

**DROPPING OUT OR *EXCLUSION* FROM SECONDARY EDUCATION?
THE YOUNG PEOPLES' PERSPECTIVE
(The case of Argentina)**

Study Report
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Executive Summary

This study report includes relevant information about some of the probable reasons why socially disadvantaged youths and adolescents in the region drop out of school. The specific case studied was that of Argentina. The field work was performed there, in February and March 2001, and consisted of collecting relevant and pertinent information from public and academic institutions, distributing 400 questionnaires to secondary school students in Buenos Aires, Resistencia, and Cañada de Gómez, selected by the Directorate of the National Scholarship Program of the Ministry of Culture and Education in an intentional, non-representative sample, and holding focus group meetings with secondary school students, teachers, parents, and representatives. The most significant findings are:

1.- The research conducted by public and academic institutions indicates that the basic problems of Argentine adolescents and youths include poverty, social exclusion, and difficulties gaining access to education and employment. The official and academic information is in agreement that their employment situation is unfavorable, especially for those who are socially excluded and those who have not completed their secondary education. Dropping out of school is a strong predictor of unemployment and informal status, and the majority of poor adolescents and youths who are employed work off the books. Their employment conflicts or deficiencies are due to their inadequate training for the world of work. With respect to education, official figures show that the Argentine educational system, with historical standards of quality and coverage, and one of the best in Latin America, has certain limitations in terms of meeting some of the basic objectives of education in these times, due, among other things, to the increase in dropout rates, especially among the most vulnerable adolescents and youths.

2.- Regarding dropping out and exclusion from school, the data show that the poorest youngsters are at greatest risk of dropping out, although for that group, the education they do receive is an essential, real, and symbolic asset for their social mobility and access. It was also noted that there is no agreement among the various participants in the educational system with regard to the reasons people drop out. Most authorities believe that young people drop out largely because of poverty, the low level of education in the home, instability, informal work status, low family income, lack of support from the parents, absenteeism, and lack of interest in schoolwork.

3.- To try to do something about the growing dropout rates, four years ago the Ministry of Culture and Education implemented the National Scholarship Program and the Institutional Stay-in-School Projects, which seek to decrease the dropout rate by providing financial assistance to students who are at risk of dropping out because of financial problems, and to improve institutional performance in the face of this risky behavior.

4.- Although the sample was not representative, the analysis of the interviews and focus group meetings establishes some of the trends characteristic of the processes associated with dropping out of secondary school, reaffirming previous findings: the most socially disadvantaged groups have a high percentage of students repeating grades, especially the first and third years of secondary education; the vast majority of adolescents and youths enjoy schoolwork, inasmuch as they consider it necessary in order to get a good job and income and access to higher education. However, they face difficulties in achieving these objectives: academic (difficulty of the courses, low achievement, schools with limited resources and in

poor condition), financial (cannot afford supplemental school materials, those who work do not have enough time to study), and family (many problems in their family relationships).

5.- They also reported problems with teachers, school violence, and absenteeism of students and teachers. Their opinions are at odds with those of the teachers, who think the school and performance problems of the most socially disadvantaged adolescents and youths stem basically from that poverty and social situation, from unstable family situations and parental abandonment, from the youths' lack of interest in education, and from the negative values that prevail in today's society. In other words, the institutional actors do not see academic problems in underachieving and in the dropout rates.

6.- More than 50% of the students interviewed are already in the labor market, in short-term jobs, in the informal sector, low-skilled and poorly paid, which increases their risk of dropping out. More than a third of the sample has already thought about dropping out because "they don't like it anymore" (40%) or because they want or need to work (35%). They suggest that the institutional programs to prevent dropping out be vocationally and psychologically oriented toward financial and social support and job training. In other words, they raise the issue of increased financial compensation.

7.- Very often, the youths are convinced that their performance problems are their sole responsibility and are due to the fact that they do not put in enough effort or that they have to work, that their future depends only on their personal abilities and effort, and that to get ahead in life or "succeed," education may not be enough, inasmuch as luck or good relationships also have an impact on success.

8.- Some of the study's conclusions are: in the majority of cases, underprivileged adolescents and youths drop out more because of their academic difficulties than their financial problems; they lack educational resources and those they have are of poor quality; they are much more vulnerable to social hazards with respect to which the school does not implement consistent strategies; and, due to the changing times, they have new roles within the family that change the nature of the parental relationship.

9.- In keeping with the conclusions, it is suggested that the Ministry of Culture and Education programs to prevent dropping out be expanded, strengthened, and supplemented with programs intended to change the school culture and ethos and to support and assist the youths who are most vulnerable and most at social risk.

Introduction

The region is at a crossroads in terms of education. Despite all the states' major investment in the school system over the last decade, and despite the significant reforms implemented to modernize education and expand its basic coverage, the rates of efficiency and continuation are far from satisfactory, especially at the secondary level. The high dropout rate and high rate of students repeating grades result in average schooling for the entire region of 5.2 years, while it has been estimated that a minimum of 12 years of schooling is needed to escape poverty (Kliksberg, 2000; CEPAL, 2000). That affects attainment of the institutional goals for quality, equity, and relevance of the educational content and, consequently, some of the central goals of the Latin American states at present, such as political democratization, economic modernization, social integration, and the promotion of citizenship through education.

The regions' adolescents and youths, with unequal and disadvantageous exposure to the processes of globalization and "cultural internationalization," are increasingly vulnerable, not just to dropping out, but also to a series of social hazards, such as violence, teenage pregnancy, and substance abuse. Education can play a fundamental role in preventing and addressing some of these problems. The processes of dropping out and repeating grades, and the growing quality gaps, are configuring highly inequitable educational systems that contribute very little to ameliorating social problems, both chronic and new, such as the increase in poverty, unemployment and informal status, the public health deficits, exclusion, the consequences of the changes in family structure, and the increase of crime (Kliksberg, 2000).

In addition to educational isolation, adolescents and youths suffer from the growing gap between the institutional world of adults and certain youth cultures, which increases their uncertainty and their risky behavior, the tension between the two worlds, and the level of their social exclusion. This problem is more severe for poor youths who have fewer opportunities to increase and consolidate their human and cultural capital. This highlights the educational inequalities among youths of different social classes and seriously endangers the population's increase in educational wealth, its only asset, apart from its patrimony, with which to escape from poverty, now becoming chronic in the region (CEPAL, 2000).

Recent research on the dropout problem has changed its focus, seeking its cause, not in the conduct of the actors, but in the culture and ethos of the school itself. Thus, when considering the marked overrepresentation of poor adolescents and youths in the group that most often drops out, it is considered more appropriate to emphasize the study of the school's role in generating these rates of *exclusion*, and to minimize the influence of the various socioeconomic factors that come into play (Davies, 1999). Factors such as inflexible syllabi, vertical and authoritative systems of rules, and the preeminence of values that favor individualism and the tendency to reject that which is different, have been consistently pointed to as central features of the cultures of school exclusion (Hallam and Castle, 2000). Also, causing additional tensions, the school is greatly affected by unprecedented events inside the school itself, such as school violence perpetrated by children and adolescents, which ends up reinforcing the negative, authoritarian, and exclusive institutional practices. These events cause many to ask themselves if it makes sense to talk about a "sanctuary school" - in other words, to ask themselves if it makes sense to talk about the possibility of keeping students and teachers isolated from the tensions of the outside world (UNESCO, 2001).

The research described below was conducted for presentation in connection with the Inter-American Development Bank's Regional Policy Dialogue on Education and Training of

Human Resources in Secondary Education. Its objective was to understand, analyze, and assess some of the school-related factors affecting the educational expectations of adolescents and youths in Argentina, through a qualitative approach to some of the resources, the curricular and extracurricular opportunities, organization, and school climate of educational institutions with different dropout rates. The ultimate objective is to identify the types of intervention most needed for improving retention levels, establishing certain priorities, and defining strategies for the schools.

I.- Background

1.1.- The situation of adolescents and youths in the Region and in Argentina

Part of the research involved a review of the documentation of projects and research on adolescents and youths in Latin America and Argentina, to establish the most important trends or the knowledge that has been accumulated in connection with the problem of youths and education, with specific reference to dropping out of secondary school.

It has been pointed out that the new global context entails a series of consequences for adolescents and youths, such as the changes in their daily lives (more individualism and risk), the change in the traditional model of the family (which affects their basic socialization), and the processes of adaptation in the world of work that affect the mechanisms for gaining access to society. Today's adolescents and youths face many challenges stemming, among other things, from society's ambivalent collective perceptions. On the one hand, they are considered the symbol of change, quick, intelligent, ingenious, and creative, bearers of transforming utopias and with strong potential for professional achievement in the market; on the other hand, they are associated with insecurity and are viewed with suspicion because of their growing freedom from traditional controls and their prominence and involvement in high-risk activities. Also, they are seen in connection with a series of tensions. They are the first generation to experience globalization and, therefore, are more exposed to the disparities of the changes, to the explosion of the various modes of juvenile group-forming. At the same time, their differences in status grow ever greater, even though their patterns of cultural consumption are shared much more than in the past. The risks and vulnerabilities that most affect youths include the disappearance of traditional jobs, earlier and more intense exposure to problems such as failure and dropping out, substance abuse, teenage pregnancy, and violence, and the attitudes of society and the media that create stereotypes. Other risks are unstable family environments, education unrelated to their interests and needs, low expectations, and the absence of consistent adult role models, a high rate of victimization, and limited access to goods and public services.

Regarding Latin America, it is known that urban working class youths are at unprecedented risk of social exclusion (CEPAL, 2000a), considering the set of hazards resulting from the intense modernization the region is experiencing. If the young population is exposed to a set of risks under stable conditions, under the social conditions found in most Latin American countries, that population is even more vulnerable to all the risky behaviors described above, such as teenage pregnancy, violence, and exclusion from school (CEPAL, 2000, Rodríguez, 2000). Public policies addressing the problems of youths represent some of the most recent in the spectrum of governmental social policy concerns. These are dominated by a perception of youths as undefined and subordinate: they are prepared, they are trained, they are imprisoned, they are penalized, and they are rarely recognized socially (Pérez Islas, 2000). The social imagery behind the various policies and interventions runs the gamut from

viewing youths as tools of modernization to viewing them as a group that is alienated and dangerous to society.

Because of the prevailing poverty and inequality, Latin American youths are much more vulnerable to the risky behaviors that widely affect their age group in other regions. The combination of various factors, including poor qualifications to aspire to upward social mobility in modern productive structures (which relegates them to precarious and unstable jobs), concentration in the urban peripheries with similarly-situated peers, and their relative isolation from the rest of society, prevents them from increasing their social capital. Meanwhile, the institutional policies for addressing this social sector have been based on social perceptions that do not always consider their heterogeneity and risk vis-à-vis multiple hazards. In this respect, it is hoped that education can play a central role in reversing the prevailing institutional exclusion of adolescents and youths in the region.

In Argentina, according to the National Directorate for Youth of the Ministry of Social Development and Environment, youths are “the population group between the ages of 15 and 29.” This group comprises 25.6% of the population. Their marital status, employment situation, social exclusion, and poverty, risk for violence, and access to the educational system are summarized in the following Tables (1-5). These social indicators show that Argentine youths enjoy one of the highest rates of social and school inclusion in the region.

Table N° 1

Youths in Argentina as % of Population

Age	Total youths	Women (%)	Men (%)	% of population
15 – 19	3,297,147	49.3	50.7	8.9
20 – 24	3,361,270	49.6	50.5	9.1
25 – 29	2,817,652	49.7	50.3	7.6
15 – 29	9,476,069	49.5	50.5	25.6

Source: National Directorate for Youth, 2000.

Table N° 2

Status in terms of Work, Social Exclusion, and Poverty (%)

Age	Employed	Unemployed	Excluded (1)	Impoverished	Not Impoverished
15 – 19	26.1	36.6	12.8	40	60
20 – 24	65.2	22.5	14.7	25.4	74.6
25 – 29	77.3	13.9	11.7	27.2	72.8

Source: National Directorate for Youth, 2000. (1) Neither working nor attending school

Table N° 3

School attendance of youths (%)

Age	Attend	Do not attend	Never attended
15 – 19	71.2	28.5	0.2
20 – 24	40.1	59.7	0.3
25 – 29	15.0	84.1	0.8
15 – 29	44.7	54.9	0.4

Source: National Directorate for Youth

Regarding the education of Argentine youths, the National Directorate for Youth indicates that school attendance of youths in the different age groups declines as age increases and, in the 15 – 19 year old group, almost three of every 10 do not attend school. Also, dropout rates increase when youths move from EGB 1 and 2 to EGB 3 and Polimodal¹.

¹ EGB: Basic General Education. This is divided into three cycles: 1 and 2 include the first through the sixth years of primary education; 3 includes the seventh year of the primary level and the first and second years of the secondary level. Polimodal: the last phase of secondary education under the new system. It includes the third, fourth, and fifth years of the system that was in effect before enactment of the Federal Education Law.

Similarly, Inter-American Development Bank figures show that the highest dropout rate is found in the third cycle of EGB. Of every 100 children who enter primary school, 75 complete the third cycle of EGB, and just 50 reach the last year of secondary education. Those who do not graduate, according to the 1999 Permanent Homes Survey, are the poorest: of the poorest quintile, just 27% of youths between the ages of 19 and 20 have completed secondary school, while in the wealthiest quintile 83% complete secondary school. Less than half of youths in the poorest quintile complete the nine years of compulsory education, as compared to 93% of those in the wealthiest quintile.

1.2.- Principal problems of adolescents and youths in Argentina

Several studies carried out in Argentina indicate that the fundamental problems of adolescents and youths are associated with poverty, social exclusion, and difficulties in gaining access to education and employment. Regarding poverty, recent studies show that the 15 – 29 year old group includes 6,470,319 people, or 20% of the total population, and of these, 40% (four out of every ten) live in poverty. In other words, their income is below the poverty level established by INDEC: \$495. In some provinces, such as Chaco, Corrientes, Formosa, and Misiones, more than 60% live in poverty (Lozano, 2000).

More than 2.7 million youths (44%) are excluded from the educational system; of these, 36% do not finish primary school and 30% have not finished secondary school. Of the youths who are excluded from the educational system, 65% unsuccessfully seek work and almost 35% are part of the “hard core” of excluded urban dwellers. Some 14.9% of youths are not working, not going to school, not looking for work, and not working at home. The educational deficit is a major cause of exclusion (Salvia, 2000, Lozano 2000).

Regarding their exposure to violence, it was learned that in 1995, 3228 youths between the ages of 15 and 24 died violent deaths. This number is on the rise. Violence is the cause of 60% of all deaths in the 15 - 24 year old group. The figures show that young men die violent deaths four times more often than women. For men, the rate is 83 per 100,000 inhabitants, while for women it is 21 for every 100,000. The death rate for men between 15 and 24 years of age in Argentina is 83.1; in France it is 79; Australia, 77.2; Canada, 75.5; Italy, 70.7; Japan, 44.8, and Holland, 38.2. The causes of violent deaths among youths are: traffic accidents, 26%; other accidents, 23%; injuries whose causes are unknown, 29%; homicide, 11%, and suicide, 11% (vital statistics from the Ministry of Health).

One vulnerability of young Argentine women is teenage pregnancy. The official statistics show that of every 100 babies born alive in Argentina, more than 15 are born to girls or adolescents. This number has been on the rise over the last 20 years, and the percentage is much higher in the northern provinces. At this time, approval of the Sexual Health Act is pending.

A 1995 UNICEF survey on their work status showed that 59% of adolescents and youths enjoy a high standard of living through stable, secure work. For unemployed youths, work is a requirement, rather than a motive or an aspiration. The well-being associated with stable work was one of the options most valued by those surveyed. According to this report, unemployment in this group rose dramatically between 1991 and 1996, and according to the 1991 census, approximately 20% could be working off the books. Early introduction of children and adolescents to the labor market is resulting in the dropout rate increasing every year. The main reasons put forward by youths for dropping out of school include: need to work (37%), no

interest in further study (31%), desire to learn other things (9%), studying is difficult (5%), no room (2%), other, (6%) and no response (2%).

Figures provided by the Secretary of Employment, Ministry of Labor (2000), show that in May 1999, 55.7% of all unemployed youths were looking for work in order to supplement household income; 45% of youths who worked or were seeking work had not completed their secondary education. This goes up to 65% in the 14-17 year old group. In the lowest income quintile, some 69% of youths had dropped out of school to enter the job market. Youth unemployment was a factor for 26.7% of the economically active population, while the unemployment rate among youths was 44.8% in 20% of the poorest homes. The average income of youths was 324 pesos per month, with an income of 2.3 pesos per hour worked. Some 64.5% of the 18 – 21 year old group worked in the informal sector. Also, 94.2% of adolescents between 14 and 17 receive no work benefits; for the 18 – 21 year old group, this percentage is 61.8.

As is clear from all these reports, the problem of unemployment is central for adolescents and youths, not only because it increases their social exclusion, but also because in Argentina, being employed is very closely tied, symbolically, to the issue of the social rights of citizenship. According to Kessler (1997), unemployment makes it impossible to gain access to “types of experiences” such as social structuring of the work day, social contacts outside the family, implementation of objectives that transcend the individual, and the achievement of status and social identity. The Tables that follow (López and Beccaria, 1997) show the relationship between education and work by socioeconomic level and the educational status of children and youths.

Table N° 4

Relationship between education and work by socioeconomic level

Relationship between education and work in children aged 15 to 24	Socioeconomic level				
	Low	Low Middle	Upper middle	Upper	Total
Go to school and work	6.8	10.8	22.1	24.2	12.6
Do not go to school but work	58.7	41.0	20.2	15.2	40
Go to school and do not work	18.1	36.6	53.7	57.8	36.5
Neither go to school nor work	16.4	11.6	4.0	2.8	10.9
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Luis Beccaria and Néstor López (1997)

Table N° 5

Indicators of educational status of children and youths. May 1995 (Greater Buenos Aires)

Enrollment rates	Socioeconomic level			
	Low	Low Middle	Upper middle	Upper
4 and 5 years	41.9	45.5	65.2	71.6
6 to 12 years	96.8	99.6	99.1	100
13 to 17 years	55.7	73.7	92.1	96.6
18 to 25 years	15.1	26.3	53.8	62.4
Left back in primary school	31.4	14.9	12.3	1.7

Source: Luis Beccaria and Néstor López

In short, these data show the unfavorable employment situation of Argentine adolescents and youths, especially those who are socially excluded and those who failed to complete their secondary education. In this respect, dropping out is a strong predictor of unemployment and informal employment.

The information collected indicates that the Argentine secondary education system, with historical standards of quality and coverage, has certain limitations with respect to meeting some of the basic objectives of education in these times. These would include promotion of civic responsibility in the educational sense and improvement of quality of life, especially that of impoverished adolescents and youths. Much quantitative and qualitative research has been undertaken to determine some of the reasons for dropping out. Between 1992 and 1998, the “completed primary” segment grew from 5.2% to 14%, and the “did not complete secondary” segment grew from 28% to 37%. However, and this demonstrates that a high level of interest in education does not always translate into completing more studies, the youths who have “completed secondary” decreased from 48% in 1992 to 34% in 1998.

In a 1998 study of Buenos Aires secondary schools conducted by the Directorate of Technical and Agricultural Secondary Schools (Boleáis and Palacios, 1999), two of the main problems found were family violence and alcohol abuse by children. According to the researchers, these schools, overwhelmed by these problems, come to see them as normal without seeking effective options for prevention and control. However, the analysis of interviews conducted reveals an enormous gap between the students’ and staffs’ perceptions of the cause of low scholastic achievement.

The principals who were interviewed state that the reasons for dropping out of school are exclusively social, related only to the students’ poverty and their inability to respond to academic demands because of the lack of resources. They also report that interventions by the schools to address these problems are very limited because of lack of support from the family and State. The teachers believe that the children came from very disadvantaged, very dismal home situations, and therefore placed little value on knowledge. But the students emphasized teacher absenteeism, lack of space and materials, and the school’s inflexibility with respect to accepting youths who work. To the parents who were interviewed, the problem is that it is very difficult to supervise and help youths who are going to school, although they felt that their children should remain in school in order to avoid ending up like

their parents. They also said how difficult it is to make a recalcitrant child go to school. In this study, the actors in the school system find many factors that reaffirm their prophecies: the children leave school because they are poor. However, the students believe that their problems vis-à-vis education are not related just to their poverty, but also to the poor quality of the education they receive. Two contrasting views of the same social problem demonstrate that the schools see themselves as neutral and unable to address the social problems confronting their adolescents and youths.

An assessment carried out in 1997 by the Ministry of Culture and Education's National Scholarship Program ("Secondary Education Quality Improvement, Follow-up Report") shed light on several school system actors' opinions about why students drop out. This survey covered 122 secondary schools in 16 provinces. A total of 102 principals, 201 private tutors, 306 teachers, and 2,440 students were interviewed. This represents a sample of 10% of all schools participating in the "Secondary Education Quality Improvement" project.

Table N° 6

Reasons	Level of impact		
	High	Average	None
Learning difficulties	42	42	5
Serious behavioral problems	15	33	19
Lack of materials	36	30	15
Students not taking tests	50	25	8
Repeated failure on tests	25	44	10
Repeated absenteeism	41	29	11
Repeating of grades	45	27	8
Successive repeating of grades	31	24	14
Students being overage	12	26	29
Home far from school	30	16	25
Low expectations of obtaining employment	35	34	13
Teenage pregnancy	31	24	14
Work outside the home	25	30	19
Work at home	22	32	20
Ethnic or sociocultural differences	9	6	46
Ostracism by classmates	5	11	56
Alcoholism	12	12	36
Drug use	7	5	56
Health problems	8	19	33
Disabilities	4	8	62
Screening courses	18	42	17
Teaching problems	9	39	15
Nature of the curricula	16	26	26
Nature of the grading systems	17	34	16
School schedule	5	39	21
Lack of family support	78	15	2
Serious problems with family relationships	64	7	2

Table N° 7

Reasons	Reasons why students drop out according to students and private tutors (%)	
	Students	Private tutors
Difficult courses	36	34
Boring classes	20	44
Have received many warnings	25	16
Repeated grades several times	24	42
Families cannot afford their schooling	19	76
Help care for siblings or relatives at home	9	56
Must work	34	74
Expecting a baby	16	16
School too far away	8	14

As is apparent, there is no agreement among the various actors in the educational system about why students drop out. While principals see the most important reasons as being lack of family support and serious problems in terms of relationships between the children and their parents, private tutors blame the dropout rate more on financial problems and the need to work. To students, the most important issue is that the courses are very difficult, followed by the need to work.

Also, regarding the study of the role of education in compensating for inequality, the FLACSO Report on Youths indicates that there has been a “grade devaluation” in the Argentine school system and that this grade devaluation is the same for state and private school students. The aforementioned report also acknowledges that schools are unable to address social inequalities, inasmuch as learning is standardized for all students, and it emphasizes that the young people accept failure at school as their own. Regardless of the youths’ socioeconomic level, all of them, one way or another, gain access to certain levels of the formal educational system; the main problem is their unequal staying power by virtue of the family group’s socioeconomic level.

Finally, an ethnographic study carried out in two Buenos Aires neighborhoods regarding how the school experience is perceived by youths in working class sectors (Duschatzky, 1999) reaffirms the importance of school to those who live in uncertainty, inasmuch as participating in the school culture entails an opportunity for acceptance. Their presence in the school setting is very highly valued, not just as a means to an end, but because of the symbolic dimension of inclusion.

In short, all the preceding information, which, broadly speaking, is related to the most important problems of Argentine adolescents and youths, as seen from the institutional and academic standpoint, demonstrates that the most serious problems are poverty, the risk of social exclusion through dropping out of school, and unemployment or an informal work arrangement. The conflicts or deficiencies in terms of employment are due to the youths’ limited training for the world of work, in addition to structural problems vis-à-vis unemployment in Argentine society, which mean few new jobs become available each year. The uncertain conditions under which adolescents work, that is, with no guarantees of social protection because of the informal nature and illegality of their employment, are also emphasized. Regarding dropping out of and exclusion from school, the studies show that the group most at risk of dropping out is the most impoverished group. As was also noted, there is no agreement among the different actors in the educational system regarding the reasons why students drop out, although there is a widespread belief that poverty is a major cause, because of which the school would have very little responsibility and room for intervention.

1.3.- Principal interventions in connection with youths and education

As suggested by the aforementioned FLACSO Report on Youths, the policies and interventions required by adolescents and youths should entail participation, creativity, respect, and inclusion of diversity. It was suggested that they: (I) encourage systematic training of human resources and promote coordination by the various state agencies to develop a comprehensive policy on youths; (II) overcome the idea that policies on youths are a minor problem; and (III) coordinate the area of youths with public policies on education, health, work, culture, and sports, to guarantee success. As support for the policies, they stress the need: (i) to ensure that the school addresses the students’ actual problems, imbuing the work of teaching and the schools with basic prevention, community action, and social work; (II) to change from the “encyclopedist” model to one which accommodates “real life,” taking into consideration the students’ experiences and needs, which entails acceptance, valuing, and encouragement of the youth cultures in the educational process; and (iii) to integrate youth cultures with the educational curricula in order to ensure that the students grasp the content by representing it in their own terms. The interventions that have had the most impact in this field have tried to address some of the most urgent problems of adolescents and youths, and are fundamentally aimed at youth promotion and participation, improving their performance and access to the labor market, and increasing the rates of retention and participation in the educational system.

The proposals for the promotion of policies on youths are the responsibility of the National Directorate for Youth under the Department of Social Development of the Ministry of Social Development and Environment. The most recent, the Youths for Youths Program under the National Plan for the Future of Argentina, is a social project which "... stresses the creation of joint networks and participative spaces to enable youths to take a leading role in the development of their city, province, and country." The main objectives of this project are to establish Youth Coordination Desks to bring together representatives of youth organizations, student centers, politically active youths, and so forth, and Youth Houses, to centralize policies directed at youths. Beneficiaries of the program are all youths between the ages of 15 and 29 in the community where it is implemented. Its components are: a) Youth Houses, b) communication and new technologies, to enable youths to learn to use them and meet the requirements of the labor market; for this, to have computer centers at the Youth Houses, training courses, and so forth; c) voluntary youth military service to include youths as liaisons with the State and the Youth Coordination Desks; d) institutional strengthening, including: public policies on youths, management of Youth Houses, participation of youths, and Youth Coordination Desks; e) development of projects involving youth participation, to implement community youth intervention projects; and f) job training, which would be implemented in conjunction with the Ministry of Labor, giving the youths the knowledge they need to meet the requirements of the world of work.

Among the policies aimed at giving excluded adolescents and youths access to the labor market and encouraging employment for youths is that promoted by the Youth Project Program. This consists of "training the low-income, undereducated population so they can acquire practical skills – "know-how" – to enable them to obtain employment. PROAME, funded by the Department of Social Development and consisting of 70 projects under the auspices of NGOs, is also being implemented. It targets at-risk minors; its principal activities involve job training and the creation of "microenterprises." Between 1994 and 1997, the Youth Project trained more than 100,000 people between the ages of 16 and 35, and the most important investment was the one aimed at job training for unemployed youths. The Program's main limitation is that the municipios have few resources and little experience. This weakens the technical nature and management of the projects. Youths who participated in the Youth Project have, on average, an unemployment rate 7% lower than youths who did not participate. Some 25 to 30% of youths who participate in the Youth Project return to secondary school. (Jacinto, 1997, 2000).

From the educational sector and with the goal of improving retention of adolescents and youths in the system, the National Scholarship Program (PNBE) and the Institutional Stay-in-School Projects (PIRE) are being promoted. The PNBE hopes to decrease dropout rates by providing economic assistance to students who are at risk of dropping out because of financial problems. The requirements for obtaining the grant are: a) being Argentinean by choice or birth, b) ages between 13 and 19, c) eligibility to enroll in any year of basic or polimodal education, and d) being a member of a family with limited financial resources. Between 1997 and 1999, Argentina invested more than \$123 million in nearly 260,000 grants. The grant comes to \$600 a year, paid in two installments. Some 96% of the schools set up their own PIREs, which are part of the pedagogical component of the National Student Grant Plan. These involve implementing strategies to improve the academic skills of vulnerable youths. Each school diagnoses the situation, takes actions aimed at retention, and implements the institutional retention project per se. Four alternatives for intervention are proposed: a) expanding the school's functions (by (i) organizing outings and visits, (ii) coordinating actions with institutions that perform social work, and (iii) organizing school clubs); b) improving institutional coexistence (which involves three activities: (i) drawing up rules for coexistence, (ii) encouraging participative experiences for the students, and (iii) organizing tutorial programs); c) presenting tests as a new opportunity for students and teachers and "committing the whole school and diversifying strategies for preparing for them;" and d) teaching the languages of the disciplines through two specific activities such as (i) setting up teaching work spaces focused on the specific languages and (ii) implementing projects for producing texts for the students. One of the most frequently-implemented strategies is exam preparation, which consists of forming groups of students who attend support classes outside of regular hours, with the participation of teachers from the same school or other schools and advanced student-teachers.

Thus, Argentina has implemented a series of initiatives to address what it sees as the most serious problems facing adolescents and youths. But the persistence of some of the most pressing problems makes it advisable to improve on the aforementioned interventions and expand them in the most critical areas, especially in the education sector.

Moreover, civil society plays a significant part in programs for social assistance to adolescents and youths. But the vast majority of the programs are aimed at job training for youngsters who are no longer in school, and very few are implemented in the schools per se to deal with the principal risky behaviors, such as violence, substance use and abuse, and dropping out of school or exclusion from school. Many of the classic programs for preventing these behaviors in other countries, such as mentoring programs or outside counselors for socially disadvantaged youths, are implemented half-heartedly, perhaps because of the persistent belief that the youngsters are at more risk after they leave school.

Also, the activities implemented are still incipient, with meager resources and with few institutions participating. There is much room for participation by civil society in this area, since it can encourage, together with the State, activities to prevent the principal risky behaviors. To date, the most widely-implemented activities are those aimed at pregnant teenagers, consisting basically of training in related matters, reinforcement, support for their return to school, and so forth.

1.4.- Opinions of Argentine adolescents and youths about the educational system, the young peoples' lives, and the country.

Inasmuch as it is of interest for the objectives set forth herein, below is the information considered most relevant from two recent public opinion surveys of Argentine adolescents and youths. This information should be useful in making comparisons with the interviews conducted during the study.

Major findings of the first survey, conducted in 1997 (Sidicaro and Tenti, 1998), were: youths felt that the principal attributes society values in a person are economic status (60%), appearance/fame/power (41%), being a good person (27%), education/intellectual ability (24%), other (12%). The attributes adolescents value most are being supportive/doing things for others (50%), being intelligent/capable (47%), being hip/fun (47%).

The actions considered ethically despicable are misappropriating public funds (78%), drug trafficking (73%), and bribery (66%). Among those considered less despicable are individuals who are chronically absent from work (9%), drunkards (5%), petty thieves (4%), and students who copy (2%).

Regarding education, both the positive and negative opinions of adolescents and youths were varied. For example, young people criticized the syllabi and their content more than relationships with teachers. Young peoples' level of satisfaction with their teachers correlates with their age: only basic education students are very satisfied with their teachers. In secondary school, 34% of students are somewhat dissatisfied or totally dissatisfied with their teachers, while at the university level this increases to 39%.

Youths' opinions about the future of Argentina

In the coming months, Argentina will be	Private School	Public School	University
Better	46	39	20
The same	27	22	26
Worse	21	29	45
Does not know/did not respond	6	10	9

Source: Sidicario and Tenti, *La Argentina de los jóvenes*, UNICEF, 1998.

The second survey was conducted in 1998 (Deutsche Bank, 1999) in Buenos Aires. Some of its results were compared with those of a similar study conducted in 1992. Youths felt the most important values were being sincere (63.2%), always being available for my family (39.9%), and trying to do my best in my activities (36.6%). The option of “not being violent” was ranked 10th out of 13 with 11.3%.

Table N° 9

Most significant difference in young peoples' criteria		
Criteria	1992 (%)	1998 (%)
Try to do my best in my profession	29	37
Always be available for my family	30	40
Be supportive, help others	23	30
Respect others' lives and dignity	36	26
Try to be fair in my dealings with others	13	18

Source: Deutsche Bank, *Jóvenes Hoy*, 1999.

Table N° 10

Differences in life plan options 1992 – 1998

Life plans	1992	1998
Have a professional career	38	54
Have a family	57	71
Care for and protect my parents	25	48
Work very hard	18	31
Help people who are socially weaker	16	31
Learn in order to be knowledgeable	20	34

Source: Deutsche Bank, *Jóvenes Hoy*, 1999.

Some 34% of youths studied in order to know a great deal about life, while in 1992 just 20% did. Also, those who felt that education is basic for successfully entering the labor market increased from 38% in 1992 to 54% in 1998. Among the most positive features of education, young people stressed: “help in developing as an individual” (50.6%); they believe that there is freedom of speech (45.8%); knowledge is useful to 43.8% of youths; and 39.7% believe the teachers are interested in the subject matter and in teaching. Also, some 23.2% believe their teachers are highly competent.

Among the negative characteristics, 44.8% believe “they study by rote, rather than being taught to think;” 38.4% believe the available teaching material is insufficient; 38% believe that education is not stimulating or innovative; and 36.2% criticize the frequent teachers' strikes. Some 36% believe they learn just to “pass the courses.”

Table N° 12

Principal reasons for studying (%)		
Principal reasons	1992	1998
Better job opportunities	66.2	83
A broader view of life	46.1	55.6
Better understanding of what goes on in the world	31.5	44.3
To learn more	39.5	43.6
To be an educated person	38.1	43.4

To have more control over career	34.2	40.4
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Source: Deutsche Bank, *Jóvenes Hoy*, (1999)

More than two thirds of the youths interviewed perform activities unrelated to their vocation. Regarding the main reasons for this, 16% acknowledge that they have not persevered to reach their goals, 13% did not finish the pre-requisite studies, and 11% gave up out of discouragement or fear of failure. When asked, “were you finally able to become what you wanted to be?” 44% of youths responded affirmatively in 1992, but in 1998 that figure had dropped to 33%.

The importance of the two surveys is that they show us some of the young peoples’ recent assessments of central issues such as education, employment, and values that should prevail in society. As these studies show, education is strategically important to Argentine youths, especially for successful access to the labor market. Thus, it is apparent that employment is another central concern. The surveys also point out their perceptions about the future: it is telling that there is more pessimism regarding Argentina among youths who attend public schools (Table N° 8). There is disagreement over the values considered most important, with some stressing being sincere and supportive and doing things for others, while others stress societal values, such as financial status and personal appearance. Without expressing it directly, the young people demonstrate, through those statements, their conflicts vis-à-vis the new environment in which they live.

This background shows, first, that the social conditions in Latin America place adolescents and youths in much more disadvantageous positions vis-à-vis change than their peers in the more developed world, and that consequently they are much more vulnerable to the risky behaviors to which all youths are generally exposed. It also shows that public policy on youths in the region has either given them short shrift or considered them a problem, and that therefore, most of the interventions, which have been very similar in all countries, have not addressed the multiple causes of the problems that affect them most. Also, while the states’ interest in the issue is growing, policies for maintaining and increasing enrollment in secondary school are still incipient. In Argentina, one of the most promising policies is that implemented four years ago, the National Student Grant Program and the Institutional Stay-in-School Projects, which seek to decrease the dropout rate by providing financial assistance to students who are at risk of dropping out because of financial problems, and to improve institutional performance in the face of this risky behavior.

II.- The Study

II.1.- Methodology

The qualitative information on adolescents and youths in Argentina was obtained through semi-structured interviews, focus group meetings, visits to institutions, and review of documentation. The field work was carried out in two phases, which included two visits to Argentina, between February and May 2001. The researchers worked closely with the team that coordinates the Ministry of Culture and Education’s National Scholarship Program. Initially, the work plan was structured around obtaining information from key actors, making visits to institutions, and collecting documentation pertinent to the design of the data collection tool. Based on this material and the first interviews, the student questionnaire was developed, with open questions and closed multiple-choice questions. It was fine-tuned before being implemented. The cities in which the research was conducted were suggested by the National

Scholarship Program to help learn some of the reasons why a percentage of youths receiving grants drop out.

In view of the study's objectives, i.e., to analyze and assess the school-related factors affecting the educational expectations of adolescents and youths in Argentina, the following areas of interest were taken into consideration in developing the tool: socio-demographic and socioeconomic variables and perceptions of the educational system, the world of work, and general problems facing youths, organized into five sections with a total of 98 questions.

Due to the conditions and the time available for the field research, the sample of youths was intentional and not statistically representative. Given the characteristics of the population, urban youths from Buenos Aires predominated. The questionnaire was administered to 260 youths from Buenos Aires, attending 10 day and evening secondary schools, to 108 students from 5 day schools in Resistencia (Province of El Chaco), and to 32 students from 3 day and evening schools in Cañada de Gómez (Province of Santa Fe), for a total of 400 interviews of youths attending school, all in the public sector, most living in outlying areas. The schools selected by the Ministry of Culture and Education were located in underprivileged areas, and a high percentage of their student bodies request financial assistance through the National Student Grant Program. Several focus group meetings were held with students, teachers, private tutors, parents and representatives, to amplify and evaluate the information collected using the survey.

II.2.- Analysis of the results of the questionnaires administered to adolescents and youths in Argentina

II.2.1- Sociodemographic and social data

The first part of the instrument addresses the sociodemographic and social status of the youths interviewed through variables such as sex, age, marital status, type of home, type of family, and so forth. The majority of the youths came from socially disadvantaged sectors. The sample was almost evenly split between the sexes, and the majority of respondents from Buenos Aires and Cañada de Gómez were between 16 and 18 years of age, while most of the respondents from Resistencia were between 13 and 15.

Most are single. Some 2% in Buenos Aires reported being married. Some 12.4% of the Buenos Aires sample, 43.6% of the Resistencia sample, and 3.1% of the Cañada de Gómez sample were receiving grants. Most of the sample attends day sessions in the second, third, and fourth years of secondary education. Interestingly, and contrary to expectations, most of the youths interviewed live with both parents, although the percentage living with both parents is slightly lower in Buenos Aires. Clearly, living with both parents does not eliminate the risks connected with an unstable family situation, but this information is significantly different from the prevailing views of "students who live with two mothers or two fathers and with more than ten siblings, all with different fathers or mothers." On this point, the information is again at variance with general opinion: the majority have one or two siblings and a significant percentage of those living in Buenos Aires (27.6%) have none. Their houses are generally small, modest, and located on the outskirts of the city.

II.2.2- Socioeconomic information

The unstable employment situation of the heads of households was noteworthy. More than a third of the Buenos Aires and Resistencia samples are self-employed. The majority of

those interviewed in Buenos Aires and Resistencia reported that they do odd jobs or are laborers, while in Cañada de Gómez, the percentage of laborers and shopkeepers is higher and the percentage of those doing odd jobs is lower. In Resistencia, the majority of heads of household are unemployed, and in Buenos Aires, a third of the sampled heads of household are unemployed. This situation is less critical in Cañada de Gómez. The percentage of unemployed heads of household reported by the sample is almost double the national total. Considering that the majority who work are in low-skilled jobs or in an informal situation, we can determine the degree of employment precariousness and instability prevalent in the homes of the youths who were interviewed.

Except in Resistencia, probably because of the unemployment and poverty (according to the 1991 INDEC National Population and Housing Census and SIEMPRO, 1995, El Chaco is the Argentine province with the highest percentage of the population between 15 and 24 years with UBNs: 38.5%), other household members work. The majority of the sample report an average family income of less than 500 pesos per month, with a slight difference in Cañada de Gómez. But nearly 30% of the Buenos Aires and Resistencia samples have incomes of less than 300 pesos per month.

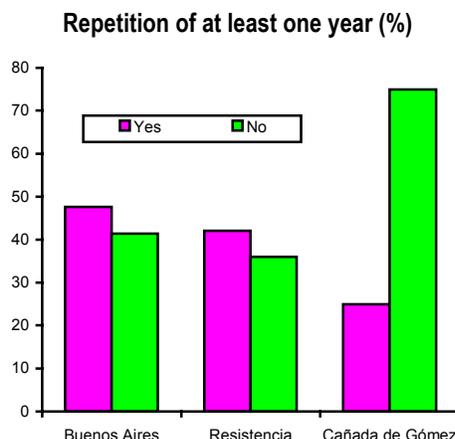
The majority of heads of household have not finished secondary school, which speaks to the low level of education in a high percentage of homes. The lowest levels are found in Resistencia, followed by Cañada de Gómez, with Buenos Aires reporting the highest percentage of heads of household who have finished secondary school.

In summary, on average, the adolescents and youths sampled were disadvantaged, with average household income below the minimums required for subsistence according to official figures, and the head of household's employment status is precarious, to say the least, given their high rate of unemployment and informal status, especially in Resistencia. Similarly, the educational level in most of the homes is insufficient.

II.2.3.- Academic information

In Buenos Aires and Resistencia, almost 50% of those interviewed had repeated at least one year, while in Cañada de Gómez, 25% had. The most problematic years of secondary education were the third and first for Buenos Aires (18.6 and 15.9%) and the first for Resistencia (27.7%), while in Cañada de Gómez it was all three, the first, second, and third, with 9.4 and 6.3% respectively. This confirms that the most complicated years for students, in which the highest dropout rate occurs, are the first and third.

Graph N°1



It is noteworthy that while the lowest percentage of students repeating grades is in Cañada de Gómez, once they repeat, they repeat more often than their peers in Buenos Aires and Resistencia, who repeat grades 15.9% and 22.9% of the time, respectively.

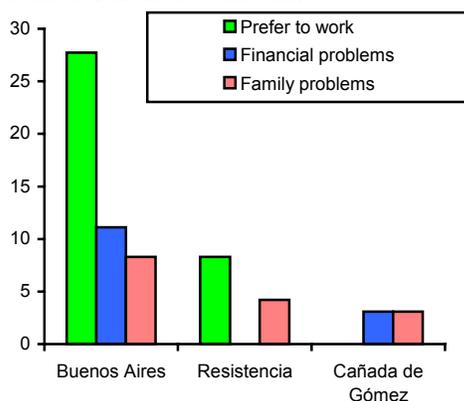
In Buenos Aires, there is a broader range of reasons why students attend the night session, the most important being day work (8.9%) and helping at home (6.2%). In Resistencia they cited lack of room in the day session (17.7%), and in Cañada de Gómez the youths worked during the day (18.8%) or enjoyed going at night (12.5%). In short, the sample shows high risk for dropping out, considering the high percentage that have repeated a year of secondary education. The most critical levels for the students, in terms of repetition and dropping out, are the first and third.

II.2.4.- Opinions of the educational system

The students' opinions of certain aspects of education are more or less consistent. Those from Cañada de Gómez are unanimous in that they enjoy going to school (100%), followed by those from Resistencia (92.1%) and Buenos Aires (88.9%). For all, the major reason they are interested in going to school is that it is necessary for work (Buenos Aires with 19.8%, Resistencia with 14.6%, and Cañada de Gómez with 22.6%). The second most important reason is to have a good income (Buenos Aires 14.9%; Resistencia, 12.3%, and Cañada de Gómez, 16.2%). This is consistent with the youths' viewing education as a means of access to work and economic survival, especially if the level of education at home is low and they believe that this is the reason for their precarious employment situation.

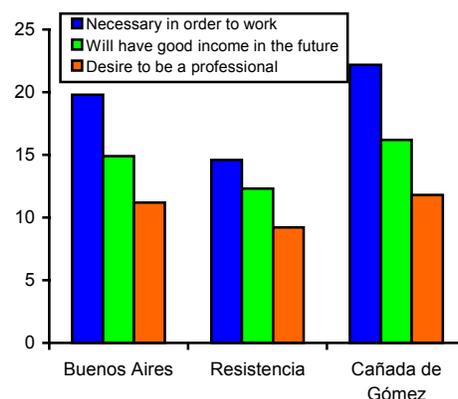
Graph N° 2

Reasons for disinterest in studies



Graph N° 3

Reasons for interest in studies



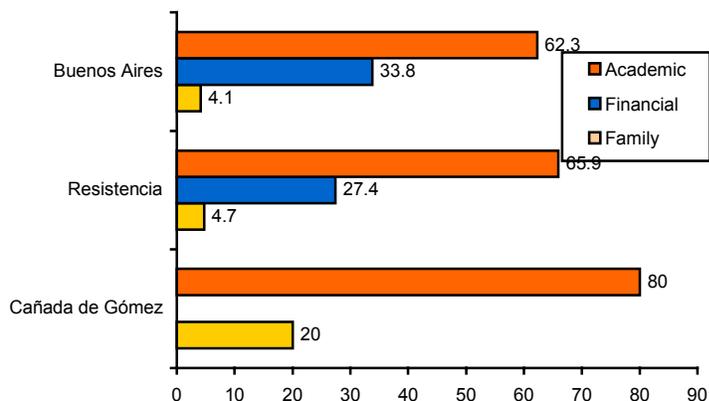
The three groups report completely different reasons for not liking to study. In Buenos Aires, the three most important reasons are preferring to work (27.7%), disagreement with the teachers (11.1%), and financial problems (11.1%). In Resistencia, school conditions are the most important (29.2%), followed by low achievement (16.7%) and the parents' displeasure (16.7%). Those in Cañada de Gómez stated almost unanimously that the reason they disliked

studying was the school conditions (93.8%).

Each city reports different factors affecting adolescents' and youths' interest in studies. In Buenos Aires, the main difficulty is the complexity of the courses (28.4%), followed by lack of funds for study materials (21.6%) and poor test results (14.9%). In Resistencia, the main difficulties are lack of money for materials (23.6%), poor school conditions (22.6%), and distance of the school from home (16%). Those from Cañada de Gómez most often mentioned difficulty with the courses (40%), distance of the school from home (40%), and too much scolding (20%). The most common means of transport to school in Buenos Aires and Resistencia is walking (58.62% and 78.2%, respectively), while in Cañada de Gómez it is biking (53.1%).

Graph N° 4

Principal difficulties affecting interest in studies (%)



Analysis of all this information shows that the majority of the students interviewed are satisfied with the quality of education. However, the difficulties in terms of school they mentioned are all related to the operation of the school system rather than finances. Thus, they report difficulty with the courses, poor examination results, and living very far from school, a problem more critical for Cañada de Gómez and Resistencia. The fact that the majority of youths walk to school does not necessarily mean that the schools are nearby. During the focus group meetings, some mentioned that they walk because they cannot afford the bus.

The fact that almost all the youths interviewed enjoy doing other things speaks volumes about the diversity of their interests, which is typical of young people. Unfortunately, they cannot do them at their schools – which is something that would reinforce their sense of belonging to the school system and help counter the tendency to drop out. The school facilities problem seems to be critical in these peripheral areas, inasmuch as all those interviewed reported lack of suitable space or poor condition or both. One of the most common proposals of all those interviewed, teachers and students alike, was to expand or improve the school facilities to at least accommodate sports. Most of the institutions visited conducted sports activities in nearby parks, in view of everyone and depending on availability, which involves additional transportation expenses for the students and the school.

In all three cities, the most-mentioned things the youths do at home besides studying are shopping, followed by occasionally helping with some work, and doing all the chores. It was also learned through the focus group meetings that the majority care for and are responsible for their younger siblings and the sick and elderly who are at home, which doubtless affects their ability to study and have social relationships and changes their ideas about the present and future.

Regarding the most common problems students in the sample have with their teachers,

in Buenos Aires, disparate treatment was mentioned. In other words, they treat some students well and others poorly (21.9%). The next most common concerns were inability to understand the students' problems (15.94%) and failure to interact or to be friendly (12.75%). Those in Resistencia mentioned the same concerns, while those in Cañada de Gómez most often cited mistreatment of the students (25%) followed by devoting themselves to other activities (9.3%). As is well known, the quality of the relationship with teachers is one of the most important problems affecting students vis-à-vis school. Most youths feel that they are victims of the teachers' arbitrariness, against which they have few defenses. This makes them feel like outsiders. In other words, the absence of strong emotional bonds with the teachers minimizes their feelings of belonging to the institution. It also has very important repercussions for the way they perceive relationships with authority figures, who are associated with iniquity in the most neglected sectors, requiring defensive strategies that contribute nothing to citizenship support and democratic participation. Regarding problems with classmates, those cited most often in Buenos Aires are violence, unruliness, and age differences (21.9%, 15.94%, and 12.75%, respectively). In Resistencia, violence is also reported most frequently (16.5%), but in a higher proportion than in Buenos Aires. Violence is followed by aggressiveness (12.9%), which is also associated with violence, and age differences (10.9%). In Cañada de Gómez, the primary problem is unruly individuals (31.2%), followed by age differences (18.6%) and violence among students (9.3%). As noted, the problems associated with coexistence are the most pronounced, which is consistent with the information obtained through the interviews. Although not long ago school was a refuge or a place removed from the hazards of "the street," there are more and more reports of violence within its walls. Specialists disagree about its causes.

It is not a problem related just to the social group to which one belongs since, in one way or another, all educational establishments and the majority of countries, developed or undeveloped, have seen an increase in school victimization. The literature also mentions the increase in "zero school tolerance," defined as the policy of excluding students from school when they manifest the least behavioral problem, which leads to new acts of rebellion and violence in the educational establishment. Due to the multiplicity of causes that may interact in this complicated problem, it deserves attention, since internal and external variables may be involved. This refers to violence perpetrated on the students by the school, expressed in terms of more and sterner punishment, and diffuse external street violence, which would be used frequently to settle disputes with schoolmates.

To the Buenos Aires youths who were interviewed, the most common problems at school are: student absenteeism (22.1%), violence (15.3%), age differences among students (11.8%), and the students' low rate of participation in activities at the educational establishment (10.3%). To those from Resistencia, violence is again the most serious problem (25.7%), followed by student absenteeism (16.8%) and a lack of support material (13.9%). To those from Cañada de Gómez, the biggest problem is overcrowding in the classrooms (24.3%), which is consistent with the responses to previous questions, in which problems relating to school infrastructure were mentioned. This is followed by violence (18.1%) and student absenteeism (12.1%). Repeated mention of violence as one of the three most important problems reaffirms the urgent need to develop policies to improve coexistence in schools.

Student absenteeism was also mentioned repeatedly at the focus group meetings by students and teachers. Teachers believe it is caused by the abandonment of poor students by their families. But students believe it is due to the school's inflexibility in not tolerating lateness caused either by job schedules that prevent them from arriving on time or by their getting to bed very late as a result of their jobs and then being unable to get up on time and not

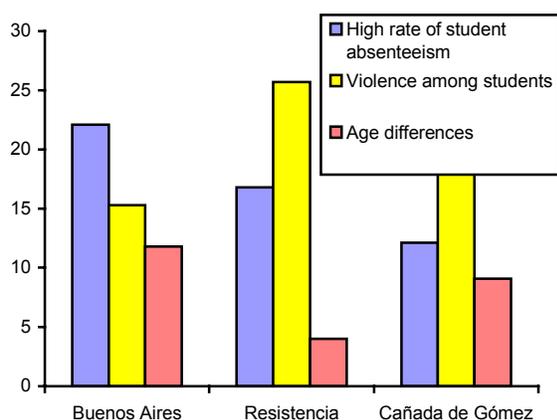
being allowed in. They also mention limited access to study support materials as a serious problem.

Regarding the problems that most affect the other youths they know, the opinions of those sampled vary from city to city. To those from Buenos Aires, financial problems at home (20.4%) are fundamental, followed by lack of interest in studies (17.7%) and teenage pregnancy (15.7%). Some 40.2% of those from Resistencia cite teenage pregnancy as the most important problem, followed by the need to work in order to pay for schooling (14.3%) and alcohol consumption (13.4%). To those from Cañada de Gómez, lack of interest in studies is the number one problem (26.7%), followed by alcohol consumption (20.1%), “other,” (16.5%), and financial problems at home (13.3%). Some of these are fully in keeping with the risky behaviors described as most common among adolescents, such as early pregnancy and abuse of substances such as alcohol. The schools’ programs for the prevention of these problems can be substantially improved to keep youths from feeling at risk and exposed to them.

The majority agree that they do not receive adequate attention, although those from Cañada de Gómez seem to be more satisfied in this area. A majority of youths also report that there are no workshops or symposia addressing their most common problems. Almost everyone thinks they would be useful and should be developed. The Buenos Aires group believes financial support programs would be the most appropriate (23.6%). But almost 70% of the desired programs involve psychological, sexual, academic, parental, and personal or recreational assistance. This indicates that as much as or more than academic assistance, students expect a school to provide support and understanding to help them solve their problems using the only mechanisms available to education: teaching. To those from Resistencia, financial assistance is most sought after (20.5%), although the other assistance programs, e.g., academic support and personal assistance, are also desired. Those from Cañada de Gómez chose psychological guidance (27%), sexual guidance (15%) and parental guidance (14%).

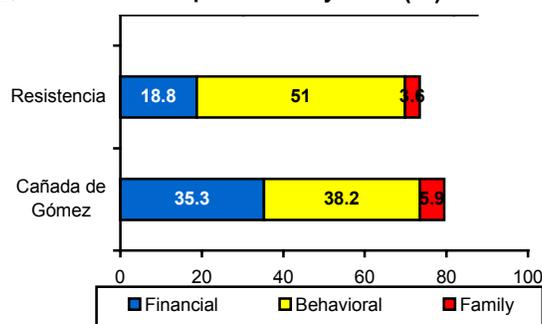
Graph N° 5

Most common problems in school (%)



Graph N° 6

Most common problems of youths (%)



There was significant agreement among the interview subjects in all three cities on recommendations for preventing youths from dropping out of school: they propose a monthly grant (43.2% in Buenos Aires, 44.9% in Resistencia, and 42.4% in Cañada de Gómez). Those from Buenos Aires also mentioned job training programs (18.4%) and flexible schedules (15.1%). In Resistencia, the second option is the half-yearly grant, as is currently in place

(21.3%), followed by flexible schedules (13.5%). To those from Cañada de Gómez, the next most important options were flexible schedules (16.9%), paid internships (13.6%), and the half-yearly grant (13.6%).

Responses to the question of why some students who are receiving grants still drop out varied according to the city and the percentage of grant recipients in the sample. Those from Buenos Aires, where 12.4% of the sample were grant recipients, responded that the grant does not cover their school expenses (26.8%), that they prefer to work and allocate their income themselves (22.6%), and that it is insufficient to cover their personal expenses (20%). Those from Resistencia, where the sample included a higher percentage of grant recipients (43.6%), mentioned that the grant does not cover their school expenses (44.9%), that their parents make them spend that money on other things (21.3%), and that it is insufficient to cover their expenses (13.5%). To those from Cañada de Gómez, the vast majority of whom were not grant recipients, the most important factor is that the youths prefer to work (34.5%), followed by the fact that the grant does not cover all their school expenses (25.9%), and that it is insufficient to cover their personal expenses (19%).

Some 51.4% of those surveyed in Buenos Aires want to go to college after completing their secondary studies, while 34.1% want to take short courses and 10.1% want to work. In Resistencia, college is also the first choice (47%), followed by short courses (15.7%) and marriage (14.9%). Some 66.7% of those from Cañada de Gómez want to go on to college, 16.7% want to take short courses, and 11.1% want to go to work. This makes two things obvious. The first is the preeminence of the value of education and professional careers in social imagery, because of which the majority plan to attend college. The second is associated with the first and the vast discrepancies between the youths' realistic expectations and their desire for inclusion in a program of studies. In fact, most of them are at risk of dropping out of secondary school because of their high failure rate and because a high percentage of them have already thought about dropping out. This gap between their expectations and real opportunities to gain access to society results in frustration, which they experience as their own and on their own terms, and is risky behavior in that they may interpret this gap as a type of exclusion by the school system.

The above notwithstanding, in the case of Buenos Aires, more than a third of those interviewed have already thought about dropping out (35.2%). The percentage is lower in Resistencia (24.8%) and lower still in Cañada de Gómez (18.8%). Of those who have thought about it, there are more girls (23.21%) than boys (17.98%). Some of the reasons mentioned are, in Buenos Aires, that the money is insufficient (26.8%), that they want to work (14%), and that they have many problems (12.7%). In Resistencia, financial reasons are the cause of dropping out in 46% of the sample, followed by having many problems (11.9%). In Cañada de Gómez the order changes slightly, with financial problems and "having many problems" being cited most often (28.6% for both).

Regarding other youths' reasons for dropping out of school, the first mentioned in Buenos Aires is that they no longer enjoy studying (41%), followed by lack of funds (37.0). In Resistencia, the basic reason is that they no longer enjoy studying (32.1%), followed by needing to work (32.6%) and lack of funds (20.7%). In Cañada de Gómez, the reason mentioned most frequently was the need to work (37.1%), followed by no longer enjoying studying (31.4%) and lack of funds (22.9%).

In summary, in this part of the questionnaire, the youths revealed their high level of motivation to study and the high value they place on studying, while strongly emphasizing the problems they face in the school system. The most important problems involve the teachers, difficulty with the courses, the lack of funds for acquiring materials, and the meager internal

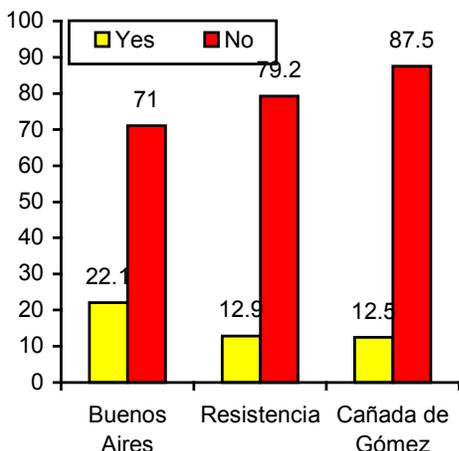
and external support they receive to supplement their education. They also felt that supplementary activities could result in the development of several stay-in-school programs. A significant percentage of the youths interviewed do almost all the work at home, which means they have at least two full-time jobs, at home and at school. Other major problems are violence among their schoolmates, absenteeism among teachers and students, and overage students in some courses.

II.2.5.- Information on the youths' employment situation

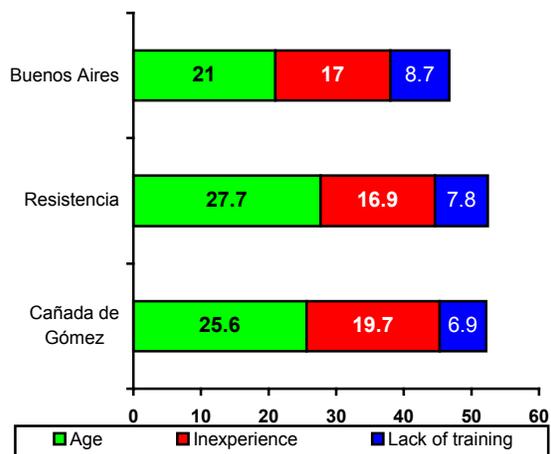
Some 22.1% of the Buenos Aires youths interviewed worked, as compared to 12.9% of those from Resistencia and 12.5% of those from Cañada de Gómez. Thirty-one percent of those from Buenos Aires have been employed for less than six months, and 26.2% for more than a year. Of those from Resistencia, 38.5% have been working for less than six months and 38.5% for more than a year. In Cañada de Gómez, 25% have been working for less than six months and 75% for more than a year. Many of those who are working have been employed for more than a year, which places them at high risk for dropping out. The young men interviewed work most often as sales clerks, pizza delivery staff, leafleters, or assistants in any field, while the young women worked in sales, in cleaning, and as receptionists. This information is consistent with the findings of other studies: the work performed by the young people is very low-skilled, especially that performed by the young women.

The youths who work obtained employment through a family member, an acquaintance, or a friend. Almost none obtained employment through a help-wanted ad, since these types of jobs are not generally advertised publicly because of the low skill levels required. In this case, the responses from the three cities are similar. The majority of the Buenos Aires subjects work more than six hours a day or "as much as they can," which applies to delivery or leafleting work. In Resistencia, 38.5% work less than three hours, and the rest work between six hours and "as much as they can." Those from Cañada de Gómez work more on weekends (62.5%), some 25% work from six to eight hours a day, and 12.5% work three hours a day. Clearly, the number of hours they must work limits them if it does not outright prevent them from fulfilling their school responsibilities.

Graph N° 7
Employment status of the youths (%)



Graph N° 8
Reasons why it is difficult to find employment (%)



The majority of the youths work in stores or businesses, are self-employed, and work on the street. There are no appreciable differences among the three cities. The majority said they earn 300 pesos or less. The youths report that they work to help their families, but also to cover their personal expenses. Those in Resistencia allocate more than 50% of their earnings to help their families, probably because of the critical social and unemployment situation there. In Buenos Aires and Cañada de Gómez, they allocate approximately 50% to help their families, but the rest is used for their personal expenses.

The responses indicate that the youths work for practical reasons and for reasons of self-esteem. In Buenos Aires, 24.7% work because the family needs the money, but the rest work to cover their expenses, because they enjoy working, because the opportunity presented itself, and to pay for their schooling, all of which reflect financial need, but also the desire to do something by themselves, to demonstrate that they can and that they are adults who can handle things themselves. The percentages of those who work because the family needs the money are almost identical in Resistencia and Buenos Aires, as are the percentages that work to consolidate themselves vis-à-vis school, their families, and their friends, as well as to meet financial needs. In Cañada de Gómez, the percentage of those working because the family needs the money is lower than in the other two cities. The majority of the youths in Buenos Aires and Resistencia enjoy working, some 61.9% and 53.8%, respectively. Those from Cañada de Gómez report less satisfaction with work, although 37.5% did not answer, which could mean they do not know yet whether they feel better working or attending school.

Work is rewarding to them because it enables them to help their families, which makes the youths feel secure and satisfied. To those from Buenos Aires, learning at work is less important than the above (20.6%), followed by covering personal needs (17.7%). To those from Resistencia, the second most common reason for satisfaction with work is the ability to cover their personal needs (23.8%), followed by the fact that it makes it easier to attend school (14.3%). In Cañada de Gómez, 50% did not report the reasons why they liked work, while 25% said it was because they were learning, and the remaining 25% said it was because they received a fair wage.

For those from Buenos Aires who are not satisfied by work, the reasons are that they are underpaid (27.7%), they are made to do the most undesirable jobs, they don't earn enough to cover their expenses, and they are having problems with their studies, 16.7% each. In Resistencia, 50% of those interviewed did not report the reasons why they do not like work. Reasons mentioned were that they are underpaid, they are having problems with their studies, they are not learning at work, and they don't earn enough to cover their expenses (12.5% each). Those from Cañada de Gómez reported that they don't earn enough to cover their expenses (34%), they are underpaid (22%), they are having problems with their studies, they are not learning at work, and the work environment is unsatisfactory (11% each).

Their expectations for job stability are not very high, except in Resistencia (69.2%), probably because it is more difficult to obtain work there and the young people prefer to keep the job they have whatever it takes. The young people do not remain long in these types of jobs, either because they are high turnover positions as a result of high demand for them, or because of the unfavorable working conditions.

The sample interviewed in the three cities reported that almost a third had worked before and between a fourth and a third are currently seeking work, which means that more than 50% of the young people interviewed are working, are seeking work, or have worked before. This is an indication of the size of the group which is at high risk for dropping out, considering also the percentage of students who said they had already thought about dropping out and the percentage who have already repeated a year.

In the three cities, the majority of those who have given up a job did so because it was temporary (38.2% in Buenos Aires, 17.9% in Resistencia, and 30% in Cañada de Gómez). The next most reported reasons were low pay (21.1%, 14%, and 15%, respectively), the hours, and problems in connection with their studies. Regarding the reasons why those who sought work had not found it, those from Buenos Aires mentioned the lack of offers and inexperience (both 40.4%). Those from Resistencia mentioned the lack of offers (39.4%), inexperience (18.2%), and their lack of training (15.2%). Those from Cañada de Gómez mentioned the lack of offers (67%), “other,” (22%), and inexperience (11%).

Most of the youths in the three cities felt that it is very difficult for young people to find work. There was near-unanimity on the reasons: age, inexperience, schoolwork, and the situation in the country.

In short, the situation of young people who work, as indicated in the questionnaires, is very difficult, because it is not easy for them to find jobs, and when they do, they have many problems keeping them and keeping up with their schoolwork. Work for these youths is a very important means of legally obtaining funds to cover their expenses and needs which, as is well known, are motivated to a large extent by the need to assert oneself and other needs engendered by the consumer society. In this respect, the cities in which they live are not a factor – their problems with work and school are the same all over. For most, the ideal would be to combine work and study, but neither their jobs nor their schools permit this. Their jobs make it impossible because of the number of hours they must work, the types of jobs they perform, which wear them out, their limited experience and qualifications for better-paid jobs, and the fierce competition for those positions, which affects their ability to negotiate for better entry conditions or to keep up their studies. The schools make it impossible because of the schedules and the difficulty of fulfilling their responsibilities and keeping up with their studies. In addition, difficult family situations can impose urgent needs that conflict with studies (which are also very important), and the reality is that if they have to work, they have to quit studying, which increases the dropout rate.

II.2.6.- The interviewed youths' perception of education and other matters of general interest

With regard to the most common perceptions among the adolescents and youths interviewed, there are few differences from city to city. Some of the most persistent perceptions are: that their performance problems are their sole responsibility and are due to their failure to exert enough effort or to their need to work; that their future depends only on their abilities and personal effort; and that an education does not ensure success in life, but rather, luck or good relationships are decisive factors. The preeminence of these beliefs or perceptions is clearly correlated with the sociocultural setting of the modern age, in which values more closely associated with individualism and personal management of risk prevail.

It is interesting to note that while violence is very troubling to them in school, they feel it much more strongly outside of school. This points to great opportunities for intervention by the school, since the young people still feel protected and safeguarded from external hazards of violence and adulthood there. With regard to teenage pregnancy, they say that while younger and younger girls become pregnant they do not do so because they want to leave home. Although they understand that this is a growing problem and that it hits closer to home all the time, they associate its high frequency with irresponsible behavior or the girls' lack of awareness.

They reiterate that the most common problems of youths are, in Buenos Aires: poverty (18.2%), drug use (16.1%), violence (9.7%), and lack of sex education (9.1%). Those from

Resistencia cite lack of sex education (23%), alcohol consumption (15.8%), and drug use (12.9%). Those from Cañada de Gómez mention alcohol consumption (26.4%), poverty, (20.6%), and lack of sex education (8.8%).

The young people in Buenos Aires and Resistencia agreed that the best job opportunities were for soccer player, computer expert, and professional, in that order. To those from Cañada de Gómez, computer expert is first, followed by soccer player and professional. The girls in the three cities think their best opportunities would be as professionals, executive secretaries, or administrative workers. In Resistencia, modeling is very popular.

The young people again reiterate their responsibility for failure at school, disagreeing with the hypothesis that performance problems are due to the limitations and poor conditions at the school (except in Resistencia, where opinion is clearly divided) or the teachers' training. There was more disagreement about student-teacher relations, which are conflictive, and there is a perception that the teachers have so much work that they can never keep up.

There is more agreement than disagreement with statements such as, "I know people who have finished high school and are having problems at work because they are not well trained," and "I know people who have spent half their road studying and they earn the same as or less than others who have not." And there are doubts or less unanimity on, "When you work and go to school, you find out that school is harder and offers fewer benefits than work." The students' opinions about these statements indicate some of their doubts about the quality of the education they are receiving, since they may have reason to believe that the accumulated capital is not very useful to them in the world of work.

The young people are skeptical to pessimistic about the future of Argentina. They are more optimistic about the immediate future of education, since the majority feel it will be the same or better. They are much more optimistic about their personal futures: in the three cities, the majority believe it will be better in the short run.

II.3.- Focus group results

In the interviews and focus groups, the young peoples' opinions basically agree with almost all the statements made by those who responded to the questionnaire. In general, their greatest concerns centered on their school performance and school life, their problems as young people, and their social status. Regarding education, their opinions centered on limitations they saw in their schools, the dropout problem, the reasons for failure at school, absenteeism, the grant program, discrimination against impoverished or foreign students, problems with teachers, and the lack of relevance, pertinence, and usefulness of most of the courses. They strongly emphasized the host of problems they faced in doing well in their studies. They often referred to the lack of materials and computers, convinced that their technological literacy will make an important difference in their opportunities to obtain employment. They are very concerned about the relevance of what they are studying since, for the majority, education is seen as a tool and the vehicle for escaping from poverty.

Their positions on ethnic and social discrimination are conflicting. On the one hand, they strongly condemn it. On the other hand, being severely socially disadvantaged, they feel that it is unfair for others to compete with them in a very difficult world, where one must fight harder and harder for less and less. The struggle for survival is very clearly drawn here. But they also feel social discrimination. They feel that their status and physical appearance work against them in gaining access to society and employment, and they report that they sometimes have to lie about where they live.

Their responses and positions on dropping out were vague or conflicting. This is because they are not clear on the reasons for dropping out. Although they feel responsible for their own failures, they also feel they have done everything they can to stay in school. The easiest answer, then, is lack of interest, indifference, changing the subject, and changing their minds about school. It continues to be good, but since it was not for them, it does not interest them. The opinions of the younger individuals were noteworthy. They showed more uncertainty, lack of interest, and indifference than those who had already gone beyond the second year and could see their future in school more clearly. In general, and there was universal agreement on this point, the most critical age is 14 to 16, when the personal, family, and social pressures are strongest or have more impact on dropping out.

Other problems mentioned were violence, teenage pregnancy, their critical relationships with the police, and to a lesser extent, family problems. Violence, they feel, has no cause, but it does not seem strange to them. In other words, they are not surprised that it manifests itself that way, as vague, without a specific objective. They feel teenage pregnancy is the result of the girls' irresponsibility and lack of common sense. They do not hold the young men responsible at all, rather seeing them as neutral. The critical relationship between all youths and the police is well known: they feel they are hounded, persecuted, and disrespected by the police, from whom they get an inappropriate impression of their citizenship rights and authority figures. Their proposals for changing education are specific. They want better-equipped schools, more teachers, and access to the new technologies. They feel committed to education, but they want school to be committed to them, through certain opportunities and support to help them complete their studies.

The teachers who were interviewed are very sensitive to the students' social situation, but their opinions about what school can do for them and their situation vary. They are professionals who are very attentive to the political and social setting, and they constantly point to what they consider declines in their salary and social position. In general, the teachers in the most traditional schools tend to agree about the reasons young people fail at school, which do not focus on school, but on the failing students' underprivileged environment. They have more stereotypical views of the young peoples' poverty and families, which, in the majority of cases, are out of touch with reality. They see school as neutral and having no responsibility for the deterioration around it. Consequently, they see their ability to retain the young people as minimal. The teachers in the most flexible schools, on the other hand, feel that their job is to keep the children in school at all costs and by whatever means possible. They work a great deal on their self-esteem and personal situation, without neglecting their scholastic performance. They feel that they should not make concessions in that respect for fear of defeating the main objectives of education. They feel that the social situation is a constraint, but not an insurmountable obstacle, and they demonstrate that when teachers change their attitudes, the youngsters' distrust and alienation changes to greater commitment and sense of belonging. Private tutors generally have a different perspective on the problems of adolescents and youths than teachers do, because they have a different type of closeness to them and their problems and generally come from the same area in which the school is located or are former students hired by the school.

The majority of parents and representatives interviewed support their children staying in school with all the means available to them (which are, of course, very limited), despite the evidence of the poor education they are receiving. They are grateful because they feel that they have an opportunity to change their children's lives and make them different from their own, which are marked by poverty caused fundamentally by their lack of education. The majority of those interviewed had not completed their secondary education, had no books at home, and

lacked any resources or the minimum conditions to guarantee their children additional support for their scholastic lives. Although conditions cause them to approve of their children going to work, and even require them to do so, they insist that they not leave school for any reason, seeing it as their only real opportunity to change their social status. They see dropping out as stemming from their children's desire to help them financially, the limited opportunities to study, the difficulties they face at work that prevent them from going to school at the same time, and disappointment due to lack of opportunities.

The majority of parents interviewed were adversely affected by unemployment. In those cases, the children needed to work to support the family. In many cases they were the family's sole source of income. That role reversal also affected their relationships with their children, to whom they necessarily granted more freedom, independence, and respect for their decisions, even if the decisions involved dropping out of school. The role of parental guardianship and protection changes to one of financial dependency. Their limited circumstances, and those of their households, prevent them from providing any support to the school in its teaching function or attending meetings, since all their available time is used in pursuit of survival. For example, some of their homes suffer frequent flooding and lighting outages, and none has access to any type of materials to supplement or assist with their children's homework. So they give total responsibility for their children's education to the school and seek more understanding as the failures mount up, and they blame the failures on their children's lack of ability or lack of interest, or on the strain of working and going to school at the same time.

II.4.- Good Practices

Two of the schools visited in Buenos Aires were experimenting with developing innovative strategies to keep students in school. These schools, E.M.E.M. No. 4 and E.M.E.M. No. 5, under the authority of the government of the city of Buenos Aires, are located in outlying areas of the city (Villa Lugano and Barrio Mitre), and their student bodies are comprised almost entirely of impoverished adolescents and youths, many of whom apply for student grants. In relation to other institutions that are similar in structure, organization, and location, these schools, according to figures from the National Scholarship Program, have higher average retention rates, especially at the critical levels. Their basic strategy includes making the mechanisms for retaining students more flexible and fostering more open communication with and understanding of the students and their specific circumstances by teachers and administrators. In practice, this enhances the students' emotional commitment to the institution and their teachers, renewing their interest in and efforts to stay in school.

The visits to these institutions revealed a marked difference in their school climate, with more horizontal relationships among the members of the educational community prevailing. Also, administrators and teachers are more involved in the students' *real* world: they know each student's history and specific circumstances perfectly well, and avoid stereotypes and preconceived notions. The focus group meetings with students from these schools revealed two interesting factors. The first is the students' strong emotional commitment to the school, the administration, their teachers, and private tutors, and the second is the differences between the general perceptions of education of those just entering the school and those who have been there for a while. The new students are more cautious with their opinions, have lower

expectations about their own futures, and are less committed to the institution, since they hardly know it. But those who have been students there for a year or more have changed their viewpoint about themselves and their educational opportunities. The institutional flexibility these schools exhibit is more the personal commitment of the administrators and teachers than initiatives or policies of the municipio. So, if they had more support or flexibility at other levels, they could significantly increase their achievements in terms of keeping students in school.

III.- Preliminary Conclusions

Some of the study results essentially confirm those previously obtained in studies in Argentina and other countries in the region: for the adolescents and youths from the most underprivileged sectors, education is a highly important symbolic asset to which they have less and less access due to institutional problems that are fundamentally related to school. The increasingly precarious social context of these youths contributes to a reordering of their main priorities. But the majority try to commit to a long-term educational plan so they can achieve better access to the labor market. The problems they confront, some associated with their own abilities, educational resources, and accumulated cultural capital, and others associated with the institutions' resources, prevent them from completing secondary school and thus achieving the minimum requirements for jobs that will enable them to reverse their social exclusion. The school, for its part, faces several strategic challenges. It must keep current and modernize, not just in the technological sphere, but in terms of changing the institutional climate, which promotes, at certain levels and under certain specific conditions, the exclusion from school of socially disadvantaged adolescents and youths. Other conclusions of the study are:

- 1.- Argentina's scholastic coverage rates and quality indicators place it among the Latin American countries with the most educational assets. But in the most recent five-year period, some indicators of the numbers of students pursuing an education and remaining in school have been affected by the growing dropout rate at the secondary level.
- 2.- Regarding public policy for reducing high educational risk in the underprivileged population, Argentina has developed, under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture and Education, two very important programs: the National Scholarship Program and, under this, the Institutional Stay-in-School Projects, which have achieved many of their objectives.
- 3.- On a very preliminary basis, it is possible to assess some of the trends in connection with the global change in the life of the most underprivileged adolescents and youths. With regard to their personal, day-to-day life, the absence of the notion of the long term and the future, and their increased tendency to grow accustomed to risk and accept it as a part of daily life (against which they have very few personal or symbolic resources), are noteworthy. Changes in some traditional family roles are foreseen, less in connection with the restoration and reconfiguration of models than with concept of masculinity and the father, the classic provider of goods and security, when the financial situation forces him to share that role with or delegate it to the adolescent or youth. This has implications for a change in hierarchy, ability to negotiate, and so forth. And it is most clear that this population's lack of competencies and cultural capital prevent it from gaining access to the labor market and that the conditions of labor flexibility and restructuring affect its ability to negotiate better pay and protection.
- 4.- Also, in general terms, it could be said that some of the initial assumptions are confirmed. To impoverished adolescents and youths, education is a basic asset, whether as a tool or in its own right. The combination of stumbling blocks to educational success is a very big obstacle

for a population permanently exposed to multiple risks. Based on what was observed, the majority of those who drop out of school do so, not because they do not want to study, but because they cannot cope with the educational demands, especially of a pedagogical nature. This is part of a protracted process of “exclusion from school,” which generally begins with the adolescents’ and youths’ repeated failure at the lower levels of secondary education and ends with dropping out for good. Also, it was learned how the social conditions rob this group of its basic legacy: its youth. In this respect, their dropping out is even more traumatic, since it prevents them from staying in the one place where they can continue to be young.

5.- Although grants are a very important, fundamental mechanism for compensating economically underprivileged adolescents at risk of dropping out, the ability to keep them in the system is compromised by the educational reality. In other words, the problem is not just financial, but also involves the quality of the education they receive. Hence, there is a need to supplement the financial benefit with programs to improve institutional quality.

6.- The study results also show that the majority of the population interviewed is already at high risk for dropping out, due to the large numbers of youths who have already accumulated scholastic failures, who work, or have worked and who have already thought about quitting school. The sample also showed that girls are more at risk than boys: women account for the highest percentage of those who want to drop out and represent the segment that has the fewest opportunities to enter the labor market. Consequently, they would be employed in lower-skilled or more undesirable jobs. Women confront the additional risk of teenage pregnancy.

7.- The study confirms that those at highest risk for dropping out and school abandonment are 13 to 16 years old and in years 1 to 3 of secondary education. Those youths who make it past the third level are much less likely to drop out. This is partly because they have already invested more time in their studies and have survived some of the most difficult hazards. Also, the highest percentage of youths who fail and repeat the grade are in years 1 to 3, making this the best place for compensatory pedagogical intervention and emotional support.

8.- The road to dropping out seems to start with failing in some year one or more times, and/or starting to work. Youths who are performing well rarely drop out. The school cannot prevent or control these students’ working. But it can enhance its role and strengthen protection against failure through more extensive programs to prevent risky behavior and by developing more flexible scheduling, homework, and similar policies vis-à-vis the youths most at risk of dropping out – those who work and/or have repeated a grade.

9.- Immigrants – mostly Bolivians and Peruvians – are at high risk. In recent years, this group has grown significantly in the schools located in peripheral areas. This group is even more disadvantaged than the most disadvantaged Argentine groups, having less social capital and suffering discrimination because of its ethnic origin. These are additional variables that traditionally play a part in school abandonment.

10.- The families of the youths who were interviewed have no educational resources with which to assist or support their children in their instruction and training. They have no tools (reference books, literature, newspapers, specialized magazines, computer), and no suitable space for the young person to do his homework. They cannot encourage supplementary activities, since the young people work in or outside of the home; nor are they in a position to supervise their use of free time. Also, due to the type of work they have access to, the area in which they live, and the frequent role-reversal vis-à-vis the family provider, it is very difficult for them to establish effective mechanisms of control over their adolescent children’s educational performance. Furthermore, it is extremely difficult for the families to participate on an ongoing basis in the various activities the school proposes, since they are struggling fiercely

just to survive and they do not have the necessary time. And, of course, the educational level in the home is very low.

11.- The youths in the sample also do not have access to supplementary educational resources at school. For those who attend, either there is insufficient space (the majority of schools visited lacked even the space required for physical education activities) or, since they work all day on different shifts, the only time they can use the facilities is when they are in class. Nor do they have space at home. The lack of access to supplementary educational resources has a high impact on failure and dropping out.

12.- Another factor which comes into play in failure at school is teacher absenteeism. If chronic absenteeism of teachers is added to the difficulties in gaining access to supplementary educational resources, it becomes clearer that the causes of students' failure are not just related to their family or social environment, but are often related to specific problems associated with the school organization. Teacher absenteeism is even higher in the evening session which, as is well known, has a higher at-risk population.

13.- The following problems were stressed by the adolescents and youths in the questionnaires and the focus groups: teacher absenteeism, their own performance in school, the lack of educational resources and materials, the outdated technology, the inadequate infrastructure, the practical inadequacy of their study materials, and the inflexibility of the institution. The combination of certain or several of these factors fosters failure, which leads to disenchantment, interest in doing nothing or working if possible, followed by dropping out for one reason or another.

14.- Other problems that distress youths attending school are violence, the age differences among students, student absenteeism, teenage pregnancy, and the abuse of substances such as alcohol and drugs. Although the Ministry of Culture or Education or the municipalities are starting some programs to prevent these problems, the multiplicity of factors involved or the lack of support and continuity sometimes strip them of the necessary effectiveness. The young people demand programs to provide psychological assistance, sexual guidance, conversations with the parents, and vocational guidance, among other things. Many schools in the most underprivileged sectors do not have these services, when this is where they are most needed. When they exist, they have very little capacity to address the complexity and heterogeneity of problems experienced by the youths in those settings, and the young people have no one to turn to. Thus, there is a need to increase these types of programs in schools with high percentages of at-risk students, by strengthening the psychopedagogical staffs and implementing the use of floating pedagogical, vocational, emotional, and similar types of counselors or mentors.

15.- The young people are also concerned about their need to work in relation to their school performance, since when they work their performance falls even farther, from levels that were already minimal. Since many of the youths drop out of school once they go to work, it would be desirable to consider the experiences of schools such as EMEM No. 5 or EMEM No. 4. While they continue to demand that students keep up fully with their schoolwork, these schools are more flexible about absences and latenesses, understanding that they are the result of the double – often triple - shifts these young people work, including taking care of things at home and siblings. It is also necessary to ensure the rights of the youths who enter the labor market, since their employment is often illegal and subject to employer abuse. More than justice, which cannot be denied in this case, pedagogy should take precedence, in that the young people should not learn that the standard for relationships with authority or power is just arbitrariness, since that could have disastrous consequences in their lives as citizens.

16.- The teachers have a strong sense of abandonment in connection with their work in these schools. They feel overwhelmed by the social conditions and by the students' many problems.

Consequently, they often fall back on stereotypes and pre-established ideas in addressing the problems. Given their circumstances and characteristics, these schools need teachers who are specially trained for this work and who enjoy strong institutional support so they can more easily read the prevailing logic of interaction and communication.

17.- The visits showed that some of the schools have decreased the dropout and abandonment rates by implementing a clear, well-defined pedagogical plan and installing a quality teaching team and administration. The intent is, fundamentally, to afford more institutional flexibility, increased emotional support, and teachers who establish more horizontal relationships with the young people. These schools could increase their retention rates even more if they had the resources to increase the amount of time spent providing psychological support and if they had access to different teaching strategies to increase the young peoples' sense of belonging to the institution. Also, since violence and teenage pregnancy are increasing in these schools, it is suggested that, in addition to prevention policies, some of the initiatives that have been established be strengthened. This would include setting up nursery schools staffed by former students of the school who share its philosophy, etc. These projects' success is associated not just with certain compensatory programs for pedagogical support -- very necessary and very helpful to the young people in this context -- but also with the change in climate and school culture, which is committed more to giving all students a sense of inclusion and belonging.

18.- Regarding the National Scholarship Program, the majority of those interviewed extolled its importance and the need for it. But the time periods established for providing the funds must be honored. In other words, the funds should be provided during the school year for which the grant was approved. Otherwise, it loses a very important part of its real and symbolic value as compensation and assistance for the acquisition of study materials. Although it is clear that the amount allocated sometimes covers family needs that also affect the young peoples' ability to study, the fact remains that if it comes at the right time, the young people can use some of the funds to buy their materials. This would encourage them more and make them more committed to their studies.

IV.- Recommendations

Considering all the Argentine Ministry of Culture and Education's successful and promising dropout prevention policies, the first suggestion entails expanding and strengthening the National Scholarship Program and the Institutional Stay-in-School Projects, which are highly successful in keeping the neediest adolescents and youths in school. Also recommended is significant strengthening of all the successful experiments in changing the educational climate, since they hold great promise for reversing the trends associated with the culture of school exclusion.

Other strategies are also recommended for addressing the institutional causes of dropping out. To increase the numbers of those who graduate and those who remain in the school system, the most successful strategy is to foster a setting and structure that enable the school to design policies for effectively dealing with the at-risk population. This strategy includes developing primary and secondary prevention programs to support that population. The school cannot reverse the consequences of the social situation. But it can use various programs to support those who are in the worst position in order to offset, by themselves and through their mere attendance at the institution, the deficits caused by belonging to needy social groups.

The programs that focus on changing the school culture and supporting the most vulnerable young people have been proven to be effective in controlling and decreasing the risk factors and in enhancing protection of the adolescents and youths from dropping out, poor

school performance, and vulnerability to social hazards. The strategy of using multiple components or a mix of different types of activities makes it possible to address the broad range of school experiences and the multiple paths which the problem of dropping out and failure in school follow. Thus, the adolescents and youths will see that the institution values them, recognizes their vital capabilities, their ability to understand complexity, and their handling of personal relationships and their complicated worlds. This will increase their commitment to and integration into the school and their motivation to learn. The suggested activities also seek to bridge the gap between school and the real world, giving more weight to what the youngsters say. This will also result in better citizenship training for the youngsters. The basic purpose of the proposed interventions is to help decrease the dropout rate by taking actions to prevent and control risky behaviors and to strengthen the institutions vis-à-vis the new challenges to adolescents and youths. Other objectives are to develop a set of interventions to improve what the educational institution has to offer; to enhance the quality, capacity, and flexibility of the school system's mechanisms for dealing with at-risk youngsters; to improve youngsters' integration into the school system by implementing various programs and creating new bonds to encourage them to stay, developing primary prevention programs for adolescents and youths at high risk for dropping out, and designing and promoting programs to deal with those vulnerable to teenage pregnancy, school violence, and other social hazards. This will significantly increase the school system's ability to retain the most vulnerable youngsters. Some of the most promising programs involve institutional strengthening, meaning changing the school ethos and culture, training and raising awareness of administrators and teachers regarding critical issues, and various initiatives and support for the school's and the youngsters' extracurricular activities. Finally, actions are needed to warn and take care of youngsters who are vulnerable and at social risk through primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention programs, in order to give the most exposed youngsters institutional compensation mechanisms to better equip them to deal with situations involving social risk.

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