education system—even if by doing so we, naturally, lose some of the large diversity that exists between Buenos Aires and the rest of the country.

**Rules influencing the distribution of students.**

Formally, in Argentina, public schools are open to all students. Each public school has an area of influence (*radio escolar*) which determines who has priority to be enrolled. One of the questions that need to be addressed in analyzing institutional arrangements is whether the rules of the game under which the education system operates tend to promote school segregation according to social status or income level. In other words, what are the mechanisms through which children from poor households (or some other measure of socio-economic status) tend to concentrate in certain schools and have low representation in other schools?

It is worth starting by recognizing that the ability to pay tuition acts as a strong mechanism of social segmentation between public and private schools. Private education represents a large share of the system in the two jurisdictions and, increasingly, high-income groups have tended to leave the public system in favor of private schools. National data show that at the primary level (grades 1-7), for example, 64% of the children from the highest income quintile attend private schools. The corresponding percentage for the lowest income quintile is 7%.

As will be discussed later in the paper, the particular way in which public subsidies for private education are allocated is not contributing to counterbalance this type of segmentation. But the center of the analysis here is on public schools and the mechanisms through which segmentation operates in the state sector.
There are strong spatial/location factors in operation that influence the degree of "social integration" in public schools. The poor concentrate in certain neighborhoods and correspondingly schools in those neighborhoods tend to have a high concentration of poor children. In the City of Buenos Aires there are strong geographical cleavages between southwest and the rest in terms of a variety of social indicators.\(^{20}\) While it is certainly the case that there are pockets of poverty in other parts of the City, the social gaps between, for example, Boca/Barracas and Belgrano/Nuñez are striking. In the Province the difference between the so-called first and second belts are also well documented. But, within the Partidos and school districts (some of them as large and populated as a medium size city) the geographical divide between barrio de clase alta, barrio de clase media, barrio popular and villa is strong. All the schools visited for this project were located near villas or barrios populares.

This type of, geographical, segmentation is clearly exogenous to the education system. Children wearing uniforms (guardapolvos) often get a lower bus fare and thus try to travel to more distant but better schools (and in some cases parents do use that option as suggested in Box 1). Nevertheless, the lack of an official school-bus system limits dramatically the option of going to schools outside the immediate neighborhood, particularly for students in elementary schools.

But beyond the location factors, there appear to be some important selection mechanisms that operate at the school level. While the formal rules indicate that schools are open to all children in the radio escolar, in reality, school authorities play an important role by managing cupos or entry slots.\(^{21}\) Within certain limits, schools seem to have flexibility in determining class sizes and thus may reduce the overall number of cupos as a rationing mechanism. To what extent they exercise that flexibility is an empirical question I couldn't address appropriately during the field work. Nevertheless,

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\(^{20}\) Cohen (1999) identifies "five cities" within Buenos Aires. What he calls the "southwest corridor" includes 8 districts (Boca, Barracas, Pompeya, among others) and slightly more than a third of the population.

\(^{21}\) One way in which the formal rules tend to disfavor the poor is because those students that have siblings in the school or attended school for kindergarten (a lower proportion among low-income households) have priority over other children at enrollment time.
interviews with school directors, district administrators, parents and experts suggest that school authorities do exercise significant discretion in assigning cupos.

There is a perception among many of those interviewed that in schools located in middle-income neighborhoods cupos are managed selectively in favor of children from relatively favored backgrounds. Although not sufficiently documented, there has been a historical pattern whereby those with the right connections (mostly liberal professionals as business people have tended to abandon public schools altogether) circumvent the radio escolar restrictions and find cupos for their children in the few “elite” public schools. To what extent this historical pattern continues to prevail is a subject of disagreement among those interviewed.

Perhaps more significantly, the presence of dire forms of discrimination based on nationality, social status or skin-color in the way cupos are distributed is something that came up in every interview held during field-work. The existence of several schools in the same radio escolar creates the conditions for this type of selection process.

While the most explicit references to discrimination were made in the City, the existence of similar tendencies in the “flagship” elementary schools in each district (typically being the Escuelas No. 1) in the province was also identified in the interviews.

This type of practice may well be reflecting the prevailing prejudices among teachers and directors (“poor students do not learn” or “poor students behave badly”) or plain racism. But it may as well be a reaction to the objective fact that schools receive little support from system authorities to help them dealing with the challenges of teaching to children whose first language is not Spanish or students that experience difficult family conditions.

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22 The inflow of immigrants (and the reactions of public schools) came up as an important issue particularly in the City. In addition to the traditional migration from neighboring Latin American countries, public schools in certain areas of the City are now receiving students from countries as diverse as Korea and Russia.

23 It is not unusual to find several schools at short distance from each other in the City. For example, one of the schools I visited is literally across the street from another school. Many years ago one was a school for girls and the other for boys. Today both schools are gender-integrated but there appears to be a social (rather than a gender-based) selection process. In particular, immigrant children seemed to concentrate in one of the schools.
Box 2: Isla Talavera: Success in an unusual setting

The school is in the Delta del Paraná which, while not far from the City (less than a 2 hour drive from the Presidential Palace), is rural and isolated. The inhabitants of the islands are extremely poor and non-integrated into the formal economy. Experts recognize this school as exemplary and its special character jumps at you: it’s building, good teachers, motivated students. The school has been extremely successful in mobilizing resources from the province, the municipality and private sources.

Beyond the anecdote (a heart-warming one though) the case of Talavera also highlights some important facts about the way the education system functions in Buenos Aires. There are significant resources for education which are made available for schools in need. But the process by which those resources are being allocated is not totally transparent, rational and, perhaps, even effective. The school in Talavera is getting what it does due to its success (partly because people like to support successful experiences and partly because they are a terrific case to show to visitors and the press). Other less successful (or skillful) schools are unlikely to receive this kind of support. Furthermore, many of the targeted programs from which Talavera benefits are mobilized thanks to the presence of a very pro-active school director -- in schools with less-proactive directors, for example, many kids that would qualify for fellowships may not even know about such opportunities. What the case of Talavera illustrates is how, when the conditions are right, a virtuous circle can be established in the funding from different sources. One can only wonder whether greater school autonomy, particularly in urban areas where there is a private sector that can contribute and municipal governments with resources, might create opportunities for similar examples of synergy.

However, at the same time that Talavera is receiving this support, the lack of books is very noticeable as is the difficulty its teachers face in order to receive training: being a full-day school and so far from training centers, teachers would have to take those courses at night. There might be lots of funds to build schools but not enough to help poor schools offering a higher quality education. Our visit highlighted also the sense of loneliness felt by staff in the school. The institutions in the system (e.g. the Province, the inspectors, the school board) are "somewhere out there" and, in the best case are seen as sources to tap for funds or, in the worst case, hurdles to avoid.

In some cases, rules that were designed to help schools such as this have in fact created further difficulties. For example, the school is considered to be in a highly unfavorable zone and, thus, teachers are paid a significant salary bonus. However, as pensions are calculated on the basis of salaries received during the last three years of work, this has created an incentive for older, close-to-retirement teachers to apply for positions at this school. Many of them tend to lack motivation and have a hard time adapting to the dynamic and innovative spirit of this school. Given their seniority, they tend to have priority in selecting positions and school authorities have simply no say in the selection process. What, on paper, appears to be a rule that should benefit them in practice has become a serious problem for the school.

The success of this school is due to the fact that they developed a pedagogical project appropriate to the environment in which these kids live, both as a way of giving meaning to abstract knowledge and motivating the value of learning by conveying skills that they can appreciate. At the same time, the school has become a center that supports the kids and their families in a variety of ways. The interesting thing is that this was "home made" rather than the construction of a team of external experts. Much of this is due to the energy and leadership of Estela, the school director. It is impossible not to wonder what would happen if Estela were to retire and a less committed director were to replace her. Where are the checks and balances, one wonders. Is it in a reformed group of inspectors? Or is there a way of empowering parents to play that role? What would it take? Is the project of school autonomy (with parents as administrators) a utopia in these
settings? Can you build these capabilities “on the job” or only after a long period of holding their hands? From an institutional perspective, these seem to be the critical questions. In other words, how to create the conditions for more Estelas and more Escuelas Talavera without relying in miracles or in cloning.

The other instrument used by schools to select students is through the use of transfers or referrals (pases) to other schools. These are officially linked to behavior problems or low academic performance. It typically involves a recommendation to the child’s parents by a teacher or counselor (gabinete psicopedagógico). There is some evidence that students from low-income families tend to be over-represented among that “transferred” (Di Marco, 1999). Cristina’s story (Box 4) does not seem to be unusual.

These mechanisms of social exclusion are often supplemented by tendencies to self-exclusion. Over time subtle codes are developed though which students tend to self-select themselves into certain schools. It is quite possible that past instances of discrimination helped creating those codes. But, the presence of friends or a “non-discriminatory” school director seemed to be a powerful pulling factor in several of the schools I visited (see Box 3).

In some cases the combination of flexible (or unclear) rules and relative school autonomy to select students facilitates discriminatory practices. More generally, however, segregation or segmentation tendencies are linked to broader social forces that the education system does not seem to recognize and even less be prepared to counterbalance.

24 Some interviewees mentioned another mechanism: in those occasions in which new schools open in the area (because of a growing school-age population) teachers tend to use the opportunity to “get rid of the problem students”. An older woman I interviewed (who is in charge of her young grandson) told me how she and some of the other families leaving in the area felt discriminated in the neighborhood school and used the opportunity of a new school opening a few blocks away to move their kids. In this case, the “expulsion” took place previously and in a “slow” manner.

25 These tendencies surfaced quite strongly during the implementation of the EGB in the Province. The reform incorporated a significant number of students that had dropped out of the system to the 8th and 9th grades. In many cases, as the construction of new classrooms in formerly primary schools proceeded, the 8th and 9th grades operated as a semi-independent unit within already functioning secondary schools. Many conflicts developed in those schools that felt their “elitist” status challenged. The interviews indicated there were repeated cases of plain and simple discrimination against the newly incorporated students (“los villeros”). The reform implementation had not, in many cases, fully taken into account those prejudices and prepared school authorities and personnel to deal with them.
Rules influencing the distribution of human resources.

The "quality" of the teaching staff (teachers and directors) is one of the most important factors, if not the most, influencing the quality of education received by students. At any given point in time, in every school and every district, there are "good" and "not-so-good" teachers. The definition of what is a good teacher (or good teaching) and how to identify one is a matter that escapes the purpose of this paper and my own capacities. The question to be addressed is whether the prevailing rules of the game are working against (or in favor) of poor schools -- i.e. schools with high concentration of poor children-- in the sense that it encourages (discourages) "better teachers" to move toward non-poor schools (that as a result in a type of self-fulfilled prophecy, indeed become the "best schools").

As emphasized in Section 2 of the paper, when it comes to the critical question of filling vacancies/positions, the public system is, de facto, run by the teachers. Neither public school authorities, nor parents or administrators have, in practice, the power to decide who teaches where. The teachers' ability to pick and chose is directly related to how many points she/he has. Given the way the point system works it is those teachers with the most experience (that is, more years of work), more training (that is, those that have taken more courses), higher ranked diplomas and better performance (as measured by the doubtful evaluations by school directors) that are first in the queue.

The implication is that the distribution of teachers within the school system depends essentially on the motivations of individual teachers and the incentives the education system might offer them.

Perhaps a good way to approach this theme is by asking who teaches in poor schools (e.g. schools serving a villa). Several authors have raised the point that the points system tend to generate a pattern in which it is the youngest and least experienced that go to poor areas (Braslavsky and Tiramonti, 1995)]. Many schools in the periphery are, sadly, happy with whatever they can get. Detailed information for one municipality in

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26 In one of the secondary schools I visited, a new English teacher had started working that morning: a 21-year-old, with no teaching diploma whose command of the subject was limited to five in an English academy.
the Province (IIEP, 1999) offers a picture consistent with those views. The average number of years of experience falls from more than 12 years in schools in "favorable zones" to somewhat more than 8 years in schools in highly "unfavorable zones". Within those schools in "favorable zones" those with the highest percentage of students that received meals at school (a proxy for poverty) have less experienced teachers (the average is one year lower). The same information also gives a sense of the qualifications of teachers. Among the schools in favorable zones, 75% have at least one teacher that has a university level teaching diploma. Within that group, the same percentage is 100% for those schools with no students receiving meals and only 33% among those in which all students receive meals. Among the schools in the less favorable zones, only 25% of the schools have at least one teacher with a university diploma.

In many circumstances, schools in poor neighborhoods become the entry point into the school system: a young teacher's first job that, over time, will lead her to more prestigious and comfortable positions. In that sense, the poor become a sort of training center for the schools that "really matter" (Tedesco and Parra, 199x). The experience of the secondary school described in Box 3 offers an interesting counter-factual. Established not long ago as a pilot school, its director had, for a short period of time, the authority to select teachers. Being aware of how tough the social environment would be, she used that unusual authority to hire very experienced teachers. The promise of being part of a group of motivated and well-prepared teachers working on a pilot project seemed to be enough of a motivation for this group.

Several "types" of motivations leading teachers to chose to work in a poor area were identified during the interviews. A first type of teacher is what several people called the teacher with "compromiso" or "with social-conscience". Fortunately, although most people interviewed expressed some form of despair about the degree to which the teaching profession is still idealistically motivated, there still seems to be quite a lot of...
"compromiso". However, as an interviewee that is now in a high management position after forty years of working as an educator said, "compromiso does not mean quality". In her view, for many of these teachers the core education functions seem to be quickly taken over by the social-work functions that their "compromiso" pushes them to assume.

A second type of motivation to select a poor school seems to be associated with the search for "power" or "control". Some of the interviewees made the observation that poor parents are more "docile" and less challenging of the school’s or the teachers’ authority (Di Marco, 1999). As a result, for some teachers, working in poor neighborhoods becomes an attractive way of retaining the traditional authoritarian role that is being challenged by more active middle class parents, particularly since the advent of democracy. The issue of whether or how parents participate in poor schools is further discussed in the subsection on school accountability below.

Are monetary incentives an effective source of motivation for good teachers to accept positions in poor schools? The Province, for example, classifies schools according to how “unfavorable” their situation is. Teachers then receive a pay bonus depending on how the school ranks in a scale from 1 to 5. One limitation of the system is that it tends to reward mostly distance from urban centers rather than the social conditions of students attending the school. While there is an association between the two, the system tends to offer little monetary incentives to teachers working in schools located in highly populated urban slum areas.

More generally, and given the absence of any tool by which the capacity of applying teachers can be evaluated, it is not clear that those that are motivated by these incentives are, indeed, the "best teachers". In the view of a high-ranking leader of the teachers’ union this type of incentive tends to bring out the “worst instincts” from teachers. But, even if one discounts this "non-materialistic" argument, at least in some cases the bonuses appear to be generating some perverse incentives. For example, given that amount of pensions are determined by the salaries (including bonuses) received during the last three years of work, “unfavorable” schools are particularly attractive to teachers close to retirement. This was the situation faced by one of the schools I visited (see Box 2) that tended to attract older teachers that were less flexible and motivated to
adapt to the innovative approaches the school had so successfully developed and implemented.\textsuperscript{29}

Beyond salary incentives, overall working conditions appear to have an important motivating effect on the decision of teachers to stay in a particular school, even if it is located in an "unfavorable" area. In that sense, there seems to be a high degree of heterogeneity among schools in similar socio-economic strata. School directors (their management style and approach to teachers and students) tend to have significant influence on those working conditions. The contrast between the schools described in Boxes 1 and 2 is illustrative. Unfortunately, the rules of the game governing the matching of schools and directors does not seem to be essentially more pro-poor (or less anti-poor) than that of teachers.

Overall, it is perhaps somewhat daring to argue that, as a norm, poor schools get "worse" teachers.\textsuperscript{30} The point, however, is to notice that neither of the two jurisdictions has found a way to collectively, rationally and effectively provide poor schools with the human resources they need. While it is also unfair to, based on the limited evidence presented here, dismiss the value of monetary incentives, at a minimum it is imperative to recognize that they should not be considered in isolation of various other incentives that are in operation. From a policy perspective, perhaps the most interesting question is whether changes in the rules governing the appointment (and reporting) of school directors have the potential of improving the quality of human resources working with poor children even if the rules applying to teachers are not changed.

\textsuperscript{29} Braslavsky and Birgin (1995) make a similar point.

\textsuperscript{30} It is, in fact, questionable whether there is a correlation between "points" teachers accumulate and the quality of teaching. Some experts argue that, in the Argentine context, older teachers (with many years of experience and many accumulated courses leading to high points) may be in fact worse than some of the new generation teachers, particularly to work in disadvantaged settings. Whether this is the case or not should be subject for future research.
Box 3: Segregation and despair in a secondary school

On a rainy winter night I drove across town to visit a night secondary school in Villa Lugano that was suggested to me as an example of some of toughest cases in the City. The school is located across the street from Villa No.21 from where all the students come. The school was created in 1990 to serve the villa and operates in the building of a primary school.

The material and social conditions in the villa are extremely bad: low incomes, poor habitat conditions, pervasive health problems, family breakdown, drugs, violence and crime. There used to be a local cooperative that provided services and support but it fell in disgrace after one of the leaders stole money from it. A large percentage of people in the villa are immigrants from Bolivia.

Very few of the kids from the villa go to other schools in the area. The fact that this is the only night school makes it attractive to those students that work during the day. But those are not a majority. It is no secret that very often the availability of cupos (vacancies) depends on the student’s skin color. But, according to the school director, a deeper process of self-selection is operating: these kids feel out of place (“sapos de otro poso”) in the other schools and prefer to come to this school to be among “their peers”.

She tells me the story of a young woman that was the star student in this school. She went on to teacher’s school (the only case she knew of any graduate from this school that continued studying) but had difficulties adapting to the new environment: she felt she didn’t belong in this new environment. According to the school director, one of the key challenges the school faces is the serious lack of self-esteem by most of its students. While visiting the school, a 16-year-old student says to the director, in front of all the class, the teacher and myself, “I am not worth anything”. The implicit segregation under which these kids live (most of them have never even seen downtown Buenos Aires, a 20 minute freeway drive) is contributing to this sense of despair. Isolation and the oppressiveness of the environment operate as an exclusionary mechanism.

The school director is a social activist that has assumed the role of motivating and guiding teachers, supporting students, negotiating with the system to find responses to the misery of the villa. As this was created as a pilot school, the teachers’ statute was not operational during an initial period. This gave her the power to attract committed, experienced and motivated teachers that she personally selected, an option she no longer has. Now, she has no control over who is sent to the school: many teachers come, see the neighborhood and leave.

While motivated and committed, the staff at this school lacks the tools to effectively support these students. The monitors or preceptores are former students with no special training, there is no social worker in the school, and the training received by the teaching staff—in the words of the director—is worthless. The supervisors support them (mostly by not enforcing bureaucratic rules the school is unable to abide by) but have little else to offer.

On my way back, I cannot stop thinking about a poem written by a student that I read in the director’s office. In this poem, the student talks of her dreams of a wonderful world of friendship and love. But, as she wakes up, she realizes she is not worth enough to be part of that world. With tears in her eyes, the school director had spoken about the impotence she feels when trying to fight against this sadness, despair and depression. Neither she nor the school is equipped for that challenge.

Rules influencing the distribution of material resources

The financing of public education in the two jurisdictions, as in the rest of the country, is highly centralized. Schools essentially do not handle funds, with the exception of small amounts channeled through the cooperadoras for specific purposes. In that sense, what they get is, in most cases, in-kind support. Over the recent past,
though, there is an emerging pattern of transferring more funds to schools (e.g. the decentralization of a portion of the maintenance budget in the City, or some of the funds from the Plan Social Educativo). However, there seems to be a lack of quantitative analyses that look at the distribution of resources according to socio-economic status of schools.\textsuperscript{31}

The following analysis does not address that failure, as it is essentially of a qualitative nature. The motivating question is whether poor students get less (that is, less than non-poor kids do and/or less than what they need) in the way of infrastructure and school materials.

Historically there have been no systematic efforts to consider the needs of the poor when making decisions about the geographical location of schools. One good example is the distribution of full-day elementary schools (\textit{jornada completa}) within the City. Their introduction was the result of an experiment that did not have children from low-income households as the primary beneficiaries (Aguerrondo, 1993).\textsuperscript{32} Today, the geographical distribution of schools with \textit{jornada completa} is biased toward middle class neighborhoods. For example, in the area of Villa Lugano, with a high concentration of poor households, only 3 of the 13 elementary schools have \textit{jornada completa}, a much lower proportion than in other (middle class) areas of Buenos Aires. Students in schools with \textit{jornada simple} are further disadvantaged because in order to accommodate the lunch schedule of the two schools that operate in the building their classes are cut short by half an hour every day.

Efforts to redress these geographical imbalances have happened in the past and are taking place right now. The Province initiated an ambitious program of

\textsuperscript{31} In general, these types of analyses tend to look at provincial-level data. An exemption, for the case of the municipality of Campana is IIEP (1999).

\textsuperscript{32} There are very few schools with \textit{jornada completa} in the Province. The CECs operate as centers that offer complementary pedagogical support after school. I could not find the information that would allow to analyze whether they are strategically located. In the case of the San Fernando district, there are no CECs operating.
construction/expansion as part of its education reform. The City is planning to build new secondary and pre-schools in the southern districts where the major gaps remain. But, talking to experts and policy-makers it is unavoidable to get a sense that many of these efforts are sporadic and not systematic. Furthermore, at least in the view of some of the stakeholders, the process by which these decisions are made and implemented is not completely transparent, a fact that compounds the sense that many of these decisions represent less a systematic effort to address the needs of those most in need and more short-term political investments.

As, if not more, important as the decisions on construction/location of new schools, are the rules that govern decisions about infrastructure maintenance. Segmentation according to social status operates at least at two levels. Routine school maintenance is highly dependent on support from cooperadoras, that is, from parents. The dependence on parental contributions severely diminishes the capacity of poor schools to keep up with maintenance activities unless a strong compensatory mechanism involving public funds is in place.

However, funding for maintenance remains generally insufficient and its management highly centralized in both jurisdictions. Contrary to what might be expected, this centralization is not conducive to the type of compensatory action needed, as it tends to be highly susceptible to influence by well-placed interested parties. Maintenance needs in well-located, “respectable” schools, are quickly identified and acted upon after the mandatory phone call to the authorities in charge from an influential parent or relative. It is easier, in this system, to disregard leaking roofs in marginal schools. The presence of consejos escolares in the Province does not seem to be making any difference vis-à-vis the City in these matters. For one, their role seems to be limited to lobbying activities when it comes to problems with school infrastructure as they don’t really manage funds for that purpose. Furthermore, in many cases, the districts under their responsibility are so large that one could speculate that even if they had the funds a similar logic of influence would be reproduced.33

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33 Cooperadoras in some districts in the Province receive some minor funds from the Consejo to pay for cleaning materials, gasoline for heating, and other expenses of that sort. Funds are earmarked for each specific purpose. The head of a cooperadora complained that she had too much money to buy gasoline and
More or less similar patterns are observed when it comes to materials (textbooks, maps, etc.). As in the case of maintenance, cooperadoras play an important role with the consequent inequities among schools. The lack of transparency mentioned earlier does not seem to be any different in this area. However, demand in this area by school authorities appears to be less than for routine maintenance and thus, the response even less forthcoming.

Is the supply of private education compensating the insufficient supply of public education? The only case that could be used as a reference is that of subsidized schools: schools that receive official funding to pay for teacher salaries. An important segment of those schools are the escuelas parroquiales, religious schools managed by neighborhood churches. Their clientele has, historically, been middle class families and not the urban poor. In part this reflects the fact that these schools have grown from initiatives by local churches in middle class barrios seeking alternatives to public schools rather than an institutional effort on the part of the Church to serve low-income groups. The funding system (mostly reactive and following an inertial approach) does not contribute to changing this pattern.

Donations and volunteerism as means of supporting public schools in poor neighborhoods/areas is more the exception than the rule (see Box 2 for a positive example). In general terms, business and NGOs are typically absent.

Rules influencing teaching approaches.

Several interviewees raised a point that was not present in my initial considerations. Their argument was that, besides the problems in terms of the inputs poor schools have access to, there are some serious pedagogical deficiencies: teaching approaches themselves are not pro-poor. More specifically that there isn’t enough investment in the development and application of teaching methods and approaches that address the specific needs of children from low socio-economic strata. Teachers are not well

not enough to pay for cleaning materials. The solution was to ask the provider of gasoline to buy the cleaning materials and prepare one bill.

According to some analysts the escuelas parroquiales are increasingly serving an impoverished middle class that has difficulties affording other (less subsidized) segments of the private school system. No quantitative analyses are available to test this proposition.
prepared and do not receive sufficient pedagogical support to teach to kids from disadvantaged backgrounds. Furthermore, that the use of inadequate pedagogical models reinforces the preconceived notions—common among many teachers—that children with disadvantaged backgrounds cannot learn, regardless of what the teacher does. What ensues is, in terms used by analysts, “containment without learning”. Schools that offer mostly alternatives to “life in the streets” but little in the way of learning or even socializing for the job market.

These forces have a negative impact not only in schools with overwhelming number of poor children but also in schools in which the poor are a minority but teachers don’t know how to integrate (and work with) them.

Accepting these observations, from an institutional perspective, the question is which are the rules that limit the development and application of alternative pedagogic/teaching approaches.

Several observers speak of a generalized deterioration of the teaching profession. Real wages of teachers, the argument goes, fell substantially during the 80s and stabilized but not recovered substantially during the nineties. Working conditions have worsened. As a result, the teaching profession has stopped being an attractive alternative to middle class students (that in the past brought to the profession the relatively high levels of human capital of Argentina’s large and sophisticated middle class). Today, the main attraction of the teaching profession is job stability, a factor that appeals mostly to students from less favored socio-economic backgrounds. These teachers, however, bring with them significantly lower levels of human capital (Tiramonti, Braslavsky and Filmus, 1995).

This trend has not been compensated by increased pedagogical support to teachers in the form of training, tools and models, and direct assistance from supervisors and experts. In part, these are expressions of a transitional period in the Argentine education system in which the functions of the national and provincial governments have been redefined. It appears that in these transitional periods there is sometimes an emphasis on the “brick and mortar” and “funding” issues at the expense of the more intrinsically
pedagogic ones.\textsuperscript{35} The fact that authorities in both jurisdictions have started developing programs and interventions specifically oriented to address some of these gaps offers some support to the hypothesis that these are transition problems. Examples of these trends are the PROFEI program in the Province (that offers technical assistance on pedagogic and managerial aspects to poor secondary schools) and the ZAP program in the City that provides special training for teachers working with poor children as well as supports school level pedagogical initiatives.

Another way in which the rules of the game seem to be working against the development and implementation of “pro-poor” pedagogies is by constraining the opportunities for experimentation at the school level. Such experimentation and innovation is happening, as for example in the case of the school described in Box 2. However, in order to experiment these schools have often to bend the rules and guidelines. Quite often, supervisors and inspectors tend to see those experiments with suspicion and may try to block them.

Overall, the underlying tension is one between a system that combines excessive bureaucratic control and pedagogical abandonment and the alternative of autonomy with effective support.

**Rules influencing the accountability of schools.**

Who, within the education system, is responsible for the learning of children from poor households? Who cares and who faces the consequences of poor outcomes? As in any education system, particularly decentralized ones, this is \textit{de facto} a shared responsibility. Under current institutional arrangements the higher administrative/policy levels of the system (the national ministry, the heads of the education offices in the Province and the City) bear mostly a political responsibility. The type of instruments they have (and use) are “macro” by nature: the expenditure rules, human resource

\textsuperscript{35} This is what happened in the case of the reform in the Province, according Balduzzi and Suarez (1999). In their view, the main limitation of the reform is that it did not include pedagogical support: considering that the kids that were brought back to the system were from at-risk groups (older, poorer, etc.) special pedagogic interventions should have been developed.
policies and others considered in the previous sub-sections. The consequences of bad outcomes are felt essentially through the political process—if at all.

Those “macro” instruments may create (or more often not) the basic conditions for schools to make the key decisions and deliver the type of education poor children need if they are to surmount the hard conditions under which they live. But, will they? In other words, do current rules of the game make schools accountable for responding to the needs of children from disadvantaged households?

The accountability vis a vis the high-level authorities in the system (e.g. “La Plata” in the case of the Province) is hardly binding. It is unrealistic—even if all the macro rules were in place—to expect the central authorities in these very large systems to be in a position to enforce such accountability rules. This type of “vertical” accountability is highly dependent on the role played by supervisors, inspectors and other agents of the center. A majority of those people interviewed expressed serious doubts about both the capacity and the motivation (incentives) of those agents to enforce quality standards or other type of results on schools. But, even if this perspective is dismissed as too negative for the schooling system as a whole, it may still be valid for poor children in particular. Neither of the two jurisdictions has even made a “concern for the poor” a basic aspect of the terms of reference for these agents, let alone given them the tools and capabilities to carry on that mandate.

Other forms of accountability that rely less on vertical controls require the presence of strong voices within each school community with an interest in defending the “learning” interests of disadvantaged children. Cases of groups of teachers that are playing that role in a type of self-managed accountability arrangement are known to exist. But given the current “macro” rules discussed above, this type of arrangement is more a testimony of the altruistic motivations of those teachers than a logical outcome most poor children could rely on.

Under these circumstances, the only other control instance would be parents. They, after all, are the ones that have a vested interest in the education of their children. The cooperadora is, in reality, the only formal means through which parents participate in the school business. While its formal powers are very limited, as are their means in most
cases, the *cooperadoras* are very often the only institutionalized presence that may counterbalance decisions and actions by school authorities.

Even among our small sample of schools differences in the activity level of *cooperadoras* was noticeable. The contrast between an elementary school in which a group of half-a-dozen mothers (and grandmothers) was meeting inside the school facilities during regular school-hours and a nearby secondary school in which parents do not show up unless they are officially summoned by the director is, perhaps, symptomatic. Even if their main task is to decide on how best to use the few hundred pesos they have and organize a special party for the kids, in the first school the mothers are a constant presence the school director cannot dismiss.

Clearly the rules of the game could provide more incentives and opportunities for parental participation by, for example, entrusting *cooperadoras* with more responsibilities, as both jurisdictions have been doing over the recent past. But the fact of the matter remains that the capacity of poor parents to organize themselves to participate within a state institution is quite often very limited.

That capacity is directly linked to the level of social capital in the community. In the elementary school referred to above, while there has been an inflow of new, poor, families in the recent past (mostly migrants) there is a well-established community in the neighborhood that proves to be an important factor explaining the relatively high level of participation. The community in the other school not only is relatively newer but also recently experienced a major negative shock to its local organization when one of its leaders stole money from the local cooperative and thus reduced the level of trust among neighbors. Social mobilization in the neighborhood is, sometimes, an important factor too. Di Marco (1999), for example, found that mothers in the City that had experience in political and/or social activism in their neighborhoods (*trabajo de base barrial*) show more capacity to reflect on what is happening in the school—a precondition for effective participation.

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36 By decentralizing funds for school maintenance in the City and involving *cooperadoras* in the definition of blueprints for new secondary school buildings in the Province.

37 One of the mothers in the *cooperadora* meeting had herself been a student in the school and her mother was participating in the meeting as well.
participation and influence. In a very different environment, authorities in one of the schools visited (see Box 2) made the training and growing empowerment of parents an important component of the school's learning strategy.

Overall, the combination of limited responsibilities and authorities in the hands of cooperadoras and the paucity of instruments to build the capacity of poor parents to participate and influence decision-making implies that this last "line of accountability" is rather weak in both jurisdictions.

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<th>Box 4: Discrimination in the Schools?</th>
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| Cristina is in her thirties and has three children. Two of the kids used to go to an elementary school that has a very good reputation and in which there is a preeminence of children of professionals. Not anymore. Cristina is down on her luck. She separated from her husband, lost her job, had to move out of her apartment and into a shelter run by a Catholic charity. At first, she tried to hide this from teachers and counselors at school. Her kids were depressed because of what was happening at home but received no special support. Their social lives also begun to suffer: they stopped going to parties and other social activities organized at school because she couldn't pay the entry fee. Eventually, she discussed it with the school counselor. At the end of the year, the counselor recommended that her kids be transferred to the other elementary school that operates in the same building arguing that their performance was not at the expected level. The children in this other school are from low-income families. The new school, in her view, is less organized, there is more noise, teachers are "less in control", etc. She feels that her children are now less motivated: in the older school there was positive peer reinforcement.

Eventually, she heard several similar stories. Like the one about a school director that proudly tells about how when she receives immigrant parents she suggests they come back in the afternoon to enroll their children. Easy ways of getting rid of them as two half-day schools operate in the building and she is in charge only of the morning school.

IV. Looking Forward

This paper was motivated by one basic question: how institutional arrangements are operating to exclude (or include) certain groups ("the poor") from quality education. The approach I followed was to focus on a set of rules (both formal and informal) that influence decisions regarding the distribution of students, teachers/directors, and material resources among schools, as well as rules influencing teaching approaches and school accountability. What has come out is a set of hypotheses suggesting that the education systems in the two jurisdictions are not designed in a way to avoid the exclusion of poor students, much less to promote their inclusion.
It is important to emphasize, however, the speculative nature of these hypotheses. Proving them will require a different approach to the one followed in this case study. This should combine both quantitative and qualitative methods. On the qualitative side, a larger sample of schools, teachers, parents and system administrators should be interviewed to validate the conclusions emerging from this case study. On the quantitative side, it is critical to document and test the patterns identified in the case study. The data collected through the *Operativos Nacionales de Evaluación* provide an excellent starting point that may be complemented with more detailed work to collect information at the school level.

In any case, from a methodological perspective, the case study offers both a simple analytical toolkit and an example of how much can be achieved applying that toolkit even with very limited time and resources. It is, naturally, up to the reader to judge the value of the outcome.

It is almost imprudent to attempt deriving policy recommendations based on this type of study. However, with all the corresponding caveats, I will move in that direction by suggesting some general areas in which, I believe, the study might have policy implications. The first area involves the critical issue of human resource management. Teachers and directors are part of the problem and need to be part of the solution. The paper has raised some questions regarding the incentive system for “good” teachers and directors to work with poor populations. The message emerging from the study is that simple solutions are unlikely to suffice or even help. The incentive system should probably deal with monetary as well as non-monetary dimensions.

A second area involves the question of school autonomy and accountability (particularly vis-à-vis parents). The paper barely scratched the surface on this important and controversial issue but suggested some of the current dilemmas: how to, at the same time, increase autonomy/flexibility of schools and the support offered to them? How to not only create opportunities for parental involvement but also to strengthen the capacity of those parents to do so.

Finally, there are some potentially important implications in terms of what can be called “education federalism”. In this area, there appears to be an important agenda for the different levels of government. The discussion on rules influencing teaching
approaches suggests a potentially important role for the national level (researching, promoting, disseminating, evaluating). The discussion on the distribution of students and both human resources and material inputs suggests the need for the Province and the City to reconsider what are the rules governing the distribution of resources within their systems with an eye on social inclusion. And the discussion on rules influencing the accountability of schools suggests the need to re-assess the need of further decentralization of management authorities.
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