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**Teaching Practises of Use of Printed Textbooks in Argentina  
Elementary Schools**

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## Introduction

School textbooks, with more or less centrality, are objects of daily use in the classroom. These are books written, designed and produced specifically by publishing houses for use in teaching and that teachers often have their students use for learning one or more subjects.

Textbook use in the classroom is linked not only to public policy<sup>1</sup>, which, for decades promoted statewide distribution of free textbooks but rather fundamentally to a historically constructed place within the school. First, it should be remembered that the textbook has been present in classrooms since the beginnings of modern school. For a long time it was the main base of teachers' daily practice and the fundamental support for student learning. In 1632, the Czech educator John Amos Comenius in his *Didactica Magna* refers to the need of books in order to carry out the method that should sustain teaching:

There is one factor which by its absence or its presence can render the whole organization of a school of no avail or can aid it in the highest degree, and that is the proper supply of comprehensive and methodical class-books. J. A. *Didactica Magna*. Cap. XXXIII (chapter 33, page 296)

A few years later he creates the *Orbis Pictus* (1654), a picture book aimed at children for learning Latin.

This book will provide a wonderful means for young children to understand much more easily than hitherto reading the letters, as all the letters in particular and the image of the animal whose cry mimics the letter are added to the symbolic alphabet characters. Instead of an alphabet that only begins with ABC or the need to spell, the child will firstly remember and highlight the energy and sound of each character to the sole view of the animal that comes from, to the point his imagination ensured by the use and daily practice will provide quick and perfect cognizance. (Quoted in Rabecq, M. (1957). "John Amos Comenius, an apostle of modern education and international understanding". Unesco Courier, Volume X, No. 11).

Textbook historians identify numerous historical roots of books used in Lutheran schools since the Lutheran Reformation and in popular Catholic schools, however, not always those books had features specifically linked to instruction.

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<sup>1</sup> Statewide distribution of free textbooks was conducted from 1993 to 1999 (Llinás 2005:77) and presently, since 2003, with the implementation of the "National textbooks and literature delivery Plan" through the Ministry of Education, intended for elementary and secondary schools across the country. The following link leads to information about the plan: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q4aUtFXvmEE&feature=player\\_embedded#at=20](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q4aUtFXvmEE&feature=player_embedded#at=20), accessed July 15, 2013.

Massive appearance of textbooks came only in the last twenty five years of the nineteenth century both in european and argentinian societies during a period of consolidation of national public education systems. Textbooks were part of the cultural infrastructure conditions that were considered necessary for the universalization of education, while, accompanied a process of massive training of readers who trusted school as the authorized agency of transmission of knowledge that was considered legitimate (Cucuzza, 2003). By means of a historical complex process it was given rise to a textbook pedagogical space and the use of uniform books.

Despite their common use in classrooms, textbooks have not always been accepted by those involved in the schooling process. During the twentieth century various progressive movements (Active Schools) have expressed disparaging reviews, which in general, have focused on a particular style of textbook, based on a fully transmissive teaching model. Therefore these criticisms refer to the objectives and contents covered by school texts, as well as the ways of teaching they induce. Innovative trends, however, did not eliminate textual mediums but they modified them, translating the criticism in the composition of new books that involved a new subject reader. The lessons of things, centers of interest and projects are some of the examples set out in books trying to translate the principles of a student-centered pedagogical conception and of the empirical and intuitive methodology (Escolano, 2006: 17). Such is the importance awarded to the school textbook, which has earned the designation of *edited curriculum* because it takes part of the overall curriculum materials involved in the content transmitted in a subject, in the sequencing of topics and often in the teaching strategies used. Their extended presence in educational institutions over time and in different latitudes, their resistance to fade from schools' prevailing practices and the variety of adjustments suffered based on the changes that occur outside the school, are remarkable. This invariant character is as a key element in the configuration of school culture (Escolano, 2006: 9).

However, the primordial role originally assigned to it in teaching has had modifications caused by, among other factors, the discussions that different pedagogical and teaching streams provided over time and also by technological advances and the new ways of reading these imply.

Researchers who have dedicated themselves to the study of curriculum and texts from different perspectives, have raised controversial discussions in recent decades. The

questions focus on the ideological distortions, educational limitations and underlying textbooks' commercial interests (Torres Santomé, 1996), as well as the technical control that has prevailed in school through textbooks and the consequent disqualification of teachers, leading to a loss of opportunities for skill development and, in some cases, to a comfortable and flexible ascription (Apple, 1997; Bonafé Martínez, 2002).

From an alternative position, José Gimeno Sacristan (1997) has conducted studies on cultural policy and market influence of textbooks in educational reforms, and warns about the need to consider the institutional reality of schools and of the teacher's work, which makes teaching materials of necessary assistance in school everyday.

The development of multimedia and new languages adds discussions on the presence and use of the textbook in school. In this regard, Roger Chartier (2001) wonders about the appearance of the e-book and the threat of disappearance of paper books. He poses, for the next decades, the likelihood of coexistence -not necessarily peaceful- between the two forms of books and three recording modes: writing, print publishing and electronic textuality. Amidst the reorganization of cultural practices it would seem more reasonable, Chartier says, to contemplate such coexistence than to grieve the inevitable loss of literacy or the reckless enthusiasm for immediate entry into a new era of communications. Along the same lines, Umberto Eco (2004), referring to textbooks, argues that the Internet provides a fantastic repertoire of information, but offers no filter to select it, while the teacher and the text share the function of transmitting not only data but, fundamentally, selection criteria.

The current cultural transformations once again challenge the permanence and the use of textbooks amidst the emergence of new pedagogies and changes in relation to the production and distribution of knowledge, the demand for new literacies and the prevailing forms of communication specific to multimedia and digital modes.

In this article we will analyze how Argentinian teachers use printed textbooks for teaching and what senses support those practices.

There is a substantial body of international (Horsley, 2006; Horsley and Walker, 2003; Lambert, 2002; Choppin, 2000; Escolano, 1998; Munakata, 1997; Johnsen, 1996; Chall and Conrad, 1991) and national (De Diego, 2006; Cucuzza and Pineau, 2003; Carbone, 2001; Romero 1999; Wainerman and Heredia, 1999; Braslavsky, 1992) research dealing with the study of textbooks from different perspectives. The results presented here seek to contribute to those relating to their use in schools.

## **Method**

The research was carried out between 2009 and 2011 in the middle sectors of Argentinian elementary schools, both state and private, located in the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires.

The methodological strategy involved the completion of six focal groups of teachers of second cycle elementary -4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade-, nonparticipant class observations and twelve in-depth teacher interviews.

Focal groups comprised thirty-five teachers organized into six groups, five depending on the use of the textbook in a specific discipline -Language, "traditional" Mathematics, constructivist approach Mathematics, Social Science and Natural Science- and one in relation to the use of a textbook comprising the four disciplines. The groups were asked about the characteristics of the moment of the book's election, the findings about the books they used at that time and the ways in which the material was used in the classroom.

Six teachers responsible for the second cycle of elementary were selected for the intentional sample. The decision for selecting this cycle is due to that one of its objectives is teaching how to study, subject that requires the use of books. In Argentina teachers have autonomy to decide on not only which textbooks to use for their students, but on the type of textbook to choose as well. This means that at each school and even within the classrooms of the same institution, frequently, books of different formats and publishing houses are used.

In the selected sample all teachers had required all students in the grade the same textbook, published by one of the top-selling publishers present in the market. In some cases it was a textbook specific to a discipline (Mathematics, Language, Natural Science and Social Science) and in other it was a textbook that gathered all four. For each teacher, class observations were made during a week in order to observe the teacher in different situations and the interaction with a variety of materials in the event there was any. In all six cases there were two in-depth interviews with each teacher. The overall basic script included questions about the experience of using textbooks, on access to books and their choice, on reading texts and on their use in the classroom.

Within the framework of the analysis and interpretive reading it was resorted to school textbooks used by the respondents themselves as to students' folders and notebooks in order to measure the productive character associated with the practices.

## Results

Six teaching practices conducted by teachers from the researched group using printed textbooks have been identified: 1) *To adapt the textbook to the needs of the group and the teacher*, 2) *To relate topics of the textbook*, 3) *To complete the contents of school texts with other written texts*, 4) *To combine teaching content of the textbook with school outings*, 5) *To select the topics of the textbook that will function as "wild-cards"* and 6) *To skip topics*.

**Practice 1.** *To adapt the textbook to the needs of the group and the teacher* is a practice that involves recreating the instructions of activities to be worked on in class, using some conceptualizations of the book to promptly accompany the activities designed by the teacher and / or orally reworking explanations of the textbook.

They -students- have the Language folder where we work some of the book questionnaires, the reading comprehension exercises ... but I give them exercises, which I get from other books and I get them to do them in a section of the folder called "Writing and language reflection workshop." It is in this section where they write, and keep drafts and drafts. Then they assemble a file systematize based on things that come out. Then, with the textbook what happens to me? Use topics coherence and cohesion, pronouns, use of connectors, when related to some of the exercises that I give to other books because the activities that have the textbook I asked is too simple, very basic. (Language teacher 5<sup>th</sup>. State school. Buenos Aires city.)

In this case, modifications are made based on the teacher's proposal where he suggests the work of drafts in the writing workshop and refers to the book only to clarify a concept.

I select proposals (from the textbook) that we carry out in the classroom. Even if I do not take into account what the book says, if the experience is useful, I adapt it to the laboratory system we have. I work with lab reports and each experience made is recorded. We work the elaboration of hypothesis with data registries, table... or they (students) assemble the experience; for instance, the other day, with "methods of separation" they devised the hypothesis, were given the materials, put together the mixture and decided which method of separation was appropriate. (Natural Science teacher 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup>. Private school. Buenos Aires city.)

At other times the adaptations are linked to the material conditions that allow the school to carry out the textbook's activity proposal, in this case the teacher adapts laboratory experiences.

There are issues on which I disagree with the explanation of the book, for example. If we go to the concept, maybe kids read it and do not come to understand. Then I'll explain using another method on the blackboard. (Mathematics Teacher 6<sup>th</sup>. State school. Haedo, Buenos Aires.)

In situations such as those posed by this pedagogue, the teacher acts as translator of the books explanations when it is considered necessary.

Practice 2. To relate topics of the textbook in order to make sense of the content to be taught throughout different years of schooling but, fundamentally, "to relate" as a way of knowing, to link with knowledge. In this case, the authority of the teacher in knowing how to teach those relationships and taking responsibility of that aspect of the role is upheld.

Then I, agree with the history and geography teacher of high school, and give the Greek mythology class. Moreover, I watch movies and examine all the elements of Greek mythology that appear in the textbook so that the boys can analyze. I find that if it is not done this way the subject is wasted and that the kids cannot do that connection alone. Since although they are connected at all times they are not able to select information. And if we show them, also, totally disconnected information, they cannot build an idea. The kid is not going to know by heart what the definition of mythology is, but he will indeed remember that this myth has to do with gods-, and if those gods have to do with the geography of that town. And once he learns the context, he learned mythology, and he will not forget. (Language Teacher 6<sup>th</sup>. Private school. Haedo, Buenos Aires.)

Other educational senses are also associated to the practice of establishing the relationships between different topics. To hook and to mix are two educational ways to refer to the process in which they connect them. In the case of teachers who use school textbooks and meet the four disciplines, the intention is to make use of the literature to "communicate" the knowledge of two subjects, for example Language and Social Science. While teachers working with textbooks in a single discipline, generally look to render the content the textbook presents more complex.

Teacher: The material I use is the Buenos Aires manual, I teach the area of Language and Social Science. I like both areas, I try to communicate them. Especially in history, I like to find texts that are related. I selected a literature book, the one of Pedro de Mendoza, that has much to "hook" on the History part, then, one can go to the story and afterwards relate it to the book information where the real story lies. It's good. (Teacher Focal group interview, users of four disciplines manual for state and private schools. Buenos Aires city and province.)

They -students- must begin to reason and to learn how to use all the grounding that one has been giving them. If I'm working with a topic, for instance it happens that I'm teaching Least Common Multiple and Greatest Common Factor and, what do we teachers do? You give them textbook exercises but the

problem is that the kid already knows that all exercises are for that topic. I think there must be something blended in the middle, obviously that's not going to be in the book, right? But as one teaches the subject, you have to mix something else that has nothing to do with it. A problem that is solved with a common division shall be mixed with another operation that has nothing to do with this. You disrupt him, because the student will want to do the same thing. (Mathematics teacher 7<sup>th</sup>. Private school. Buenos Aires city.)

**Practice 3.** *To complete the contents of school texts with other written texts* is the need and willingness mostly expressed by teachers regarding teaching and learning a subject as presented by the textbook, "There is always something missing in the textbook, then one has to go looking in another one". When teachers point out what is missing from a topic, students mainly base their analysis on a didactical mode that allows better appraisal. What is selected to complete the information comes in most cases from other textbooks.

Fourth grade's main topic is teaching about the province of Buenos Aires, and all publishers, textbooks we have seen, don't have much content about that. They usually carry two or three pages, nothing more. There is very little information and topics are specific, then you have to go looking in other textbooks and that also gets complicated. It also happens that children say the pledge of allegiance. And books don't have content to work that. And we have to go looking for stories of Manuel Belgrano, or the elements of the flag, the text of allegiance to the flag, how this text was developed ... extend the topic because you must always seek in order to expand. (Social Science Teacher 4<sup>th</sup>. Private school. Buenos Aires city.)

Folders and notebooks are nourished by the textbooks and photocopies provided by the teacher.

[The teacher distributes a photocopy with a text on renewable and non-renewable resources that does not indicate the source is acknowledged, though it is clearly from a textbook different to the one students use. She discusses it briefly.] Continuing, the teacher says:

"Well, what we are going to do now, in groups, is to see what we can get out of a forest. What is each group going to do? You will have to transform this chart (which is below the text she explained) into a text. I explained the part above; now each group will have to explain that chart to me, okay? Two minutes, something easy. In other words, you have to turn those little charts into sentences. Do you understand what needs to be done?" (Social Science teacher, 6<sup>th</sup>. Class observation fragment)

From the analysis of notebooks, folders and textbooks used by students, it is observed that the pages of the book read in class are indicated in the notebooks, instructions to be solved in the notebook are copied from book activities and parts of "theo-

ry" chapters consisting of definitions, procedures or explanations of an issue are copied.

However, in the surveyed group of teachers we found that some use various digital media to expand textbook information, for example they ask their students to seek information from the Internet, watch a video, make a visit to a virtual museum, analyze drawings and maps both in paper and virtual formats. In the following fragment, one teacher explains about ways to acquire knowledge from different sources, a task that involves, at first tensions and negotiations with students and, then, an opportunity to explore new ways of relating and reading no longer only focused on textbooks.

From the four hours of the Social Science class we work one on one in the computer room... While children do know how to use the PC wonderfully, they are not used to using it as a tool. So it's all a negotiation, "give us a minute to use Facebook", "Give us 10 minutes with MSN". It is a negotiation until they engage. But for instance, I asked them to do practical work on "Immigration"; they worked with the book and consulted websites, they were really hooked... I try to have something audiovisual because it helps a lot. In sixth grade, I selected parts of "Modern Times" by Chaplin. By each having a PC, everyone laughed at their own pace, watched it on his or her own way, and, if needed, rewound. (Social Science Teacher 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup>. Private school in Buenos Aires city.)

**Practice 4.** To combine teaching content of the textbook with school outings. As stated in the following extract from an educational outing interview, the features combined are: motivation for the outing, the possibility of experimentation, the opportunity to gather at one time content that relates to textbook chapters and to go through teaching content that teachers do not master very well in a fun way and accompanied way.

Natural science books are usually very long, they have between twelve and fifteen units. At least in my case I never managed to complete fifteen units, well given, correctly explaining physical phenomena. This school has a dynamic that is to make trips so that the outing can be the motivation or the finishing touch of a project. Here's an example: I do not like physics. So it happens that teachers teach living beings, animals, plants, vegetables, systems, and leave the physical part for the end of the year because we do not like to teach or do not know it. Then we make a trip to the Interactive Exploratorium where all physical phenomena are seen, decomposition of light, simple machines, electricity, magnetism. Before the outing you explain important knowledge, set up practical work. And incredibly, after making a visit and see these two, three, four units of the physical phenomena part, kids already have half learnt and experienced. (Natural Science and Mathematics teacher 5<sup>th</sup>. Private school, San Isidro, Buenos Aires.)

**Practice 5.** *To select the topics of the textbook that will function as "wildcards".* Teaching practice requires ongoing flexibility of the planned schedule. In the need of various resources to face what comes as unexpected, textbooks can play an important role. Using the metaphor of the game, the wildcard is the card that may have different utilities and adopt the value that teachers require.

In Social science I have to give the issue of environmental problems in the American continent but I try to place that unit when the kids are very tired or when I'm very tired. As it is a topic that is also studied in Natural science, then I think it should be shorter. So when I teach it in Social science I try to teach it shortly and briefly, as I said, like a thing that I use as a wildcard. And then, yes, in Natural science we work it harder. (Social and Natural Sciences Teacher 4<sup>th</sup>. State School. Buenos Aires city.)

On this occasion the teacher identifies textbook topics that she can teach at an appropriate moment in accordance with the availability of time, the perceived conditions of themselves and their students, the amount of content and to the ability to avoid repetition. Something similar happens with the selection of activities. For the first hour of class, teachers often propose activities that require a larger intellectual effort. But for the last few hours entertaining activities are selected. So explains a teacher:

These short activities (pointing at a wordsearch book) are fabulous. They are exercises for a short attention span and they are also useful for when one falls short of activities. (All disciplines teacher 4<sup>th</sup>. State school. Buenos Aires city.)

“Little short” activities serve to help children be quiet and still after returning from recess or to be entertained whenever the teacher does not want to begin a new topic.

**Practice 6.** *To skip topics.* Often teachers skip parts of the chapter, activities or even the entire chapter and continue with another one, as they teach a subject from the textbook. In some cases what the teacher skips is partially resumed later, in other cases skipping will involve the exclusion of the topic. In student folders as well as in interviews with teachers from all disciplines, this practice of canceling full topics is confirmed, however, it is more evident in Natural Science.

Teacher 1: I began with matter properties, water aggregation states. In reality we went on for the whole term, with water, on Earth, water pollution, water

purification. Then I followed with life in water -that I begun to give with microbes, 'invisible inhabitants, algae, and animal classification. A quick glance. I ticked "Transition environments" but already crossed out in planning because otherwise, we are unable to cover it. So now I have to prepare activities for the science fair.

Teacher 2: And I end with feeding, digestion, respiration, circulation and pressure. Actually, at school we have an organization of content, between fourth, fifth and sixth-, in order not to repeat. According to the book you have, the topics are not repeated. Some will be left out, for instance, sound is not going to be taught by anyone, but... (Natural Science teachers focal group interview from state and private schools. Buenos Aires city and province.)

Parents also influence the way the books are used. Either because the book works as an aid to parents when it comes to accompany children in the fulfillment of tasks given by the teacher and, therefore, is required to be comprehensible to them, or because it becomes a tool that allows them to control what and how the teacher teaches. One way to escape this control is to use the book alternating chapters or pages instead of performing sequential use.

I already spoke to the directress about a problem we have because there are twin siblings in different grades and I am a teacher of both. Their parents already questioned me why I asked different books for each one and why do I give more research to one than the other. (Social Science teacher 6<sup>th</sup>. Private school. Buenos Aires city.)

Kids come from working with a behavioral modality and parents also expect to see fifty topics in the folder. Parents want the book to be finished. Parents don't like the book, don't know how to help their children, don't understand it and don't understand why it doesn't bring exercises. (Mathematics with constructivist approach teacher, 5<sup>th</sup>. State school. Buenos Aires city.)

The community of parents demand that the book is used. So, I don't use the book as it is, it depends on the page being read, the exercise page that interests me. So I use different parts of the book skipped. The issue is that people (parents) understand that you start a chapter and you have to finish it but the book is not intended for that. ... (Social Science teachers focal group interview from state and private schools. Buenos Aires city and province.)

## **Conclusions**

The use of printed textbooks supposes a series of decisions by each teacher about what, how much, when and how contents and activities will be used while teaching. However, recurrence has been found among the studied teachers of six practices of use beyond the textbook type, the discipline and grade. Practices with which come nuances according to professional contexts.

Practices 1, 2, 4 and 6 (adapt, relate, combine and skip) reveal the autonomy exercised by teachers when they decide on the content to be taught, with regard to both its scope and depth. These practices have as a common denominator the simplification of the task of not only teaching but also learning. On one hand, it is aimed to better regulate the available time for teaching and the amount of content and, in turn, to help students understand more easily complex or extended contents. At the same time, in some cases, the textbook becomes a theoretical contribution to the teacher who supplements his training deficiencies especially when teaching content linked to Natural science.

Practices 1, 4 and 5 (adapt, combine and select) show that in the use of textbooks factors associated with the management of the classroom environment and motivation of children are much more important than the use of textbooks as a source of information. There is considerable concern of teachers to "capture" the world of children and incorporate their interests and tastes in teaching the essential part of the textbook, because it provides resources that teachers consider appealing to children, such stories, colorful and close to the children's cultures, and challenging play activities.

Practice 3 (complete) demonstrates the preeminence of print over the use of other media in what is sought after to complement the book. School notebooks and folders currently remain a faithful exponent of school's written culture, vindicating the supremacy of writing over other languages.

Practice 6 (skip) refers to a strategy of avoidance in relation to parents. The manual with the student notebook or folder is a means of communication between families and school on educational work. It can also become an instrument of control of the teacher's task. By using textbooks chapters in an alternate way, teachers regulate, somehow, the pressure they say they perceive from families.

Those practices of use constitute *tactics* (de Certeau, 1980) which strength lies in the subtlety, tenacity and endurance to manage to elude the rules of a limiting space as the school handbook is. The textbook defines and develops a series of topics that are subverted and altered by the teaching practices when used. You could say, then, that teachers "morph" the textbook through use.

Which are then the senses that support these practices? In short, these practices seek to resolve tensions inherent to the teaching profession: between school time man-

agement (always considered scarce) and the amount of content to teach; between the teacher's own training and knowledge to teach as prescribed by the curriculum; between children's "fun" ways of learning outside school and what the school has to offer; between teaching that contemplates new technologies and languages and school's predilection for print culture and between the need for communication between families and school and families control over teacher performance.

All these issues are linked to everyday school life where the textbook as well as taking the place of source of information is a "cultural object" that articulates relationships, on the one hand, between different actors (teachers and teachers, teachers and students, teachers and parents, students and parents) and on the other, between the conditions of each school culture (use of time and space, participation styles, classroom groupings and curricular programming configuration, among others).

In the midst of a context of cultural transformations leading to the accessibility, production and reproduction of knowledge, the validity of the textbook in classrooms today is settled mainly in its potential to assist in the teachers task contextualized in each schools culture.

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