

**Education: Reality and Discourse****Por Edgardo Zablotzky, Vicerrector, Universidad del CEMA****Buenos Aires Herald, Noviembre 16 de 2014**

According to the latest official figures, state-run elementary schools around the country lost 49,094 students in 2013. This figure marks a new record in the decline of public school enrollment, a trend that has been steady for a decade. Meanwhile, the private schools continue growing.

The poverty in Greater Buenos Aires further highlights this fact. The drop in public elementary schools reached 11% in 2013. Why? Probably due to the decision by parents who search of a better future for their kids, making economic sacrifices to afford a private school or making the decision of sending them to public schools this side of General Paz Avenue. This fact is consistent with the migration towards public schools in Buenos Aires City which, reports Silvia Montoya (Director of Education Quality Assessment for BA City), will receive on average 10% of their students from the Province of Buenos Aires, reaching 29% in Commune 12, that borders with Greater Buenos Aires (Coghlan, Villa Urquiza, Saavedra and Villa Pueyrredón).

However, national Education Minister Alberto Sileoni downplayed the issue. Moreover, in face of the presentations made at the last edition of Coloquio de Idea, the Education minister said: “We proudly display the reconstruction of the Argentine education system, the laws, the greatest number of days of school, the increase in wages, the higher investment levels.”

The dissociation between the educational reality and the official narrative is obvious. The aim of this article is to illustrate this because it is impossible to change something if it is not first admitted.

Although our level of illiteracy is below 3%, functional illiteracy is probably increasing. A person can read and write, but its human capital in today’s society is extremely limited. This hypothesis is supported by the poor results achieved in the various rounds of the PISA examinations.

When the results of PISA 2006 were known, then Education Minister Daniel Filmus stated that: “Chile and Uruguay had a tradition of hard work and consistency in their educational efforts. Argentina, on the other hand, had 34 ministers of Education in 55 years.”

For his part, Education Secretary Juan Carlos Tedesco, who replaced Filmus some days later said: “We are in a very bad situation, especially in that age bracket. But let us remember that PISA measured the educational history of students aged 15, who began high school during the crisis.” Reasonable excuses, but that will be changing in each of the subsequent rounds and, faced with the evidence provided in each of them, the minister on duty must justify why Chile has performed so much better.

Three years later, in face of the results of PISA 2009, Sileoni’s reaction was no different: “Chile leads the region because it has invested in education for 20 years, even with the tensions that this implies,” and predicted: “If we persist in investing we will surely continue to improve.”

A new excuse. It is clear that Korea or Finland, world leaders in education, have been investing in the area for years; but, as BBC News points out, no other European country has made as much progress since 2000 to date as Poland, which invests in education around 5% of its GDP. The budget is not everything, Poland is evidence of that.

On September 11, 2013 the minister of Education tweeted: “We’re not saying that we are in paradise, but we have rebuilt the educational system and we are building a different country.” In December, PISA 2012 would reflect another reality.

What was the official reaction? As it is no longer a surprise, the excuses were immediate. Sileoni said: “We have managed to maintain the levels of performance of our young people, while we incorporated 195,000 more to high school.” He emphasized that “Argentina, along with Chile, is one of the countries with the highest rate of schooling at high school level. As a society, we have made an enormous effort to include those who were historically excluded, without sacrificing the quality of learning.” Maintaining the levels of performance? Quality of learning? The minister does not say that the Argentine performance was one of the worst between the 65 participating countries. His denial of reality is constant, and not just in reference to PISA:

19/10/11: “There are thousands of students and educators who prove that Argentine public education is alive and kicking.”

2/8/12: “It is not true that high school in Argentina is in a perpetual crisis.”

4/7/13: “This province (La Rioja) is an example of how much education improved during this decade that was won: more schools, more days of class, better wages.”

16/6/14: “We celebrate the strength of the Argentine education system that is expanding and we continue working toward a public school of quality.”

As samples I think that they are enough, the dissociation between discourse and reality is evident.

It is time to admit that Argentina is part of the world and learn from those who do things better than us. Why not study the requirements to practice the profession in the leading countries of PISA assessments? Why argue, as the minister has done, that “it is incorrect and prejudiced to think that teachers have to study at a university in order to be qualified to perform their function?” Or perhaps, as Sileoni tweeted on Teachers Day in 2012: “A good teacher is an activist who is committed to his work?”

Denial of the educational reality prevents reversing it. It is essential to begin by accepting the facts; this article has tried to contribute to this goal.