

## Newspapers as Texts for Students' Political Education: The Case of Argentina

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During eight years (1976–83) the people in Argentina lived under a military dictatorship. Nobody in this country could ask any questions, nor give any answers. To talk and to listen were verbs of dangerous conjugation. Few young people studied at the university. Censorship and fear filled the air. People who spoke freely disappeared. Thousands of Argentinian people were tortured. Some of them, the minority, were able to return home after being kidnapped by the military regime. Others, the majority, were killed after being tortured. Their bodies were never found. They are known as “desaparecidos,” the “disappeared people.”

During eight years, school children and old people lived under the same conditions: fear, silence, censorship. Students at school could not ask any questions. The school's front door was locked to ideas, and the problems of the real world could not be discussed.

April 2, 1982, was the beginning of the end for the military regime. The Malvinas war against Britain was its last attempt to stay in power. But the thousands of young Argentinians who died were enough to make us understand the meaning of seven years of dictatorship.

In 1983, the country awoke from its nightmare. In free elections, the people chose a democratic government, the first in eight years. The time of silence was over.

But people were still afraid. It was hard for everybody to realize that democracy meant more than voting for a president. Almost everybody forgot how democracy

worked. Children under eight had never before breathed the air of freedom. Children under 13 had never gone to school in freedom. That year, 1984, was the first democratic school year for all of them.

If democracy was to survive, Argentinians, especially children, would have to learn to use their freedom.

How could we teach children who had known only authoritarianism that suddenly they lived under democracy and were allowed to speak freely? The main question was how to teach eleven- and twelve-year-old children what democracy meant and what freedom of expression was.

In this context, after eight years of strong military dictatorship, we had to resocialize the students.

Political socialization is the process by which young people's political culture is formed. The individuals develop relevant knowledge, skills, and dispositions that enable them to function competently in the socio-political structure. As a result, they seek information to facilitate learning, and they engage in activities that will facilitate this process.

To seek information involves interaction with agents such as family, peers, organizations such as schools and churches, and entities such as mass media.

Much learning occurs outside the school. According to UNESCO, only 20% of the information a child has comes from school.

A democratic citizen is the one who knows how to think critically in order to be able to make decisions, to affect the community life,

and to participate in a free society. This is why information is essential in a democracy.

The one who has information is able to decide. The well-informed person, who knows how to use it properly, may also know how to participate in a free society.

“A certain amount of factual information is a necessary condition for the development of a deeper understanding (of politics). Below a certain elementary knowledge, it is highly unlikely that anyone can develop a coherent belief system” (Westholm, Lindquist, Niemi 1990).

But it is true that knowledge about political facts is not enough. What really matters is the capacity an individual has to understand, interpret, analyze, evaluate, comprehend, and relate these facts.

We are interested in information that moves people to analyze reality and to participate in public affairs, in order to avoid any governmental attempt to reduce the political space and the people's political participation.

If democracy's vitality and continuity depend upon transmitting to each young generation the visions of the democratic way of life and the commitment to it, it is necessary to start the political socialization process with the children. Early experiences are essential for the formation of these democratic orientations (Ichilov 1990).

### The Media and the School

The first step was to build a bridge between the children and the political information.

Since young children's first contact with politics tends to come via mass media (Chaffee 1990), we decided to link the school and the media in order to introduce political information and to promote political debates in the classroom.

There is another reason to link the school and the media. As we said before, information means knowledge and decision-making skills. But, in every society, people have different access to information. Some people have access to many resources: radio, open TV, cable, newspapers, magazines, VCR, cinema, theatre.

On the other hand, there are others (a big majority in Argentina) who do not have access to all these resources. They may only listen to the radio or open TV, and they may buy a newspaper occasionally.

This difference in access to information brings also differences in terms of educational opportunities and in socioeconomic conditions. If information helps each person to make decisions, it is clear that lack of information means less chances to decide and to participate in a free society.

The school has, therefore, a social role: to make a better distribution of this information. By using the media in the class, children who do not have access to these resources at their own homes will have access to them at school. Children who do not talk about current events with their parents will be able to do it with their teachers. And, while economic conditions get worse and worse, more children in public schools get less and less from their homes.

We chose the daily newspaper as our project. The newspaper is a main political information resource. The newspaper reflects social information, relevant for the people's life. And it is more available for the schools than TV and radio. It is also easier to use for teachers because it is a print text.

The newspaper has a strong potential to reinforce the student's democratic attitudes and their interest in community affairs.

People who read the newspaper systematically know more about their own society and the world.

Regular readers have less difficulties in understanding and interpreting the political world that affects their lives.

As Chaffee points out, reading is related to the political socialization process.

"Most children learn to read for reasons that have nothing to do with politics, but whether they become readers has enormously to do with their eventual political competence. But, most young people will learn to read well once they have a strong reason to do so. Giving them occasions to use information from the politically oriented print media and particularly to search various sources in a pluralistic approach, is likely to sharpen their critical, as well as technical skill" (Chaffee 1990).

In the print media, it is also possible to find different interpretations and views for the same event. Students will learn that there is more than one point of view.

Newspapers provide an arena for the expression of different and even opposing ideas. Newspapers give an opportunity to familiarize students with the basic premises of democracy, like pluralism and freedom of expression.

In the print media, facts are put in perspective. They are contextualized and not isolated as sometimes happens with TV news.

Finally, the newspaper may be the unique text that the students will read as adults. Even if they do not read books and magazines, it is very likely that they will read the newspaper at least once a week.

So, by using the newspaper in the school, students become better citizens who not only have access to social and relevant information but who also learn how to evaluate and analyze it.

## The Goals

The main goal, by reading the daily newspaper in the class, is to strengthen the students' political education:

- To teach them how to critically read the newspaper, how to discover the newspaper's ideas, bi-

ases, and identity, how to get and better interpret the media information, and how to compare it with other resources;

- To integrate reality, current events, social issues into the class. To discuss, investigate, analyze, and evaluate political events that affect the community life;
- To promote students' participation. Students will learn they have a voice and a right to express it freely. Students will learn how to build their own ideas and to share them publicly.

A teacher who uses the daily newspaper in the school plans activities for these goals.

Last year, the Argentine government wanted to install capital punishment in the country, and this became a big issue nationally. A social studies teacher decided to teach about it in the class.

The students first read the same news in different newspapers (and they learned to compare the different perspectives), but they immediately felt they needed more information. So, they investigated in different resources.

They interviewed lawyers; they read the Constitution; they talked to politicians; they surveyed people in the streets; they went to the U.S. embassy in Buenos Aires (to find out how capital punishment works in that country); they interviewed people from different religions; and they talked to human rights organizations. In the end, they built their own consensus, and they all wrote a letter to the editor, which was finally published in one of the local newspapers.

By this, the students learned to critically read the newspaper, to get information from different resources, to debate about a social issue, and to participate in the debate by expressing their own opinions.

## The Program

These are basically the main ideas in this new program called "Newspaper in the School," that started in 1987, and that depends

on the Regional Newspaper Association in Argentina (ADIRA), which nucleates more than 70 daily newspapers in the country.

The actions developed by ADIRA are:

- Regional workshops for teachers (all day long, during school hours, with the permission of the department of education in each province);
- Free copies of the newspapers for the students. Each newspaper in Argentina gives away free copies for the schools;
- Free materials for the teachers. All the newspapers in the country pay for these handouts distributed among 6,000 teachers in the country to be used in the classroom;
- Special sections in the newspaper. Every week, each newspaper in the country includes a special section with information, articles, experiences, news, etc. about the use of the newspaper in the school, in order to update the teachers in this field. The teachers know what day the section comes out, and they read the newspaper for this information;
- Newspaper in the school week. It is a week in the year when newspapers duplicate their efforts, and they organize special activities to reinforce the use of the newspaper in the school. They develop new materials, they give away more free copies, they organize special events, etc.;
- National Conferences. Each year the Newspaper Association organizes a national conference for more than 800 teachers from all over the country. Each year the conference takes place in a different province. Many newspapers pay for the teachers' trips so they can attend the conference. During three days, teachers from the whole country participate in round tables, exhibitions, and lectures.

More than 40,000 Argentine teachers participated in these activities. And each year this number increases.

There is also another action promoted by the Newspaper Association: research.

In order to evaluate the program and the real effect of the use of the newspaper in the school, we developed several research projects. In the beginning, the main goal was to analyze what happens when students and teachers debate on political current events (published in the newspaper) in the class.

Although as we said, the number of teachers who use newspapers in the schools increases every year, there are still some problems.

We still have many doubts in terms of the ways teachers use the newspaper in their classrooms. If they use a front page to illustrate nouns, verbs, adjectives, or numbers, they do not use the political information at all, and they do not discuss politics with their students. They just use the newspaper as a regular textbook, not a political information resource.

By using the newspaper, we want teachers and students to read it, to understand it, to discuss it, to evaluate reality, and to promote their participation and commitment to democracy.

So what exactly happens in the classroom when teachers and students discuss political issues published in the newspaper?

### Evaluation in Buenos Aires Public Schools

Newspapers, as we said before, are an important source of knowledge about what goes on in one's own backyard and all around the world. The newspaper has a strong potential as an instrument to strengthen democracy.

By using the newspaper, students discuss current events and political information in class: teachers learn to relate the curriculum with reality; they all know there is more than one vision and version for every fact and they learn to analyze them. Students and teachers exercise their critical thinking and their right to freely express their ideas.

They all become better informed citizens, who not only have access to information, but who also learn to evaluate and interpret it.

But this does not always happen. The project we started in Buenos

Aires elementary public schools tries to find out what exactly happens when students and teachers discuss together political information published in the daily newspaper.

Our initial questions, before we started the research, were:

What happens in the school with the students and the teacher when political information and current events enter the classroom?

What happens with the students and the teachers when they discuss together political information published in the newspaper? How do both parties feel? Do they accept these debates in the classroom? Why do many teachers and principals still promote the use of the newspaper to learn verbs, nouns, adjectives, or to underline numbers?

Why is it so difficult for them to use the newspaper as a social text? What are the effects among the students (in terms of the political socialization process) of the use of the newspaper as a social text? To what extent can the newspaper contribute to evaluate the students' political socialization?

These are some of the questions we asked ourselves before we started the research project among 20 public schools in the same school district in Buenos Aires. We worked with all the sixth- and seventh-grade students, their teachers and principals, and we used questionnaires, interviews, and class observations.

To use the newspaper as a social text in order to promote political education does not seem to be easy. The research organized among those schools allowed us to discover most of the risks and fears teachers face when they discuss political issues (published in the newspaper) in the classroom.

### Results

- The newspaper and its political issues are oriented toward present time. Teachers admitted it is always easier to discuss what happened 200 years ago than about what happened yesterday.

- If teachers decide to use the newspaper, they have to read it every day. With the textbook, they read it once a year, at the beginning of the school year, and they may plan for the following months.
- When they analyze politics with the students, the class discussion is unpredictable. Many teachers said: "When I use the newspaper and discuss social issues, I know where I start, but I never know where I finish."
- The students' questions are not always easy to answer. Children may ask questions teachers are not used to facing.
- To speak about politics and use the newspaper means also to know how to contextualize facts and how to relate past and present.

These were the main fears and risks our research discovered.

The following year we decided to start a new project, this time, among principals. The idea was that political issues and current events should enter the whole school, not just the teacher's classroom. The teacher is not isolated, so if the school was considered an institution, principals had to be included in the research.

New questions were raised:

- a) Can we talk about everything in the school?
- b) Can the teacher give his or her opinion on political issues to the students?
- c) Do parents support these discussions in the school?

Most of the principals could not solve these questions. They were not sure. They hesitated before giving an answer.

Not all the subjects could be talked about in the school (politics and violence were the main topics rejected); teachers were not always allowed to state their opinions on political issues, even though they also used other information resources; parents were viewed as a negative element in order to discuss current events in the school (although recent research shows that 90% of 500 parents agreed with the idea).

What can be learned from these

two research projects is that even though mass media should be used and should be integrated in the school and even though the newspaper has a great potential as a social text, there are still many questions to analyze.

It is not easy for teachers to deal with social and political issues. We need to evaluate their fears, explain why they feel this way, and study different aspects in the teaching process of political education.

TABLE 1

Can teachers give their personal opinion on political issues in the classroom?	
	Principals
Yes	2
No	14
Do Not Know	4
"The newspaper is unpredictable and this is a problem . . ."	
	Teachers
Yes	18
No	2

### Recommendations

We learned, then, that the newspaper does not in itself introduce any difference. It is the way the teacher uses it that makes the difference. The newspaper has a great potential because it is a social text. But this is not enough. The teacher needs to know how to use it with the students.

That means that when teachers decide to use the newspaper and to discuss politics at school they should:

- Use the information about current affairs;
- Emphasize the social meaning of its contents;
- Let the students' questions appear;
- Teach how to interpret information;
- Relate history and the past with the present;
- Respect the children's knowledge, the experience they have from everyday life;
- Use the newspaper, not as a textbook, but as a main information resource among the media.

### Broadening the Evaluation

In order to follow up this first research effort and to look deeper, we developed a second study, but this time not just in the city of Buenos Aires, but in the whole country. This research was conducted by Dr. Edgardo Catterberg, Professor Roxana Morduchowicz, and Dr. Richard Niemi from the University of Rochester (USA).

We surveyed 4,000 eleven- and twelve-year-old students from 14 provinces and the city of Buenos Aires. We asked them 45 questions in order to analyze the children's political culture.

We surveyed their relationship with the media, their democratic attitudes, their political information, their understanding of democracy and their political participation.

But, at the same time we wanted to discover the students' political values, we analyzed the program: half of the children (2,000) regularly used the newspaper in the school, and half of them did not. We wanted to find out the differences between these two groups.

Although the findings are still being processed, we do know about some positive results.

There is a big difference in the students' political information. Students who regularly read the newspaper in the school had a much better score on the six questions related to political facts that were in the news in 1992. Three were on international events and three on national aspects.

Children who used the newspaper in the school showed a higher percentage of right answers than the ones who did not. It seems that reading the newspaper in the school affects positively the students' political knowledge.

To conclude, the newspaper has a strong potential to strengthen the students' political culture. But only if it is used as a political information resource. The newspaper is not a regular textbook. And this is exactly what teachers and students need to learn.

The school and the media are political socialization agents, and political information is essential in

the political socialization process. This is why this program was born. And this is why it still exists.

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