

A law to create and improve educational information units in schools in Argentina

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Abstract:

The ability to generate laws can mean a starting point within the design of public policies. Law 26917 of School Libraries and Education Information Units System, recently enacted by Presidential Decree in Argentina, not only recognises the value of libraries and librarians in educational institutions, under public or private management, but also empowers access to reading and knowledge. Systemic actions under jurisdictional networks converge into a national system spaces.

This legislation, Law 26917, is the result of a long process of discussion and consensus in all the country's jurisdictions. It has been promoted by the Ministry of National Education through the National Library of Teachers (Biblioteca Nacional de Maestros). The proposal, submitted in 2011, was collectively and federally developed with the continued involvement of teams from the Federal Networks of the National Library of Teachers. The legislation is part of the Law of National Education No. 26,206 and is the first specialized and complementary standard of Article 91, which supports the need for creation and strengthening libraries and information units in schools of different levels and modalities. Among other things, this law differs from any previous initiative in its recognition, not only of the importance of libraries but of school museums, school archives and other information units.

This law seeks to address the diversity of learning scenarios present along and across the country. Thus, it becomes a fundamental part of public policy for the management of information and knowledge in the information units of the educational system. Our paper deals with the process that goes all the way from the existence of demand to the enactment of the law that seeks to democratize access to information and knowledge for the entire educational system. We also discuss the new challenges ahead in order to generate economic, organizational and human resources able to meet the law's articles.

Keywords: Library legislation, School libraries, Education, Public policies, Information access

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The origins of Argentina's Biblioteca Nacional de Maestros are immersed in the modernizing project of the so-called Argentine Generation of 1880, over 140 years ago. From its inception, Biblioteca Nacional de Maestros has tried to implement librarianship policies aimed at updating and improving the training of librarians, teachers and students across the country. The Biblioteca Nacional de Maestros comes from the first National Education Act, the Law 1420, and from its educational information management model which reveals a deliberate pedagogical approach that includes the creation of school libraries and school museums, becoming the first national public policies designed for the development of these institutions in our national history.

Since then, and for decades, school libraries have allowed the construction of citizenship with the inclusion of enormous waves of immigrants that came from Europe to Argentina and who very often had to adopt a new language as a passport to a new culture.

It is important to emphasize this longstanding foundational aspect of school libraries: it has to do with the important place that school libraries in the Argentine education system have had as specialized institutions within the school. An educational mark inside the school, linked to research, methods of reading and production of educational resources such as collections, reading texts and journals that are part of the historical background of the Biblioteca Nacional de Maestros.

This early and innovative direction for school libraries changed to an uncertain fate in the 1970s. School libraries were not exempt from the stagnation that most Argentinian libraries suffered since the 1970s, a time while new information technologies began to set a new paradigm around the world. Our country suffered years of dictatorship that aborted the possibility of change. State censorship regarding reading and writing freedom was common. Freedom of thought, action and even the lives of the professionals in charge of libraries were threatened.

With the restoration of democracy in 1983, the school libraries had a brief awakening but the National Educational Reform, embodied in the Act 24195, did not mention the word "library" even once (unlike Law 1420 which reserved an entire chapter to it). The new pedagogical foundations of this law prioritized using classroom collections instead of proper school libraries. Libraries became classrooms while millions of books were distributed with no plan. School librarians were pedagogically excluded from education practices and institutional projects; their education deteriorated as well.

School librarians heard about new technology and information literacy, but without computers, they were in survival trenches with only file cards and good intentions as their weapons. Of course, this was not the outlook in all Argentinian schools: there were principals and teachers who appreciated the good practices of the past, and a few jurisdictions even passed provincial laws for their school libraries. These small gains were enhanced when the Biblioteca Nacional de Maestros reclaimed its natural leading place for school libraries from within the Ministry of Education. The Biblioteca Nacional de Maestros took the helm to begin navigating towards federal improvement.

In 1993, the Biblioteca Nacional de Maestros regained its leading role. At the Biblioteca Nacional de Maestros, our staff repaired our own building in order to face the 21st century challenges, and we installed a pedagogical role model that slowly awakened librarianship into aspirations for school libraries in cities, valleys, mountains, deltas and plains of the country and at different educational levels, from pre-school to teacher training establishments.

The Biblioteca Nacional de Maestros established a national program for developing networks of school libraries across the country: BERA (Argentina's School and Specialized Libraries), and we designed and developed management software that connected to the world of new technologies. By the decision of the directors and librarians and the political will of some provincial governments, to begin to understand the importance of these institutions and the formation of its new library, the historical imprint regains his vision of reading for all, now other social contexts, where again the school should be an inclusion factor to address new gaps that are generated from the digital world, from the multiple literacies, and with them, the informational.

In this long recovery of our school libraries in Argentina, agreements with each province took place in order to systematize resources. Bottom-up public policies were designed, but they were not enough to anchor modernization in each province. Argentina's governance is federal, and provinces have autonomy of decision. In order to achieve national consensus we needed new tools: legislative acts discussed and voted on the Congress and approved by the Federal Council of Education.

Our institution struggled for the inclusion of an article regarding school libraries in the National Education Law No. 26206 of 2006. After a long process, the only item that mentioned school libraries was Article 91 of the law. It states that "The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, in accordance with the Federal Education Council, must strengthen existing school libraries and ensure proper creation and operation of those facilities that do not have a school library. The Ministry must also plan and implement ongoing programs to promote books and reading. "

Article 91 positioned libraries in the national agenda and gave birth to improvements in jurisdictions. It also endorsed the growth of the resources of the Biblioteca Nacional de Maestros in order to organize national, regional and provincial training meetings, videoconferences with purpose of installing innovation and librarians training topics on the agenda, instances of virtual training and development of tools such as an Institutional Repository Documentation and Education Legislation and online Vocabularies of education, institutional quality practices and portal associated with the institutional home of Biblioteca Nacional de Maestros resources. These actions led to the formation of human networks made up of tens of thousands of school librarians prepared to continue with better initiatives

After this long journey, the Biblioteca Nacional de Maestros decided to generate a legislative tool dedicated to school libraries as a whole, a law capable of fulfilling the challenge that Article 91 proposed. To pursue a law of this nature, a specialized one, is a matter of strategic and political timing. The Biblioteca Nacional de Maestros had already tried to make progress in these directions, but we found that, if the timing was not right, a good proposal would fail and also, if the right timing was right, we would have to have a good proposal. A number of changes helped us to see that this was the right moment to generate this law.

Among the signals we saw were: the development of the National Reading Plan with 67 million books delivered to school libraries; the development of a law to encourage the career of librarian throughout the country; and many new social inclusion policies of the government. These and many other signs made us understand that this was the time. The ground was fertile to take a qualitative legislation leap, to commit our country to a number of common policies for all our territory. On our way, after a decade of meetings, travels, training, publications, awards, internships and projects made possible with limited funding and resources, we managed to build a large collective of advocates for school libraries: human networks with long-term vision. We had built fertile territory for the mobilization of wills that helped to promote agreements that could promote the law.

To know our own history, our legislation, our programs and people who would become potential allies, our strengths and difficulties in the context of a federal system was the precondition, the **first step** to carry out this act. In addition, visible sub-systems of provincial libraries made advances as well, such as opening school libraries for prison inmates.

Let us describe now the natural and political landscape in which we had to act. Territorially, Argentina is the eighth largest country in the world. Politically, it consists of 24 autonomous jurisdictions: to develop policies for the whole country involves large actions to gain general consensus among provinces and among regional politicians who sometimes have profound differences between themselves. It is not strange that essential public policies fade if a contrary administration is the one who has institutionalized them, even those that should be untouchable for their social and educational functions in democratic societies.

This diversity of scenarios involved a diversity of interests. Compromise was needed in order to achieve a federal consensus among us all in order to ensure the active participation of the various sectors involved to take forward this Act. Shaping a project that would become a public policy for the management of information and knowledge in the information units of the educational system (school and special libraries in education, school archives and museums, documentation centers of educational information, etc.) was a challenge. Everyone would have to go above everyday interests in order to think about something that would cover us all in our work hereafter.

Biblioteca Nacional de Maestros specialists generated an initial text that then was worked on as a collective and participatory writing project in the whole country led by representatives from each jurisdiction coordinated by the BERA program. In 2011, at a magnificent federal workshop, provinces assisted to the Argentinian National Congress, at the historic hall of the Senate, to return to the initial hierarchy that gave birth our school libraries, long lost for so many decades and then recovered in this iconic journey.

A legislative corpus, able to cover 55.000 schools that exist across the country, emerged. We asked ourselves which were the minimum parameters that had to be accepted for an institution to be considered a library. We agreed that the presence of a prepared librarian, a space specially dedicated to the activity, the fundamental and much needed technologies, the quality of services, funds, and an active role in the formation of readers in this digital age. Keep in mind that Argentina is a very heterogeneous context. In some jurisdictions, the "school library" could have still consisted only of a lot of boxes stacked in a corner of an office. The search for partners was, then, the **second step**; it was the key to convince the representatives of our country in the Congress of the need to forge and stand by this project.

As we said, years of Biblioteca Nacional de Maestros management have earned recognition. It is a landmark institution and has been able to organize work of enormous magnitude. The Biblioteca Nacional de Maestros, as we already mentioned, has networks across the country, as well as library representatives from the BERA program, but also from other networks such as the National Education Information System (SNIE) and the Network Libraries and Educational Program Memory of the Argentina Education (MEDAR). Biblioteca Nacional de Maestros also has a close relationship with jurisdictional and national educational authorities, library associations, the National Library, the National Commission of Public Libraries (CONABIP), representatives from Museums and Archives and distinguished professionals that have previously worked on ambitious projects like the *Tecnicatura Superior en Bibliotecología* (Librarian Training Colleges).

Of course, we can never emphasize enough the importance of the pressure of grassroots organization: individual schools and librarians that knew the project and were behind it, felt the need to keep it strong and to make it their own. They took the discussion to the whole country for improvement. Thus, the project had a broad federal support, and we were able to reach the Congress of Argentina where we worked with legislative aides. We had the support of the authorities of the Ministry of National Education, which houses the Biblioteca Nacional de Maestros. They know us and knew the need and importance of libraries in schools as strategic elements that ensure democratic access to information and knowledge.

The way to ensure that this project was not forgotten in a pile of other bills was the **third step**: the active militancy and close monitoring of Biblioteca Nacional de Maestros and all its partners for this initiative came to fruition in three years. The project, raised in 2011, had ups and downs, corrections and improvements in the various arenas, but without the participation of all these agencies working together, surely it would not have achieved the features it has.

Our follow-up was thorough, with timelines for action in the right time with the right person. In each province, we contacted its provincial representatives who formed national committees. We insisted on discussions with them in order to generate a positive opinion about the project. The project had to be approved by senators in the first instance and by congressmen after that. Then, it had to be reviewed by education committees and budget and finance committees. Unanimously, the Act passed. Then it went through legal and technical areas of the Presidency to be enacted by decree 30/2014 of 9 January, signed by the president of Argentina, Dr. Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner; by the Chief of Staff, accountant Jorge Milton Capitanich; and by the Minister of Education, Professor Alberto Sileoni, Law No. 26.917 establishes the National System of School Libraries and Information Units Education.

As we see, not only a process of writing and presentation is required in Congress. Management tools were the key that made it possible for the bill to advance, in order to be sanctioned and promulgated, regulated and, of course, in the case of this law, to create the binding regulations within the consensus of the Federal Council of Education, with the presence of the ministers of education from all the jurisdictions in our country.

It has been the constant effort that kept school libraries in the legislative agenda with the vision of keeping the public policy agenda looking towards a bright future. Implementing the law is our new challenge. We are generating the scaffolding in order to make the development of school libraries and the training of those in charge of school libraries easier and more democratic. We still need to get the Federal Council of Education approval to generate equal institutional quality and access to information for all schools.

The law promotes the harmonization and standardization of the national system of school libraries and other information units mentioned. This harmonization will be coordinated by the Biblioteca Nacional de Maestros, that will have a special budget to generate training activities, technological developments, technical support, thematic funding purchases for school librarians, and special projects for individual libraries or library networks. This law requires minimum standards agreed upon by jurisdictions and conditions for access to the benefits of the law. This bill forces them to take measures such as implementing improvements in library education, library fee charges in the education system, to improve or build reading spaces and habitats, ones with appropriate technology and connectivity and make sure to have well-nourished to collections. Thus, a public policy is transformed into a circle of development of institutions and professionals that respects the historical mandates that Biblioteca Nacional de Maestros holds.

Today, these and other new challenges are being initiated, but libraries are better able to face them now. And, many of them already have made great achievements. The 55000 libraries in the education system must have adequate space, with trained staff, updated documents, and budget items specifically aimed at these libraries. This is a groundbreaking initiative for Argentina.

Of course, each country has its own characteristics, and its own school library advocates. They must carry out their own processes in order to generate and improve their public policies that meet the needs of their region's librarianship. However, we believe that these three steps are essential for any enterprise seeking to fruition out a policy tool of this nature: (1) know your strengths and weaknesses; (2) find the right partners; and (3) closely monitoring the project. These are the keys to achieve this kind of public policies. With great satisfaction about the work done, we celebrate this new law that struggles for the democratization of access to information and knowledge for the entire education system.

This law reinforces, in its foundations and its association with the National Education Act, the strengthening of school libraries as dynamic habitats for multiple forms of learning and training, for reading that addresses the depth of abstract and complex thought, for spaces for reflective reading and multimedia creativity. School libraries improve the development of citizenship, as well as implementing tools to monitor the reading trajectories of students and to guarantee a reading space that welcomes creativity and free time.

We thank everyone who joined us and accompanied us through this process, and especially all of you for allowing us to share our development in this space.

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