

Research Article:

## **Teacher Leadership Interrogates Teaching Policy: Comparing the Voices of Low-Income Schools with National Teacher Policies in Argentina**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article analyses how low-income schools and teacher education policies in Argentina describe the idealised “good” teacher. One of the crucial foundations of teacher leadership is related to teachers’ professional abilities. This study aims to problematise the fragile discursive constructions of what counts as effective and good teaching in both low-income schools’ actors and teacher education policy documents. As previous research has confirmed teacher ability is contextual and a highly controversial topic. How low-income school actors describe, interpret and enact good teaching might differ from national teaching policy guidelines and standards. This study attempts to address the following research questions. First, what factors do low-income school actors and Argentinean educational policies highlight regarding teachers’ professional ability? Second, does a teacher’s professional ability refer to teacher leadership? Finally, what are the implications of the gap between the perspectives of low-income schools and the official teaching policy for knowledge production and educational policy? The findings provide a framework to understand the current limited status of teacher leadership in Argentina. Through the historical normalist genesis of the Argentinean educational system that fostered homogenisation as a crucial technology of schooling, and an epistemological bias that deemed the low-income perspective as unscientific the article shed light on the status of teacher leadership. Finally, the research suggests bridges to foster dialogues between teaching policies and low-income schools.

**Keywords:** Teacher leadership, low-income schools, educational policy, teaching ability

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## INTRODUCTION

Teacher leadership is a critical aspect of educational reform, and understanding the factors that contribute to effective teaching is essential for shaping educational policy. This article analyses how low-income school actors and official educational policies in Argentina describe the idealised “good” teacher. One of the crucial foundations of teacher leadership is related to teachers’ professional abilities. This study seeks to critically examine the fragile discursive constructions surrounding the notion of exceptional teaching ability within low-income schools and official educational policies. As previous research (Forde & McMahan, 2019; Liu, 2021) has confirmed teacher ability is contextual and a highly controversial topic. How low-income schools describe, interpret and enact outstanding teaching ability might differ from national teaching policy guidelines and standards.

The study addresses three research questions:

1. What factors do low-income school actors and Argentinean educational policies highlight regarding teachers’ professional ability?
2. Does a teacher’s professional ability refer to teacher leadership?
3. What are the implications of the gap between the perspectives of low-income schools and the official teaching policy for knowledge production and educational policy?

To answer these questions, we employ a qualitative methodology with a twofold strategy. First, we use a “community nomination” methodology (Ladson-Billings, 1994) to explore the low-income school perspective on the professional ability of teachers. Second, we undertake a document analysis to analyse the official policy characterisation of a “good” teacher. By using these approaches, we seek to gain a more nuanced understanding of how urban high schools in the province of Buenos Aires describe “good” teachers and how official policy documents shape the boundaries of teaching professional ability. In five schools, we conducted 167 surveys of students, 38 surveys of parents, 12 individual interviews with five principals and seven outstanding teachers, and two focus groups – one with parents and one with outstanding teachers – in five schools in the province of Buenos Aires, Argentina. Once the teachers were selected, we conducted ethnographic interviews to discuss their background, teaching philosophy, and ideas about effective teaching. This inductive approach allowed us to explore how urban high schools in low-income areas describe and interpret “good” teachers.

This study utilised a document analysis approach to examine official policy characterisation of outstanding teaching ability, focusing on the Resolution 24/07 of the Federal Council of Education that approved the National Curriculum for Training Teachers (2007) and the Resolution 337/18 that established the Frame of Teacher’s Professional Abilities (2018). These guidelines establish an ideal teacher profile and a set of valued professional skills for future teachers and teacher education programmes. However, it is important to note that this ideal image, fuelled by educational authorities, may restrict the boundaries and possibilities of what it means to be a “professional” teacher in Argentina. Nonetheless, these normative instruments do provide teachers with a framework for self-reflection and self-evaluation.

Thematic analysis (Braun, 2022) was used to examine how teaching ability was interpreted, presented, and intended to be enacted in these documents. By analysing the official policy characterisation of professional teaching ability, we aim to gain insights into how national teaching policy guidelines and standards influence the discourse around teacher leadership and professional development in Argentina.

As teachers have a key role in the success or failure of any educational reform (Cochran-Smith, 2012), it is essential to consider their perspectives on teaching and teacher leadership. By problematising the current top-down teaching policies and standards, we hope to pave the way for new teacher leadership policies to emerge.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

York-Barr and Duke (2004) wrote the initial seminar literature review from 1980 to 2004 that conceptualised teacher leadership. Although they argue the lack of consistency regarding the concept, they affirmed that “teacher leadership reflects teacher agency through establishing relationships, breaking down barriers, and marshalling resources throughout the organisation to improve student’s educational experiences and outcomes” (York-Barr & Duke, 2004, p. 263). In addition, they endorsed a wide notion of teacher leadership stating that can be enacted through a variety of formal and informal positions, roles and channels of communication.

A second foundational study was the review of literature from 2004 to 2013 conducted by Wenner and Campbell (2017). As a starting point, they defined teacher leaders as “teachers who maintain K-12 classroom-based responsibilities, while also taking on leadership responsibilities outside the classroom” (Wenner & Campbell, 2017, p. 140). One of their main findings was the lack of studies that relate teacher leadership with social justice and equity issues. Hence, our research aims to fill that gap by exploring how low-income schools understand teacher leadership.

The third comprehensive literature review is conducted by Nguyen et al. (2020). Their study from 2003 to 2017 analysed 150 empirical articles published in Scopus journals. They used a broader conceptualisation stating that “teacher leadership can happen within and beyond the classroom” (Nguyen et al., 2020, p. 61). From their review, they established five factors that influence teacher leadership: school culture, school structure, principal leadership, peer relationships, and person-specific factors. In our study, we used those dimensions to analyse our data.

One of the few consensuses of teacher leadership is the focus on influence rather than a formal role in the school. According to Cooper et al. (2015, p. 87) beyond role-specific duties or titles (such as department chair or grade-level leader), teacher leadership rests with the ability of the teacher to work with the principal, to build community, to support teachers, and to determine, implement, or make manifest a school-wide vision for schooling. In our research, we follow Cooper et al.'s (2015) insight about the relevance of influence to define teacher leadership. Since, as we will develop later, teacher leadership is still an incipient concept in Argentina, positive teacher influence within and beyond the classroom

was the key element we used in our study to identify teacher leadership in schools and policy documents.

Finally, a key concept that emerges from the research is teacher agency understood as the teachers' ability, "that enables individuals (and, to some, collectives) to make free or independent choices, to engage in autonomous actions, and to exercise judgement in the interests of others and oneself" (Campbell, 2012, p. 183). According to Biesta et al. (2015), teacher agency is an ecological construct not a property of specific teachers but is always related to the context expressing "a quality of the engagement of actors with temporal-relational contexts-for-action, not a quality of the actors themselves" (Biesta et al., 2015, p. 626).

## **METHODOLOGY**

To select teacher leaders, we followed a community nomination approach. It is argued that, after decades of failed attempts at education reforms, it is time to listen to the key protagonists: the schools. Community nomination is a strategy that seeks to select research participants—in this study teacher leaders—through direct contact with the community where the study is conducted. It is a model of African feminist inspiration, based on the premise that the school has a voice, resources, and resilience. The approach describes an "emic perspective that captures the values of the community with regard to a particular condition" (Cooper & McIntyre, 1993, p. 50). At the same time, it seeks to disrupt the traditional distinction of the researcher as knowing the meanings and qualities of a "good teacher" and the "other" as a passive person who only awaits the recommendations of the foreign expert. The insider-outsider debate has been theorised in social sciences and there is a consensus that the previous essentialism distinction—insider vs. outsider—is no longer valid (McNess et al., 2015). On the contrary, "researchers take on different positionings dependent on the situation that we may be in, the people we are interacting with and familiarity of the linguistic and socio-cultural norms" (Milligan, 2016, p. 240).

To select teacher leaders, we focused on teachers that showed positive influence within and beyond the classroom. Hence, we asked students, principals, and parents. This wide range of actors allowed us to select teachers whose positive influence went beyond the classroom. To analyse the enactment of teacher leadership comprehensively, we used the three factors: individual, organisational and societal that shaped teacher leadership developed by Liu et al. (2021).

### **The Site and School Selection**

This field study was conducted in 2018 and 2019 and focused on low-income high schools in the province of Buenos Aires, Argentina. To select the school, we used geographic area criteria that included neighbourhoods of recent migrants, traditional working-class neighbourhoods, heterogeneous popular neighbourhoods, and urban ghettos (Kaztman, 2001), along with socio-economic criteria used by PISA. As for "schools addressing the underprivileged sectors," we understand that phrase as "those in which the average student or the socio-economic status of the school is below the

mean socio-economic level of the average student in the country” (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD]. 2012, p. 49). Four of the five schools were public, and one was private<sup>1</sup> with a religious-Catholic orientation.

According to data from the National Ministry of Education of Argentina 2020 (Ministerio de Educación de la Nación, 2021), there were approximately 1.3 million teachers working in formal education settings while in the province of Buenos Aires, the number is 350,000. A significant number of 94,000 work in secondary schools.

In Argentina, urban high school students are usually linked by Media to negative behaviours such as juvenile crime (Kaplan & di Napoli, 2017; Nebra, 2015). Marginal in this study implies not only the structural socio-economic disadvantage but also the epistemological invisibility regarding the value of low-income voices and knowledge in everyday schooling in Argentina. Their views regarding outstanding teachers are certainly not present in the debate on teacher identity. Finally, since the gap between the low-income students’ perspectives and the teacher education policy documents is the most relevant, we prioritised their voices to develop the article’s argument.

In five schools, we inquired through self-administered surveys of parents and pupils of the school about whom they considered to be good teachers at the school. Regarding the principals’ voices, we arranged semi-structured interviews in the schools. To select teacher leaders this study focuses particularly on the term “good teacher” [*buen profê*] because it was the phrase Argentinean students used in schools (Gómez Caride, 2016). In Argentina, the term “teacher leader” is not widely used. After the transcription of the interviews, the principals were able to change or add any relevant information they considered appropriate. We found out how and whom the principals identified as outstanding teachers in those schools, to compare the gaze of parents and students with that of principals. The interviews with principals also allowed us to check the academic performance of the students of the teachers identified as outstanding. When we found teachers that the whole school community (students, parents, principals) described as “good” we contacted them to ask if they would like to participate in a one-year research study that included one in-depth interview, four class observations, and a focus group with the other nominated teachers. Of the eight teachers that started only one quit the study for personal reasons. In total, during the research, we carried out: 167 surveys of students, 38 surveys of parents, 12 individual interviews: five with principals and seven with outstanding teachers, and finally two focus groups, one with parents and one with outstanding teachers.

In all five schools, we selected the senior cohorts (Year-12) from each school as they already had the experience of being taught by many teaching staff and, therefore, had more knowledge of the teachers in their school. These surveys were conducted completely anonymously and filled out in class during school hours. In all instances, we told the students the reasons behind the research before they completed the questionnaire. They would frequently ask me questions about the scope of the study.

At the same time, we carried out 40 parent surveys, and in one of them we carried out a focus group with parents. The parent survey had two objectives. On the one hand, finding

some teaching characteristics valued by parents and, on the other, knowing which teachers were valued.

To analyse national teaching policies, we used a document analysis (Bowen, 2009) of the two key documents of initial teacher training in Argentina. Initially, through Atlas.ti, we made a content analysis relating the text to the central questions of our research. Later, we did a codification process aiming to grasp teacher leadership discourses throughout the documents. Finally, we explored the three levels of factors: individual, organisational and societal to examine how these dimensions shape teachers' leadership in Argentina.

Argentina shares international reform trends seeking to improve teacher quality. In 2006, the National Education Act (LNE) gave way to the creation of the National Teacher Training Institute (INFOD) which began a reform process of initial and continuing professional development programmes at the national level. As a federal country in which teacher education is mainly in charge of the 24 provinces, the role of the INFOD was to become a key institution of federal coordination.

The National Law established that the INFOD will have “the assistance and advice from an Advisory Council made up of representatives of the Ministry of Education, of the Council Federal Education, the Council of Universities, the union sector, the private one, and from Academia (Article 77). Among the new educational reform policies implemented since 2008, emphasis has been placed on a new teacher education curriculum that lasts four years—one more year than the previous one—and includes a common core throughout the different provinces (Consejo Federal de Educación [Federal Education Committee], 2012). In Argentina, the INFOD is the agency that promotes the teaching of national policies and establishes the teaching curriculum.

The teaching documents represent an aspirational regulation for future teachers and Teacher Education Programmes delineating an “ideal” teacher profile or a set of valued professional skills. That said, to some extent, the ideal image fuelled by educational authorities shapes the boundaries and possibilities of what it means to be a “professional” teacher in Argentina. At the same time, these normative instruments provide a basis for teachers to reflect on their practice.

As we said, in both the low-income school actors and policies documents, there are no explicit mentions of teacher leadership. Hence, in our approach to teacher leadership, we focused on positive teacher influence within and beyond the classroom.

## **RESULTS**

### **Individual-Level Factors**

We found five themes that recurrently emerged related to individual factors of teacher leadership in low-income schools. First, a sense of mission based upon religious or democratic motivations. Second, a feature of the personality that we described as challenge seekers. Third, teacher leaders have strong relational attributes that allow them to establish

relations. Fourth, high expectations for their students surpass the contextual limitations of the background of the students. Finally, flexibility was the last theme that appeared crucial to navigate the complexities of teaching in a low-income school.

A powerful sense of mission is one of the main characteristics that describe teacher leadership in low-income contexts. The teacher leaders detected in our research were an experienced group of teachers with an average of 17 years in the profession. Their successful record as teachers opened possibilities of jobs in more affluent districts and schools. In contrast, teacher leaders constantly repeated that they chose to work in that specific school. Their commitment was related to religious or democratic motivations. For instance, Teacher A states “being Christian I always say I have a place, for something God put me there because HE needs me there, then I shall look for that HE needs me.” Interestingly, all the teachers emphasised that although they could be working in other schools they were there because they wanted to be.

Another aspect that influences teacher leadership is the personality of teachers. Somehow related to a strong and intrinsic motivation the teachers stated that challenging situations were common ones in their schools. During the interviews, principals stated that all the teacher leaders could be described as challenge-seekers. As Teacher C affirms, “I like challenges.” Interestingly, Teacher leaders describe their experience as teachers in low-income contexts through a challenging lens. For example, Teacher C described her first day in the school: “It was a challenge, they were all corporally big, I was new, I didn’t have much idea. I just knew what I wanted to do, and I adapted to them too, and we kept going.”

Related to the personality of teachers appears their relational attributes as a key characteristic. Not surprisingly, this finding aligns with recent studies conducted in Australia (Kriewaldt, 2015) and the United States (Warren, 2014). Relational attributes are the “concept that encompasses social relationships which are involved in the teaching-learning context, including the affectionate connection between a teacher and his or her student” (Kriewaldt, 2015, p. 85). Students list a wide variety of relational attributes of teachers. Among those attributes linked to personal qualities ( $n = 187$ ), the aspect that emerges forcefully is patience ( $n = 56$ ): “that he/she is patient” or “patience;” cool ( $n = 40$ ); and responsible (19 times). Being “cool” [Buena onda] is a key factor for students. The ability to positively relate to students is a major element in the set of attributes that shape teacher leaders. Based on the data collected, students describe that, with good teachers, they feel respected, and, at the same time, teachers validate that confidence in them by building a patient and responsible interaction with students.

From the students’ point of view, the relational and affective dimension (Ida, 2017; Patience, 2008) is crucial. A good teacher can “build trust.” According to the students, a good teacher “knows how to explain, has patience and repeats him/herself if he/she has to so everyone understands,” “has the patience to explain,” “explains well and repeats, if necessary,” and “explains topics as many times as necessary and does it well.” Patience and the ability to explain the subject as many times as necessary are recurring elements in the students’ narratives of the good high school teacher.

Far beyond the disciplinary scope, the students state that a good teacher “does not treat us as students but, instead, as people.” This opposition brought our attention to the negative connotations of being a student for this group of teenagers attending marginal schools. Surprisingly, the experience of being a person and being a student is opposed. Perhaps, the student’s history of school failure steamed the negative self-perception of being a student. The amount of attention given to the whole child (Warren, 2014) and not just their academic performance was a recurrent theme that emerged in the students’ surveys.

High expectations of students are another relevant characteristic that describes teacher leadership. Although the context and possibilities of low-income students are reduced teacher leaders have high expectations of their students. For example, Teacher E affirms:

I tell the students, tomorrow when they go to college, they’re going to have to do this, or this is what I needed but that’s the expectation. (...) I would like all the students to surpass me as a teacher, that is what one pretends as a teacher. I train them in High school today, but to become engineers tomorrow. And eventually surprise you passing by a bridge that says Melo, Nazareno, who are my students.

In a similar vein, teacher leaders mentioned a sense of possibility, constantly convincing their students that they can finish secondary education.

Finally, teacher leaders acknowledge that flexibility is a key tool in low-income schools. Principals described that teachers’ flexibility was essential. Principal B gave an example referring to the housing conditions of the students: “If the teacher does not understand that the boy does not have a table to study at home, well, he will do everything possible so that the learning space is at school.” Homework for many low-income students is not an option since they might share a room with siblings and sometimes other relatives. Teacher leaders describe different strategies to engage students with academic subjects. As teacher D states “it seems to me that first of all what a teacher needs to have is flexibility...” From principals’ perspective, teachers must recognise that all students are different and that, therefore, what works with one student may not work with another. Moreover, principals clarified that it was important to have wide-ranging pedagogical tools to be able to respond to the demands of students. Attention to diversity is a key teaching ability and implies acknowledging that everyone learns differently.

In summary, we could describe five main individual factors that promote teacher leadership in low-income schools. First, teacher leaders expressed a strong sense of mission that make them decide to work in low-income schools. Second, and concerning that strong sense of mission, they have a personality that could be described as a challenge seeker. Third, they have strong relational attributes that allow them to engage students with their academic subject. Fourth, besides their ability to interact with students, they have high expectations of students no matter their specific context or background. Finally, regarding their pedagogical practices, they have a vast array of resources that allow them to show flexibility regarding teaching strategies and evaluation formats.



## **Organisational Factors and Societal Factors**

The school climate is a crucial factor to foster school leadership (Kilinç, 2014). In this regard, teachers and principals emphasised the importance of trusting and caring relationships. A teacher leader stated:

It is important to construct a family atmosphere so that students perceive the school as part of their family; the teacher must be able to generate confidence so that students feel high self-esteem and that they can accomplish because do not forget that here most children come with a previous school failure.

(Principal B)

A positive and supportive school climate is highlighted as a crucial school factor in low-income schools.

The principals stated that teachers needed to develop the ability to dialogue with students and build a new pedagogical “contract” with students. In their words, the teacher who arrives and dumps content on students no longer works. In low-income schools, it is necessary to build pedagogical authority, which is not given by the teaching license or by standing in front of the students. In this new teaching contract, it is necessary to generate interest and forge certain agreements with students.

In Argentina, to start teaching a teaching certificate is needed and then one must apply to an open public roster of open teaching positions. One of the main criteria for winning the opening is years of experience. Hence, experienced teachers have more chances of choosing the school where to work. This administrative arrangement goes in detrimental to low-income schools since novel teachers start their careers in low-income schools, and as soon as they can they move to middle-class schools in which social challenges are less burning. Certainly, the principals acknowledged that this new landscape is a challenge for teachers, who have now an obligation to motivate students by offering them engaging learning experiences.

A societal factor that shapes schooling in Argentina relates to social inequality in the context of increasing poverty. After decades of economic crises, the social conditions of students became one of the crucial issues at schools. According to the National Institute of Statistics and Censuses (INDEC) at the national level, in the first half of 2021, 54.3% of children between 0 and 14 are below the poverty line. In the province of Buenos Aires, seven of ten kids are below the poverty line. In that social context, schools are being challenged beyond the pedagogical realm. In fact, in most of the public schools of the province students receive food assistance of different kinds. Within this complex context, teacher leaders must be aware of the socio-economic situation of the school community.

### ***Teachers’ national policies***

In 2007, the Argentinean Federal Board of Education passed the National Curricular Guidelines for Initial Teacher Training (NCGTT). The goal of these Guidelines, written by the educational authorities of all the provinces, was to seek some integration, complementarity, and equivalent results (Consejo Federal de Educación [Federal Education

Committee], 2007, p. 3) in a greatly divided training system with approximately 1,300 teacher training institutes and 91 universities that provide teacher certification licenses. The purpose of the Guidelines was to provide stakeholders and teacher training institutes with a common framework as it represents the general standards that are then adjusted at the provincial and institutional levels. Ten years later, in 2018, the INFOD launched a new document called Professional Skills Reference Framework for Initial Teacher Training (PSRF) as a curricular policy tool that complements and enriches the previous National Curricular Guidelines. The PSRF emphasises the professionalisation of teachers stating that the ultimate purpose of the new frame is “to clarify a set of professional skills to orient Teacher Training Institutes” (PSRF, p. 2). Skills such as problem-solving (p. 1), effective decision-making (p. 4), classroom management (p. 5), and collaborative teamwork inside the school and with the larger community (p. 6) are present throughout the document.

Both national policy documents—the NCGTT and the PSRF do not mention teacher leadership. Teacher leadership is not a priority in the education policy agenda, nor the local research agenda (Romero & Krichesky, 2019). In Argentina, leadership policies are associated with principals and supervisors. That said, except in the case of some provinces, there is no specific training to become a principal. The managerial function is specifically defined in the teachers’ statute and provincial laws. However, there is no clear knowledge base on which these functions are based upon. Policy documents tend to refer generically to “teaching staff” including principals and teachers. However, the PSRF seems to delineate a slightly different scenario.

### **Individual Factors**

One critical theme to analyse in both documents is the definition of teaching. In 2007, teaching was defined as “a profession whose specificity is focused on teaching, understood as an intentional and socially mediated action for the transmission of culture and knowledge in schools, as one of the privileged contexts for such transmission” (NCGTT, p. 7). The document highlighted the role of teachers in transferring knowledge. At the same time, the school was described as the preferred space of learning. In 2018 following a competency-based curriculum, the document defined teaching professional competencies as “complex constructions of knowledge and forms of action that allow intervention in educational situations adequately and effectively to solve the typical teaching problems” (PSRF, p. 1). While in 2007 the agency of teachers seems limited to the role of the transmitter of culture and knowledge, in the PSRF the notion of competencies implies a stronger teacher agency that can intervene and even solve teaching problems. Hence, the recent approach to teaching seems more aligned with the discourses about teacher leadership that portray a teacher subject with a robust agency that goes beyond the classroom.

A second relevant theme to analyse teacher leadership is the tasks or skills required to be a teacher. According to the NCGTT, the practice of teaching involves the ability to handle a series of sixteen tasks. Not surprisingly, the first competency stated that teachers should “master the content knowledge and update their theoretical framework”. The second one indicated that teachers should “adapt, construct and evaluate curricular subjects” (Consejo

Federal de Educación (Federal Education Committee], 2007, p. 9). From the 16 tasks, only three refer to the teacher dimension beyond the classroom. Those are:

1. Identifies the characteristics and needs of the immediate context and mediate school and families.
2. Participates in the exchange and communication with families for feedback on their tasks.
3. Working in teams with other teachers, developing institutional projects, and participating in and proposing school-specific activities.

These three characteristics expand the influence of teachers beyond their classrooms.

On the other hand, the PSRF establishes six teaching dimensions that include thirty specific competencies. Interestingly, although without labelling as such the fifth capacity (to intervene in the school life and community) focuses on teacher leadership. The rationality of such capacity says:

There is a growing demand for teachers to be able to participate in teams, develop collaborative working modalities, and build shared approaches to education at the institutional level. The aim is to broaden teachers' views beyond the limits of training fields, curricular units, and the disciplines or areas they address.

(PSRF, p. 7)

The newest policy document shows that the scope of teaching is expanding beyond the traditional role of knowledge transmission. Interestingly, 10 years after the first national document was produced, teacher leadership attributes gained momentum in national policy documents.

### **Organisational and Societal Factors**

Foster (2005) suggests that a heavy top-down rigid structure may hinder teacher leadership. In Argentina, the secondary school structure is vertical and highly fragmented with a heavy bureaucracy of rules and administrative specifications (Acosta, 2009). One of the main issues is that teachers are designated by subjects for several hours and not as full-time staff of the school. Therefore, teachers might have a few hours at one institution and work in many schools during the week to make a living. For those teachers with multiple jobs, it is common the motto of "taxi teachers" to refer to teachers that work in more than two schools. This administrative arrangement has pedagogical consequences such as a fragmented curriculum (Terigi, 2008) complicating the teaching tasks and making it difficult to generate cooperation with other teachers and a sense of belonging with the school. One of the consequences of this arrangement is that teachers do not have time to work collaboratively with other teachers. The ability to influence another teacher is limited to colleagues that had another role in the school such as the head of the Department. This institutional structure acts as a negative factor that significantly reduces the ability of teacher leaders to influence other teachers.

The last decades brought constant economic crises and raised challenges to schools. The policy documents describe two. The first one is the growing inequality that implies a growing number of children living in poverty. According to the NCGTT, the state “is committed to working in a sustained manner to overcome educational fragmentation and the growing inequality observed in the country, generating initiatives that lead to the construction of a school that forms active citizenship toward a just society” (NCGTT, p. 3).

The second challenge is the constant societal changes that affect schools. The PSRF affirmed that:

Current social, cultural, and productive transformations demand increasingly complex professional skills in societies. Globalization, and the impact of new technologies, among other factors, call us to renew and diversify the teaching and learning experiences that take place in our country’s schools.

(PSRF, p. 3)

In the accelerated context of change, the teaching policy calls for innovation to renew and diversify the learning experiences of students.

## **DISCUSSION**

The results showed that factors that make possible teacher leadership such as a strong notion of teacher agency are gaining space in policy documents. However, the notion of teacher leadership is still absent from policy discourses. In addition, while the individual factors that highlight the importance of relational attributes are clearly described in low-income schools the policy documents do not prioritise them. To explain these results, we will develop two interrelated themes: the historical genesis of the Argentinean educational system and the epistemological gap between low-income schools and teaching policy documents.

The Argentinean public education system originated in 1880 during the organisation of the national state. The national state wanted to attract European immigrants to work the immense fertile lands of the Pampas. Hence, one of the main goals of the nascent public educational system was to forge Argentinean citizenship. The primary school was structured through strong homogenising rationality that aimed to eliminate the cultures and languages of the large number of immigrants that had arrived in Argentina at the beginning of the twentieth century. One clear example of this normalising pedagogy was the mandatory use of white aprons for students and teachers at the beginning of the 20th century to erase the social, economic, and cultural backgrounds of students (Dussel, 2001). This initial equality principle pervaded the whole society and is still shaping the understanding of Argentinean citizens. Within this contextualisation, stakeholders considered leadership discourses as dangerous instruments of differentiation that might oppose the idea of equality by classifying, selecting, and excluding teachers. Interestingly, recent studies described the extent to which the public education system has proved resilient to neo-liberal reforms,

and Beech and Barrenechea (2011) portray Argentina as the “black swan” in Latin America regarding pro-market policies. The historical genesis of the Argentinean educational system was able to instil equality as a somehow supreme value that shapes the educational system and beyond. The ideal of homogenisation was key for forging a national system of education in a country of immigrants. Associated with that idea were the concepts of “normalism”. The nascent normal school was an institutional device of inspection to the ordinary and massive school system, under the political control of the State and the scientific control of a positivistic pedagogy (Southwell, 2013). Normalism was related to a state dependency on regulations and centralised power of control over education, similar to the French tradition (Dussel, 2001). In pedagogical terms, this was translated into homogeneous practices regulated by a mandatory curriculum, and the group as a standard pedagogical norm. This regime of pedagogical governance was like other Latin traditions in education, called the “uniformisation model of integration.” This tradition is different from the cases of the German model of separation, the “flexible integration model” of Anglo-Saxon countries, and the “Personalisation integration Nordic model” (Mons, 2007). In summary, the traditional development of the educational system aimed to foster equality by advocating a uniform rationality. However, this approach may have inadvertently resulted in a decline in teachers’ individual agency. Biesta’s ecological perspective provides insights into this phenomenon by emphasising the contextual nature of agency (Biesta et al., 2015). It underscores how external factors such as structures, culture, and resources play a significant role in shaping and constraining teacher agency, consequently impacting teacher leadership in Argentina.

Another relevant theme is what we called epistemological bias. The lack of schools’ actor’s perspectives in the normative policy educational documents can be explained through the pervasive “technocratic culture that places confidence in experts” (Tröhler, 2015, p. 750). According to Tröhler, a “medical paradigm deprived reform stakeholders of a broad range of education research, professional experience, common sense, and political deliberation” (2015, p. 749). This technocratic rationality is forged through a specific assemblage that distrusts everything that is not considered “evidence” based research. Not surprisingly, this evidence-based research concept came from the medical realm. In 1992, Gordon Guyatt, a young Canadian physician, explained that the new paradigm [evidence/based medicine] “de-emphasises intuition, unsystematic clinical experience, and pathophysiologic rationale as sufficient grounds for clinical decision making...” (Guyatt et al., 1992, p. 2420). In the policy borrowing (Steiner-Khamsi & Quist, 2000) to the realm of teacher education, the notion of evidence-based research came embedded with the disempowerment of everyday schools’ knowledge. In Argentina, the expertocratic technical knowledge emerged in the figure of the policy bureaucrat without a teaching career or with limited teacher experience who defines policies and technical discourses to improve schools. According to Fricker, this phenomenon could be described as an epistemological injustice, specifically a testimonial injustice since it “occurs when prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker’s word.” (2007, p. 1).

This technocratic teacher-free rationality still shapes how the educational system frames teacher education documents in Argentina (Feldfeber, 2018). Many of the reform initiatives proposed to improve teacher quality focus on the macro-level training system based on a

deficit paradigm (Aikman et al., 2016). The reform movement usually starts by describing the maladies of teachers and schools. For example, to increase the lack of reflectivity of teachers, teacher training programs must be strengthened or, to improve the exit level of teachers, certifying exams must be established. Under a similar deficit or medical paradigm, several international documents<sup>2</sup> propose strategies to improve learning and teaching performance. After establishing the difficulties—illness—teachers face, these documents outline policies to recruit, train and motivate teachers. Within this medical rationality, the voices of low-income schools are not deemed “scientific” enough to participate in the national debate about teaching.

In sum, the current weak status of teacher leadership can be understood through a blend of historical conditions that forged the system upon a homogenising rationality and a technocratic—teacher-free discourse paradigm that relegates the perspective of community stakeholders such as students, parents, principals, and teachers in schools located in marginal urban communities.

## **CONCLUSION**

In the first section, we highlighted low-income schools’ insights regarding teacher leaders. In the second one, we described the extent to which, the narratives of content knowledge and teachers’ agency were key elements in policy documents. Later, we analysed the weak status of teacher leadership in Argentina through the relevance of homogenisation in the historical normalist configuration of the Argentinean educational system and the epistemological bias that deemed the knowledge of low-income schools as unscientific.

To bridge the gap between schools and policymakers it is necessary to problematise the current assemblage that shapes teacher education. In the current governing hierarchy of educational knowledge, the students, and to some degree the teachers’ insights, are undervalued. Until we interrupt the assemblage that validates what knowledge is most valued in teacher education, the policy outcomes for teacher identity will not vary. The lack of creativity from policymakers and stakeholders and the recurrent melodies of standardised assessments as the silver bullet are examples of the difficulties in finding innovative paths from the current assemblage. However, we do not want to present the issue merely as an ethical one but as a complex network of power relations that materialise in national documents’ construction that embeds a specific knowledge hierarchy. We are not arguing that the technocratic culture has not helped to organise the educational system to a degree that was unimaginable one century ago. Many technological developments such as educational platforms grant access to meaningful learning experiences and resources to minorities. That said, after decades of teacher educational reforms, it is clear the limits of technocratic rationality. We are not claiming a somehow different epistemological absolutism—this time from the schools. The challenge is to move beyond the binary of relational attributes emphasised by low-income schools’ actors against the content-teacher ability highlighted by teachers’ policy documents. Similarly, we do not intend to underscore the critical relevance of equality as a value in democracies. However, equality as a supreme

value does not necessarily imply the erasure of the teacher's individual agency.

During the seventies, the critical discussion in the field of anthropology was about the advantages or disadvantages of being an insider or an outsider to study certain cultures. Delmos Jones, a famous African American anthropologist, argued against the foreigner model of the social scientist but not because "his data or insights into the social situation are better but that they are different" (Jones, 1970, p. 257). On a similar basis, we are not arguing that the school community perspective is always better. Still, it is certainly different, and it is time to value seriously and consider their insights as powerful knowledge too.

A somehow renewed teacher education culture needs to be able to assemble in productive ways different and sometimes uncomfortable voices. Teachers, parents and students should be included as key stakeholders in the processes that frame what teacher leaders should look like. Powerful knowledge in teacher education should necessarily include community voices. Instead of technocratic salvific policies from experts, it is time to foster a new normal that includes space for collaborative policy discourses in which power relations could be open to discussion. Argentina is progressively embracing global policies that encourage teacher leadership by prioritising teacher agency. In this context, an initial step would involve acknowledging the voices of low-income communities and recognising the cultural and material realities faced by teachers. By doing so, educational policies can cultivate a strong sense of purpose within teacher leadership without idealising exceptional teachers as the sole saviours. Designing and implementing effective teachers' leadership policies in low-income schools would need to establish a new balance between the individual agency and the collective (Skedsmo & Huber, 2018).

## NOTES

1. In Argentina, there are private schools that receive funding from the state and students do not pay educational fees.
2. One example of this can be seen in The World Bank document: "Great teachers: How to raise student learning in Latin America and the Caribbean" (Bruns, & Luque, 2015).

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