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Rethinking educational federalism: using assemblage theory to analyse policy travel and transformation in Argentina

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ABSTRACT

The subnational level is significant for understanding how education policies travel, are enacted, and reassembled in federal countries. This paper documents how three subnational states in Argentina (Buenos Aires Province, Buenos Aires City and Neuquén Province) responded to, and in some cases sought to influence, federal state policies for compulsory secondary education between 2006 and 2019. Our focus concerns two federal governments of opposite political orientations and conceptions of educational federalism that were elected in Argentina during this period: *Frente para la Victoria* and *Alianza Cambiemos*. Using assemblage theory, we draw on evidence collected through document analysis, secondary data and interviews with 46 policy-makers and civil servants to explore how various subnational states were active (and successful) in negotiating and revising education policy directives flowing from federal governments. The resulting formations and entanglements, what we term provincial assemblages, point to adapted proposals of educational change and alternative packages of education reform distinct from federal government prescriptions. To assist others in their analyses of education policy in federal and other contexts, we provide a useful typology for distinguishing the actions and orientations of subnational states through their relationship to federal governments: 'negotiator', 'pioneer' and 'outsider'.

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Introduction

Argentina is a federal state organised around three sub-levels of government as defined in the National Constitution: national (federal), provincial (jurisdictions) and municipal. This means that, like other federal countries (Australia, Germany, Brazil and the USA), Argentina is made up of various discrete, subnational government entities that possess their own laws and constitutional powers to govern over a fixed territory. This includes managing and funding education systems (Romualdo 2022) but provincial self-governance is not completely decoupled from the steering power of the federal government. Although Argentinian federalism has been decentralised since the 1990s, the

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federal government uses budgetary discipline to maintain some control of its various constituent parts (Leiras 2013). These and other governmental techniques have enabled successive Argentinian federal governments since the 1970s to increase their influence over provincial governments (Correa and Giovine 2010). This influence strengthened centralism as a major steer for education reform, with provincial governments exercising delegated powers to self-govern and some provinces somewhat subordinated to federal authority in locally adapted ways. (Argentina is divided into 24 jurisdictions – 23 provinces and the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires – hereafter referred to as ‘provinces’ for ease of reading).

Given this description, ‘methodological nationalism’ (with its focus on the national as the primary unit of analysis) is ill-suited for studying education policy in Argentina or any other federal country. In Argentina (Romualdo 2022) and other countries such as Australia (Savage 2016), research on federalism tends to privilege the federal government, overlooking the new roles that subnational states play in national policy formation. In this sense, methodological nationalism is problematic, because it fosters a view of nation states as uniform policy containers and subnational territories as passive recipients of national policy instruction (Dale and Robertson 2012). As McFarlane (2009, 565) observes, ‘In these accounts, power radiates from an authoritative centre that instils stability and order by recasting the periphery in its own image, and the assumption is that power is effective and extensive’. These accounts are both misinformed and misleading as they presume a fixed link between government and territory in a single nation in which power is understood to flow unidirectionally and uniformly from the top down (Simons, Olssen, and Peters 2009). Binary perspectives that frame policy making in diametrical terms of adaptation or resistance are also problematic as they overlook how policy develops through trade-offs and the reconciliation of competing interests (Hartong and Nikolai 2017; Wilkins 2019). Similarly, binary perspectives underestimate the role of subnational states in federal education policy and fail to capture the ambiguities of each case, the local construction of policies and the shifting influence of actors over policy at different levels of government (Hartong and Nikolai 2017).

Since the 2000s, much international research has addressed the subnational level as a key actor in the assemblage and translation of education policy. These studies have focused on standardised quality assessments as conditioning factors for intergovernmental relations in federal contexts, as evidenced in the United States (Wong 2008a, 2008b, 2010), Germany (Hartong and Nikolai 2017; Hartong and Piattoeva 2019), Australia (Savage and Lewis 2017), Russia (Hartong and Piattoeva 2019), Canada (Wallner et al. 2020) and Brazil (Dourado 2013; Duarte and Saraiva 2020). In Argentina, however, standardised assessment has no direct bearing on the funding and management of education systems, making this a neglected dimension in analyses of education in federal contexts (M. F. Potenza Dal Masetto 2012; Rivas 2004, 2008; Steinberg, Tiramonti, and Ziegler 2019). Studies on Argentinian educational federalism have so far focused primarily on the distribution of resources, the mechanisms of economic coercion and the division of responsibilities emerging in 1990s (Altavilla 2012; Cetrángolo and Jiménez 2004; Cocorda 2000; Morduchowicz 2009; Rivas and Dborkin 2018; Senén González and Arango 1996). What this literature lacks is a focus on the subnational level as both a unit of analysis and a context for the study of intergovernmental relations (Romualdo 2019, 2021). This includes any focus on the

subnational level as institutional orders and power relations that mediate and influence factors impacting education policy change (Correa and Giovine 2010; F. Potenza Dal Masetto 2004; Rivas 2004, 2009). For this reason, this paper documents how education policies are recontextualised and transformed through the subnational level, where politically sensitive intergovernmental relations have emerged and influenced education policymaking in diverse ways. This includes a focus on the role of civil servants and policymakers whose practices and influence on education have been relatively under-explored within said literature.

Policy enactment occurs at multiple levels and scales, involving conflicts, negotiations and unplanned actions among various actors and organisations (Ball 1993; Maguire et al. 2011). Thus, policies are mediated by institutional, politically sensitive pathways, namely pre-existing traditions, cultural practices and power relations that interact, disrupt or conflict with policies already at play (Ball 1998). In Argentina, federalism is organised around multi-scalar actors belonging to different levels of government, who often operate under discretionary principles (Serafinoff 2012) and whose relations permit the regulation and provision of public services (Escolar 2011). While the federal government plays a leading policymaking role, claims of a uniform federal dynamic overlook how policy is transformed at the subnational scale (Rodrigo 2016). Provincial logics play an important role in the development of federal policy (Aelo 2002), in some cases exceeding and contradicting federal control (Rodrigo 2016). In a study of four federations – Australia, Canada, Germany and the USA – Wallner et al. (2020) suggest that many subnational governments function as co-producers of policy and semi-autonomous innovation laboratories for testing policies that can be later adopted or adapted by others. Rather than view subnational governments as passive recipients of federal policy, Wallner et al. (2020) demonstrate their effectiveness at lobbying federal government to overturn or promote certain policy decisions. Furthermore, subnational governments function as important spaces of contestation and bargaining in which non-governmental actors, such as teachers' unions, non-profit think tanks or corporations, negotiate to influence education policy reform. Beyond the peculiarities of Argentinian educational federalism, this paper seeks to engage with and deepen debates on the role of subnational states in policy travel and transformation in federal and other contexts, while evidencing the usefulness of assemblage theory as an analytic for the empirical and conceptual study of these dynamics.

Assembling policy

Following Ball (1998, 126), we conceptualise policy making as a 'process of bricolage': policies are not implemented but always recontextualised and inevitably transformed as they move through different contexts and come under the influence of different actors. To complement and extend this approach, we adopt the analytic of assemblage to capture policy change as a variegated process in which 'heterogeneous actants cohere [or not]' (Brenner, Madden, and Wachsmuth 2011, 237) to produce specific configurations of power and interest. The analytic of assemblage has been used in other education research to similar effect. Rizvi and Lingard (2011), for example, employ an assemblage approach to show how social equity policy in Australian education revolves around a congruence of seemingly incompatible priorities. With a similar focus on policy as joining-up work,

Koh (2011) points to the strange entanglements framing Singapore government's effort to 'indigenise' their national curriculum against global standards. Using the analytic of assemblage in this paper allows us to perform similar analytical work, namely:

- (i) avoid structuralist or synchronic accounts of policy change which presuppose that subnational governments function (only) as a residual effect of federal state authority;
- (ii) critique the notion that policy actors are automatically captured in wider governmental fields of power which limit their capacity to act in ways that are creative and unpredictable or recalcitrant;
- (iii) challenge the idea that policies consist of elements that are internally coherent and unassailable; and
- (iv) move beyond a reductionist view of policy movement as unidirectional and uniform across spaces and institutions.

The importance of these analytical orientations, following an assemblage approach, is their sensitivity to 'volatility, precariousness and mutability' (Brenner, Madden, and Wachsmuth 2011, 237). To complement the unique policy environment of a federalist country like Argentina, this paper addresses the significance of provincial assemblages at the subnational scale as an interpretive tool for analysing and explaining education policy change and movement (Hartong and Piattoeva 2019; Wallner et al. 2020). The role of subnational scale as an analytic for explaining policy change has become a major focus of political science in Latin America since 1980s due to processes of democratic restoration and decentralisation (Suárez-Cao, Batlle, and Wills-Otero 2017). The same cannot be said for education policy research in Latin America, however, with very few studies adopting subnational scale as a heuristic for improving our understanding of the impact of local projects and politics on policy translation. This paper adds to this burgeoning and timely international literature in novel ways by combining the analytic of assemblage with the heuristic of subnational scale to better understand how education policies are enacted and reassembled in federal policy contexts such as Argentina.

Drawing on evidence collected through document analysis, secondary data and interviews with 46 policymakers and civil servants, our empirical focus concerns how three subnational states in Argentina (Buenos Aires Province, Buenos Aires City and Neuquén Province) responded to, and in some cases sought to influence, federal state policies for compulsory secondary education between 2006 and 2019. More specifically, our analysis documents the changing relationships between these subnational states and the federal governments that occupied power in Argentina during the same period: *Frente para la Victoria* (Front for Victory, hereafter FPV), which includes the presidencies of Néstor Kirchner (2003–2007) and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007–2015), and *Alianza Cambiemos* (Alliance for Change, hereafter AC), under the presidency of Mauricio Macri (2015–2019).

These federal governments pursued different political agendas and contrasting conceptions of educational federalism. As we demonstrate below, each subnational state shared a different relationship to the federal government, making it unique as a discrete entity pursuing its own relations of power and interest. Moreover, we evidence the extent to which the right to education was better supported under certain ideals of educational

federalism than under others across the subnational states (Gluz and Feldfeber 2021). This includes a focus on how some forms of educational federalism, as imagined by federal governments at the time, either implemented similar policies in all provinces or allowed each province to enact a different policy. We offer a useful typology for distinguishing the actions and orientations of each subnational state through their relationship to the federal government: ‘negotiator’, ‘pioneer’ and ‘outsider’. These categories are not offered here as static labels; rather, they illuminate the dynamic roles that subnational actors assume in their responses to shifting scalar configurations. This typology aims to engage with wider debates raised in the international literature on provincial assemblages and to avoid methodological nationalism.

Methodology

This paper draws on evidence collected through research conducted by the lead author during 2018–2021 (Romualdo 2022). This research employed a qualitative methodology developed using grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967), which influenced both the recording and adjustment of the data collection methods and work plan (Coffey and Atkinson 2003). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Forty-six semi-structured interviews were conducted with policymakers and civil servants working at the federal level and the subnational levels of Buenos Aires Province, Buenos Aires City and Neuquén Province. Here civil servants refer to people who work for the provincial or federal state, namely bureaucrats with different areas of expertise such as pedagogy or education management. These people are hired by the government according to their area of expertise and skills and usually keep their positions even when new governments come into power. In contrast, policymakers are politically appointed and change according to the direction of the political party in office. Thirty policymakers were selected for interview based on their rank, including some ministers, undersecretaries, secretaries and several directors and department coordinators. In addition, 16 civil servants were interviewed for their experience in policymaking and insight into the dynamics of transitions between administrations. In Neuquén Province, teachers’ union representatives were interviewed because they were members of the Provincial Education Council and played an important role in secondary school policy during the period under study. In both federal and subnational cases, interviewees were selected based on their work during 2006 and 2019 in the following departments: i. secondary education policy; ii. education policy planning; iii. education finance management; and/or iv. federal articulation bodies. Table 1 provides information on the forty-six interviewees.

Note: Three out of the five civil servants from Neuquén Province were members of the teachers’ union.

This purposeful sample was designed using the snowball technique whereby gatekeepers such as academics played an essential role in helping to identify and contact potential interviewees across the provinces. The interviewees were contacted by email and most interviews were conducted in person, except in 2020 following the COVID-19 outbreak and subsequent lockdown when interviews were performed remotely using online video conferencing. These interviews were fundamental to understanding informal intergovernmental relations and capturing provincial specificities.

Table 1. Interviewees by type and level of government.

Interviewees	Policy makers	Civil servants	Total number
Federal level	12	9	21
FPV federal administration	5	4	9
AC federal administration	7	1	8
Both FPV and AC administration	-	4	4
Subnational level	18	7	25
Buenos Aires Province	5	2	7
Buenos Aires City	6	-	6
Neuquén Province	7	5	12
Total interviewees	30	16	46

Source: Romualdo (2022).

Documents and secondary data were also collected and analysed. This included document analysis of the following items: i. regulations concerning secondary education policies; ii. public and non-public policy documents; iii. official government websites; iv. organigrams, or organisational charts, of the education area within the state structure; v. public statements by government officials taken from publications or press interviews; and vi. quantitative data on student enrolment, the number of secondary schools in each province and the annual budget allocation for secondary education. Documentary analysis was used to study education policy agendas, state structures, planning and monitoring tools and the budget allocation for secondary education provision in each province.

Throughout the research process, informed consent was obtained from participants, who were given the necessary information to make informed decisions about their involvement in the study. To protect the identity of the participants and maintain confidentiality of material, we labelled them policymaker or civil servant, except when their testimonies were drawn from publicly available sources.

The research covered 2006–2019, a period marked by the enactment of the National Education Act No. 26206, which made secondary education compulsory. This period allowed us to observe the trajectory and transformation of education policies enforcing the right to secondary education under two federal governments of different political orientations: the FPV, elected into office from 2003 to 2015, and the AC, elected from 2015 to 2019. Although FPV was in office for twelve years and AC only four years, this variation had no bearing on our analysis and did not prevent us from comparing their distinct approaches to educational federalism.

To illustrate how education policy is enacted and transformed through provincial assemblages and their associated administrative and political structures, we adopted a case study of three subnational states (Buenos Aires Province, Buenos Aires City and Neuquén Province). These case studies were selected based on their secondary education policies in the 2000s and their political convergence/divergence with the politics of federal state administration in the period under study. Buenos Aires Province's secondary education policies generally followed the rhythm and orientations of the federal state administration. Buenos Aires City, in contrast, was a pioneer in establishing compulsory secondary education in 2002, 4 years before the national law was enacted. Neuquén Province, however, did not take any measures concerning secondary school and maintained its own provincial, discrete logic, far removed from the politics of the federal state

administration. Regarding political convergence/divergence with the federal administration, Buenos Aires Province was governed by the FPV and later the AC, aligning with the respective federal administrations in office. Buenos Aires City was governed by an opposing political party during FPV administration and by the same ruling party during AC administration. Finally, Neuquén Province remained governed by a local political party in 2006–2019. The political-economic diversity of these three case studies permits a deeper understanding of the complexity of processes of federal (dis-) articulation at the subnational level.

The reconfiguration of educational federalism in Argentina 2006–2019

Reform of the Argentinian state by private sector principles and New Public Management (NPM) since the 1990s has been framed by state officials as ideologically neutral. Like other neoliberal forms of statecraft across the globe, Argentina has been subject to invasive and powerful market rationality with few opponents (Laval and Dardot 2015). The ascendancy of neoliberal logics of marketisation, performance management and competition as drivers for social change and welfare reform, especially in the USA, England, New Zealand and Chile, can be traced to the global economic crisis of the 1970s (Verger, Fontdevila, and Parcerisa 2019). Decades later, international financial institutions such as the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) promoted NPM as a tool for improvement in developing countries, including Argentina. These technical-managerial approaches to cost-efficiency and enhanced performance underpinned the structural adjustment programme echoed by the WB and IMF in the 1990s (Verger and Normand 2015).

Although Argentina has undergone a process of ‘neoliberalisation’ (Harvey 2005) since the 1970s, it was not until the 1990s, following the Washington Consensus, that the so-called first generation of structural reforms, as promoted by the WB and IMF, took place. During this time, Argentina reformed the state apparatus through processes of decentralisation, privatisation and deregulation of social services. This changed the meaning of the public sphere (Feldfeber 2003), leading to a crisis of the welfarist paradigm and a shift towards a new configuration of federalism. The 1990s was a critical turning point for the Argentinian education system. No longer regulated by the political-administrative power of the federal state through a unification and centralisation programme, the Argentinian education system was formally transformed into a decentralised, diversified, fragmented system with new subnational forms of regulation and control (Feldfeber 2009). Far from achieving any genuine redistribution of power and increased citizen participation at the subnational level, this decentralisation strategy transferred responsibilities to subnational level actors to retain and monitor a fiscal adjustment programme (Falleti 2007; Senén González and Arango 1996; Tedesco and Tenti Fanfani 2001). Since the 1990s, the federal government has retained responsibility only for funding national universities, while the 24 provinces have been tasked with allocating funding for the other levels of education: pre-school, primary, secondary and college.

The education policy developments of the 1990s were challenged in Latin America in the 2000s by various governments attempting, with varying intensity and some contradictions, to reposition the centrality of the state as a pivotal steer for securing the right to

education (Gluz and Feldfeber 2021). One of the aims of these governments was to promote education as a right rather than a service, as was the case in the 1990s. Some authors refer to this period as the cycle of contestation against neoliberalism in Latin America (Ouvina and Thwaites Rey 2018). In Argentina, this period captures the ascendancy of the FPV. However, from 2013, various progressive governments across Latin America were accused of no longer retaining the financial resources to guarantee the accumulation and distribution of wealth after the 2008 global economic crisis. In some cases, evidence of corruption within some federal governments led to popular backlash (Feldfeber 2020). Subsequently, anti-progressive sentiment spread across Latin America, jeopardising the democratic advances of the previous years and creating the conditions for the rise of new right-wing political parties (Houtart 2016). In Argentina, for example, the AC replaced the FPV as the new federal government at the end of 2015, marking the rise of a much larger conservative restoration.

Unlike the centre-left FPV coalition, which sought to challenge neoliberalism, the centre-right AC coalition maintained a strong commitment to promoting it. These governments also shared very different notions of national unity and how it should be achieved (Romualdo 2024). The main concern of FPV's education policy agenda was the articulation of common, universal policies that they pursued by standardising the structure of the educational system, the curriculum and the awarding of secondary school diplomas. Additionally, other policies were implemented to guarantee the compulsory nature of secondary education. Here, the education system was promoted and financed using principles of inclusion, equality and quality associated with a right-to-education perspective. National unity was conceived in terms of equality of resources provided by the federal state administration (Romualdo 2024).

The FPV's vision of national unity included the possibility of similar policies in all of Argentina's 24 provinces. This conception of national unity led to a 'centripetal federalism' (Romualdo 2022) that sought to unify the system through a focus on equality. In this framing, the federal state aimed to define the common direction of all provinces while preserving their capacity to recontextualise policies as self-governing entities. Centripetal federalism therefore contributed to a greater unification of Argentina's education system and, with federal support, promoted capacity-building at subnational levels. However, in its eagerness to create uniformity, the FPV ignored some of the particularities of the provinces and their capacity and willingness to carve out unique pathways for themselves above and beyond the federal call. The FPV administration also leveraged conditional funding to shape provincial behaviour, placing particular pressure on economically disadvantaged provinces with limited autonomy.

Following their election to office in December 2015, the AC abandoned equality and universality in favour of innovation and quality standards based on assessment. Highly critical of the FPV administration for focusing on access to education as a policy priority, the AC administration prioritised quality of student learning. It significantly reduced funding for education provision and strengthened the accountability of subnational governments for allocation of federal state funds (Romualdo 2022). Under the AC administration, national unity of the education system was pursued through measurable outcomes and outputs and the unification of purpose through shared goals. This shift in the conception of national unity guided the reconfiguration of educational federalism resulting in

‘centrifugal federalism’ (Romualdo 2022). While provinces were not required to enact education policies uniformly, tying funding to specific outcomes or outputs had similar effects: provincial governments were constrained by performance measures of accountability. Rather than insisting on strict adherence to policy delivery, the AC promoted what they called a freer federalism in which provinces could choose policies from a kind of ‘menu’, provided that they were accountable for their results. Centrifugal federalism under the AC administration proved ineffective in addressing the deep-rooted inequalities and fragmentation within the education system, shaped by a long-standing imbalance in resource distribution.

These approaches to the federal management of education policies (be it direct ‘rowing’ by the FPV administration or indirect ‘steering’ by the AC administration) were ultimately limited in effect owing to the active role played by subnational governments as political entities. The FPV had limited control over the effective implementation of common actions, while the AC administration lacked control over policy outcomes (Romualdo 2022). In the next section, we expand on these insights by analysing the role of three subnational states in the enactment of federal education policies for compulsory secondary education in Argentina from 2006 to 2019: Buenos Aires Province, Buenos Aires City and Neuquén Province.

Buenos Aires Province: Negotiator

Buenos Aires Province (BAP) is Argentina’s most populous and politically influential province, educating 40% of the country’s students and serving as a key benchmark for federal policy. Since 1989, except in 1999–2001 and the current federal administration since 2023, BAP and the federal state have been ruled by the same political party. Moreover, BAP has spent most of the last four decades under Peronist rule, the political party representing the welfare state paradigm in Argentina, associated with the political movement led by Juan Perón in the mid-20th century. Furthermore, BAP is highly visible in the national media owing to its population and political significance (Agoff, Bertranou, and Foglia 2013), strengthening its political influence federally as a subnational state.

Since the creation of the modern Argentinian state in the 1880s, the relationship between BAP and the federal government has been both interdependent and asymmetrical (Agoff, Bertranou, and Foglia 2013). Ollier (2010) argues that BAP shares a strong, inescapable relationship with federal politics because it produces key votes for presidential elections and the governability of Argentina. This federal-province tension usually culminates in the latter’s submission to the will of federal politics (Ollier 2010). During FPV administration, BAP was also governed by the FPV, contributing to federal efforts to create common, universal policies. The synergy between the federal and provincial agendas resulted in unique forms of co-production. During FPV administration, BAP positioned itself in support of the federal project, as one BAP education minister wrote in an official document:

Our axis ‘The School of the National Project’ is linked to the political decision of BAP’s government to actively participate in the Federal Education Council in order to unify an

education system that we diagnosed as disjointed and fragmented, and therefore, we will move forward with all aspects that contribute to the unification of a federal education project. (Lauria 2017, 80)

Evidence shows that BAP had an active role in federal meetings, where it successfully lobbied for the federal government (Romualdo 2022). BAP also carried out a ‘differentiated adaptation’ (Gluz and Chiara 2007) of federally agreed guidelines, redefining them to suit their own agenda or attempting to influence the federal one. This shows how travelling policies in Argentina are contingently configured through the properties and capacities of actors and networks within provincial assemblages. Specifically, it captures how these policies undergo ‘(re)territorialising and deterritorialising movements’ (Anderson and McFarlane 2011, 125) as disparate elements are brought together and torn apart through reassembling activities.

We made sure the federal definitions considered what BAP was already doing [...] we adapted the federal documents to the provincial ones [...] We also did many things that we then proposed to the federal government so all provinces could benefit, and our proposals were accepted. (BAP’s Policymaker)

In this sense, BAP can be described as a co-producer of federal policies (Wallner et al. 2020). It participated in numerous private meetings with the federal government to request changes to education policy issues. Furthermore, it had bargaining power in small decision-making roundtables that met regularly with the federal government and other selected provinces to define crucial aspects of the education policies. These roundtables reveal the informal nature of intergovernmental relations that typically define Argentinian federal policy making (Serafinoff 2012), as the testimony of a federal policy-maker shows:

First, we made agreements with BAP, Santa Fe, Córdoba and Mendoza – the provinces with the largest populations – so we covered 60% of the country [...] and then we worked with the others. (FPV Policymaker)

BAP’s role as a co-producer of federal policies reveals the strategic use of intergovernmental spaces to assert provincial agency. Rather than simply following national directives, subnational states shape policies, highlighting that co-production in Argentina involves negotiation and power imbalances more than consensus. BAP is the poorest province in the country in terms of fiscal resources per inhabitant (Rivas and Dborkin 2018). Although it received funding through federal programmes during the FPV administration, it was never sufficient to cover the costs for essential services for all inhabitants. Due to its population size and challenging financial situation, BAP was unable to implement some of the federal policies that it had helped to coproduce. This led to tensions with the federal government, forcing the province to seek permanent negotiations.

During AC administration (2015–2019), BAP was also governed by the AC because it had won both the federal and provincial elections. However, during this period, BAP defended its own provincial assemblage against the federal proposals. In contrast to what happened during FPV administration, BAP exercised limited influence over federal policy making. Cooperation with the federal state was only apparent and superficial during this time, with negotiations aimed primarily at defending provincial assemblages

rather than contributing to a broader federal project. BAP was also no longer a protagonist in federal meetings. Partisan convergence did not necessarily translate into policy alignment, highlighting a core tension in federalism: subnational autonomy can be limited by structural weaknesses or centralised agendas, rather than political conflict. This opens up possibilities for challenging the narratives of ‘decentralised governance’.

Due to the lack of experienced AC policymakers specialised in BAP’s education management (Becerra 2017), AC decided to retain some of the FPV people, which to some extent explains the continuity of some FPV’s policies. This was evident in the main policy for secondary schools in BAP, called *Escuelas Promotoras* (Promoting Schools), which aimed to prevent student dropouts and improve learning. Owing to this policy, BAP continued implementing strategies from the FPV administration but adapted them to AC’s federal guidelines by abandoning the FPV’s universal policies and incorporating performance-based rubrics in some cases for student assessment.

BAP’s education policy agenda aligned with federal guidelines, but differed from them too. For example, instead of implementing the federal programme *Escuelas Faro* (Lighthouse Schools), BAP implemented their own programme called *Red de Escuelas de Aprendizaje* (Learning Schools Network). Both programmes aimed to improve student learning in language and mathematics, but the federal programme was mandatory for underperforming schools serving vulnerable populations, while BAP’s policy was voluntary. This example illustrates the ability of BAP to negotiate and assert its authority to pursue actions and values different from those of the federal government, even under the same political party. This challenges assumptions of the internal coherence or predictable movement of travelling policies, highlighting instead the uneven distribution of power within decentralised systems and ‘the gaps, fissures and fractures that accompany processes of gathering and dispersing’ (Anderson and McFarlane 2011, 125) within these systems. The following testimony illustrates BAP’s negotiating nature, which characterises its provincial assemblages:

Even though we were in the same political party, we didn’t agree on everything. I told the federal government, ‘I’ll support the federal programme too, but I can’t make it compulsory.’ And they agreed. (BAP’s Policymaker)

Something similar happened with the federal programme *Asistiré* (I will attend), aimed at monitoring school attendance. After months of debate between BAP and the federal government, which envisioned managing the policy at the municipal level, BAP ultimately coordinated it using an existing provincial network. As evidenced by the following testimony, BAP has experience negotiating education policies with the federal government and creating its own versions of them:

The federal programme *Asistiré* was strongly opposed. At first we took it with a pinch of salt [...] So, we worked hard with the federal team in several meetings [...] but they understood. [...] We accepted the economic resources, but we needed to rethink the programme for BAP. So there was a ‘BAP’s *Asistiré*’. (BAP’s Policymaker)

These examples show how provincial assemblages selectively reterritorialise national policies. Rather than simply resisting or complying, BAP’s adaptation reflects a recalibration of scalar politics where local actors actively shape the terrain of

implementation. Regarding economic federal-provincial intergovernmental relations during the AC administration, BAP had to deal with large, unregulated fund transfers made during the FPV administration. These financial irregularities led to severe budgetary sanctions from the federal government due to administrative challenges in managing BAP's many schools. Due to a rotating funding mechanism implemented by the AC, BAP did not receive funding for some of its policies for up to a year until it was able to demonstrate financial transparency and accountability. This example highlights the fragility of fiscal federalism in Argentina and illustrates how resource dependency becomes a tool of control in intergovernmental relations, particularly for under-resourced provinces.

Buenos Aires City: Pioneer

Buenos Aires City (BAC), Argentina's capital and its wealthiest province, combines strong autonomy and influence with national visibility and a political stance at odds with Peronism.

During FPV administration, BAC was governed by a political party, *Propuesta Republicana* (Republican Proposal), which opposed the FPV. During this time, BAC created a new secondary school policy whose main features (innovation and quality standards based on assessment) would later become part of federal policy during AC administration. BAC's education policy agenda was asynchronous with the federal one because secondary school attendance had already been made compulsory in 2002. In fact, the federal government imitated some of BAC's policies during this period. This pioneering quality distinguishes BAC from the other provinces considered in this study.

BAC had to take another leap forward, because what the federal government was proposing, BAC had already accomplished. (BAC's Policymaker)

This example illustrates the decoupling of political alignment from policy leadership in federal systems. Far from being constrained by its lack of federal ties, BAC leveraged its ideological distance as a space for policy experimentation. This challenges conventional models of top-down policy diffusion and instead suggests a bottom-up circulation of influence driven by subnational innovation. Following Wallner et al. (2020), BAC can be viewed as an autonomous innovation laboratory for policy testing. BAC's autonomy is supported by its economic independence and political ideological differences from the federal government, helping to shape a political-economic identity that is difficult to integrate into the logic of national unity. This identity served not only as a shield against central directives but also as a productive force of policy differentiation, revealing how subnational actors actively assemble and remake territorial logics of governance rather than merely resisting them. Between 2011 and 2015, BAC created an alternative secondary school project called *Nueva Escuela Secundaria* (New Secondary School), which differed from the federal version proposed by the FPV and which was later partly implemented at the federal level from 2015 to 2019. Although BAC had its own surplus monies which it used to govern its territory, it strategically mobilised federal economic resources to strengthen or extend the coverage of its policies. The *Programa Nacional de Ajedrez* (Federal Chess programme), which helped BAC to extend coverage of a provincial chess programme from primary to secondary schools (DNPS 2012), is

a prime example. At the same time, BAC was renowned for rejecting federally funded education policies where they already had similar policies in place, such as the *Programa Nacional de Coros y Orquestas* (Federal Choirs and Orchestras programme) (DNPS 2012). BAC's unique political-economic position and its ability to reassemble – or even reject – central policy directives reveal three key insights about policy movement and translation in federal contexts: i. power does not radiate from an authoritative centre in ways that (re)territorialise the periphery in its own image; ii. travelling polices articulated and mobilised by central authorities are not as unassailable as they may appear; and iii. provincial assemblages enable local actors to evade capture by governmental fields of power. Notably, a power dynamic emerged in some federal meetings, where BAC and other provinces opposing the FPV, such as Córdoba and Santa Fe, lobbied against federal polices, while BAP supported FPV's federal project.

BAC also served as the seedbed for centrifugal federalism later adopted by AC federal administration because BAC's policymakers, who then held positions in AC administration, viewed FPV's pursuit of a common agenda as restraining BAC's autonomy, as a BAC policymaker, later an AC policymaker, noted:

When I was on the side of the provinces as part of BAC's government, I experienced every request and every federal programme as a shower of arrows, mostly, we saw neither coherence nor sense in what was imposed on us, someone came and told us what to do, without asking us if we thought it was feasible or if it would be beneficial for our students. (Miguel 2020, 40)

During AC administration, BAC was governed by the same political party in power federally because *Propuesta Republicana* formed part of the AC coalition, but continued to exercise considerable autonomy as a subnational state. BAC's agenda therefore aligned with the federal one, once again pioneering federal policies for the secondary school level. This was facilitated by many of BAC's former policymakers holding positions in the Federal Ministry of Education. During this period, BAC successfully exported education policies to the federal level, most evidently through the *Secundaria Federal 2030* (Federal Secondary School 2030), which was largely inspired by BAC's policy.

For me it was like speaking the same language. [...] the federal government copied many of the changes in BAC's secondary school [...] Besides, the Federal Secretary for Innovation and Educational Quality had been BAC's Director of Planning before. I mean, she transferred all that to the federal policy. (BAC's Policymaker)

Against perspectives which often conceptualise power within hierarchical or concentric models radiating outwards or downwards from a central position, federal contexts reveal complex power gathering, distribution and insertion as a process of co-functioning that privilege neither centre nor periphery. Assemblage theory is useful here in rejecting synchronic or institutionalist accounts of power, moving towards an account of 'power as plurality in transformation' (Anderson and McFarlane 2011, 125). During this period, BAC also held a privileged place in shaping federal education policies, much like BAP's influence under FPV federal administration (2006–2015). Testimonies described informal, bilateral meetings between high-level federal and BAC officials, evidencing informal intergovernmental relations (Serafinoff 2012). The shift in policy influence from BAP under FPV to BAC under AC points to the contingent and negotiated nature of leadership in federal education systems. Influence is shaped by historical positioning, technical

capacity and political opportunity, reinforcing a vision of intergovernmental relations as fluid assemblages rather than fixed hierarchies. Nevertheless, there was never a clear alignment between federal government and BAC. BAC's restless autonomy and internal disputes made it a politically variegated space. There is no evidence of any official documents that emphasised the federal government-BAC link. In contrast, the federal government-BAP link in FPV administration was visible in the official documents (Lauria 2017). Another crucial difference between federal government and BAC was the implementation of the federal programme *Escuelas Faro*. BAC implemented said programme in 2% of its secondary schools and rejected additional available federal funding, despite the federal government's insistence on expanding its scope.

We had about twelve secondary schools in the *Escuelas Faro* federal programme. And as we were involved in BAC's own policy, little else was done beyond federal efforts. (BAC's Policymaker)

BAC's refusal of federal funding challenges the assumption that political alignment ensures vertical coherence and instead reveals how provinces can use federalism to maintain symbolic distance, even from ideologically similar central authorities. Economically, when BAC did not account for the federal funds received, it penalised the schools that failed to account for the use of allocated funds. Unlike BAP, with its own vast economic resources and relatively small territory, it did not have much difficulty in implementing control mechanisms in all its schools.

Neuquén Province: Outsider

Neuquén Province (NP), a sparsely populated Patagonian province rich in oil and gas, has been governed by a local party, the *Movimiento Popular Neuquino* (Popular Movement of Neuquén), since 1963. Its residents identify strongly with the province, often seeing provincial and federal interests as incompatible (Favaro and Bucciarelli 2008), shaping its unique role in Argentina's federal system.

NP's education system is governed by two separate entities: i. the Ministry of Education; and ii. the Provincial Education Council, presided over by a President and five members (two from the government administration, two from the teachers' union, and one from the community, who is often an additional union member). The largest teacher's union has historically played a key role in NP's education policy-making and provision. NP's political identity has a long history of protest (Favaro, Iuorno, and Cao 2006), solidified during the 1970s civil-military dictatorship, when it became a refuge for exiles persecuted by the military in other provinces. Later, during the 2001 crisis, characterised by severe economic and political turmoil, NP became the cradle of Argentina's unemployed and *piquetero* movements, representing forms of struggle against neoliberal policies. The 1990s teachers' strikes consolidated the confrontation between the ruling provincial political party and the largest teachers' union, *Asociación de Trabajadorxs de la Educación de Neuquén* (Neuquén Education Workers' Association); hereafter ATEN. This implied, among others, an annual dispute over delayed school starts caused by teachers' strikes (Martínez 2018).

During FPV administration, NP continued to be governed by its long-standing provincial party. NP did not have a provincial agenda for secondary education as the

subnational government was busy with political wrangling with the militant teachers' union. Federal policy initiatives concerning secondary education were therefore adopted later and implemented partially due to the union's resistance. This illustrates how subnational actors can mediate, reinterpret or obstruct national policy through localised power dynamics.

NP's history of education was shaped by a significant event that captured local and national attention and was mentioned by interviewees as a milestone: the 2007 ATEN demonstration, where teacher Carlos Fuentealba was killed by the police during a protest (Equipo FACE-UNCo 2013). Since this tragic event, local policymakers have prioritised reaching agreements with the teacher's union.

After Carlos Fuentealba's shooting, provincial authorities aimed for consensus and peace among teachers. So programme implementation and negotiations usually take lots of time. [...] it was a process that changed us very much. (NP's Civil servant)

During FPV administration, NP did not resist federal policies but enacted them only superficially due to a deadlock in relations between the local government and the union. The dialogue was fraught with challenges because the provincial political party was ruled by its most conservative line while ATEN was led by a very combative faction. The provincial government formally accepted all federal proposals and funding, despite having one of the largest education budgets in the country, but ATEN acted as a 'gatekeeper' (Romualdo 2022), controlling which policies were implemented. The scope of federal policy programmes was therefore defined according to the resistance of the union. For instance, the *Plan de Mejora Institucional* (Institutional Improvement Plan), a universal federal programme, only reached 80% of the secondary schools in this province (Equipo FACE-UNCo 2013).

The provincial curriculum largely ignores Federal Council decisions. [...] adapting regulations in a distinctly 'Neuquén style' [...] Federal programmes were replicated selectively (for example, only two or three schools had orchestras) and implemented only with union approval [...] Indeed, it is ATEN that governs the education system. (NP's Policymaker)

This points to a decoupling between formal adoption and substantive enactment of policy, highlighting how unions can exert informal but decisive power in provincial assemblages. Furthermore, there is evidence of official provincial documents that follow the federal guidelines, but lacking the signatures of the union representatives of the Provincial Education Council (Romualdo 2022). NP's experience exemplifies how policy translation is not a linear process but one shaped by localised assemblages of power, where unions can act as reterritorialising agents that redefine the scope and meaning of federal reforms in the political and technical reassembly of travelling policy. From an assemblage perspective, unions embody the 'unevenness and friction' (McCann and Ward 2012, 44) of policy travel across national and subnational levels.

In addition, NP occupied a marginal position in federal policy decision-making and exercised limited influence over the federal agenda, in comparison with the other provinces analysed in this paper. There is no evidence to suggest that NP successfully influenced federal education policy during this time, or engaged in any joint policy work with the federal government. The testimonies of the provincial officials reveal that they

perceived their participation in federal meetings as akin to training provided by the federal level, and they also mentioned a constant lack of recognition of their local specificities.

Federalism is easier said than done. When it comes to implementing policies in the hinterland, I think there were many shortcomings in the way consensus was built. [...] the federal government didn't understand that the world doesn't revolve around Buenos Aires [the capital city] [...] NP is different. (NP's Policymaker)

During AC administration 2015–2019, NP continued to be governed by the same local political party, but this time a new, union-friendly provincial education minister improved relations with the teachers' union, enabling the development of a provincial secondary education policy. This local government-union alliance strengthened local resistance to federal reform efforts, giving the province leverage to reject AC's proposals. This permitted NP to become a subnational state in which non-state actors like the union were empowered to play a leading role in the design of provincial policy and preside over a contested political space that functioned above and beyond the policy demands flowing from the AC administration (Wallner et al. 2020). This strategic alliance constituted a subnational policy counterproject enabling NP to exert horizontal power against vertical federal mandates, demonstrating how provincial autonomy can be activated through union – state collaboration. This relationship between the local government and the union showcases an essential aspect of a specific provincial assemblage that would ordinarily be overlooked within methodological nationalism accounts of policy change.

As in FPV administration, ATEN continued to play an important role in defining NP's education policy, but the novelty of this phase was that it took a leading role in the most important policy for secondary education: the process of participatory construction of the new curriculum design carried out between 2015 and 2019.

They need us to make education policy. [...] They couldn't do it without us before, and now this curriculum exists because ATEN chose to support it – we practically designed it. The ministry even felt overridden. [...] It's very hard for the government to decide anything without us. (NP's Civil servant, teachers' union representative)

NP rejected the *Escuelas Faro* federal programme, deeming it incompatible with local concerns and successfully requested to redirect its funds to a provincial policy instead. Due to its favourable financial situation, NP was also successful in continuing the implementation of previous FPV's policies despite their discontinuation at the federal level by the AC.

I told the federal government: 'You're allocating over 10 million in 2019 for *Escuelas Faro* – a programme I won't implement. Please transfer the funds to the secondary school we're designing'. (NP's Policymaker)

Furthermore, despite the accountability logic for federal funding implemented by the AC, no school in NP was left without funds. A special unit was created in the local Ministry of Education to help schools with their budget accountability, and provincial funds were allocated to prevent schools from being penalised by the state. Finally, in the testimonies of some provincial officials, NP appeared to be respected by the AC despite

carrying out a provincial project with different orientations. However, evidence shows this did not mean that any of NP's ideas were taken into account in the federal policies.

We shared our views [at federal meetings], but we did not agree with what was written in the federal documents.

-Did you have the opportunity to express it?

Yes, we did.

-Was any of it included in the final documents?

No. (NP's Policymaker)

Persistent features, changing contexts

Federalism matters in education because it captures how provincial governments and their shifting orientation respond to federal commitments, like the right to secondary education. This paper builds on emerging research on policy mobility in federal contexts (Bonai et al. 2023; Esper and Acosta 2023; Hartong and Urbas 2023; Piattoeva and Vasileva 2023), empirically focusing on how space and place shape policy interpretation and translation in decentralised systems. We discuss the subnational level as a unit of analysis and show the endurance of provincial assemblages in the articulation and installation of travelling policies. Specifically, we focus on how federal policies move, are gathered and mobilised (or not) through discrete subnational contexts with constitutional powers and discretion to reassemble travelling policies. Empirically, we have identified the unique properties and capacities of these subnational contexts as anchors for provisional assemblages – what (McCann and Ward 2012), 42) call the 'the socio-spatial manifestations of policy work'.

Assemblage theory has been key to capturing the uneven development and movement of federal policies as dynamic expressions of provincial assemblages. Drawing on scholars across disciplines, from geography (Anderson and McFarlane 2011) and cultural studies (Puar 2007) to social anthropology (Li 2007) and political studies (Prince 2010), we use this lens to examine the specific socio-spatial formations that generate new forms of policy articulation and translation. This approach avoids structuralist or synchronic accounts that reduce policy change and movement into tidy global systematic or national representations. Assemblage theory then serves as an 'interpretative strategy used to displace presumptions of structural coherence and determination' (Baker and McGuirk 2017, 431). Our paper also contributes to growing education research using assemblage theory to explain the particularities of policy travel and translation in federal contexts (Jules and Salajan 2023), including studies on global technologies like the OECD (Gorur 2011), PISA (Koh 2011) or New Public Management (Wilkins et al. 2024).

Analysing the actions and orientations of provincial governments through the lens of assemblage theory moves us beyond a homogenous account of state power or a linear view of policy as unidirectional and uniform across space/place. Instead, it foregrounds the significance of local politics, projects and actors to the formation and assembly of education policy. Methodological nationalism, for example, presupposes that there is a homogeneous, particular or prior national dynamic that is later transformed by the logic of provincial powers (Rodrigo 2016). In contrast, we demonstrate how provincial powers not only successfully resist and reconfigure federal policy frameworks to suit their

own agendas, but also contribute to the development and transformation of those frameworks at the federal level (Aelo 2002).

The three subnational cases examined here have differing identities, with features that have persisted even in the face of significant changes in the role of the federal state. These features are characteristic of what we call provincial assemblages and are associated with how each province positions itself in relation to various federal initiatives and influences those processes and outcomes. We have defined each subnational case differently to capture their unique relationship to the federal government: Buenos Aires Province as ‘negotiator’, Buenos Aires City as ‘pioneer’ and Neuquén Province as ‘outsider’. This typology of provincial identities shows that, beyond the different kinds of federalism proposed by the federal administrations or the conceptions of national unity on which they were based, the subnational governments were not merely empty containers and recipients of these policies. Rather, this paper demonstrates how subnational governments negotiate and even influence federal policy frameworks, adapting them to their own ends or rejecting them in favour of policy alternatives imagined at the provincial level.

Wallner et al. (2020) suggest subnational states play three major roles, which are consistent with the findings of this paper. However, our typology adds nuances to theirs. For Wallner et al. (2020), subnational states can serve as pioneers by initially testing policies that are later adopted by others, as was the case with Buenos Aires City during the FPV and AC administrations (Romualdo 2022). They can be co-producers of policies with other levels of government, even using spaces of federal coordination to lobby in their favour, as was the case with Buenos Aires Province during the FPV administration (Romualdo 2022). Alternatively, they can be contenders of educational reforms, providing spaces for non-state actors to promote their ideas, as was the case with Neuquén Province during AC administration, which created its own provincial policy promoted and co-produced by the majority teachers’ union (Romualdo 2022).

In our typology, the ‘pioneer’ province is not only a forerunner of many education policies but highly autonomous, evidenced by its decisions to ignore the national government and create opposing policies. Regarding the ‘negotiator’ province, although co-producing policies is one of its distinctive features, we emphasise that negotiation is an exercise of power in which provinces enter into permanent tensions with the federal level, from which the province often has to defend itself. Finally, regarding the ‘outsider’ category, we not only refer to certain subnational states as sites of contestation occupied by non-state actors but highlight how some subnational states can be marginalised within contexts of educational federalism. One of the main contributions of the Argentinian case study to broader comparative discussions is to highlight the roles of subnational states that exist on the margins of federal rules. Both Buenos Aires City, as a ‘pioneer’, and Neuquén Province, as an ‘outsider’, reveal weaknesses in the federal system, raising questions about the extent of decentralisation and coordination.

Although the typology may be limited by its association with the specific features of the Argentinian state and Latin American democracies, we believe it can provide valuable analytical tools for understanding the roles of subnational states in other regions. Rather

than offering fixed labels, this framework seeks to illuminate the roles of subnational actors in response to shifting political and spatial dynamics. In doing so, it contributes to global conversations on provincial assemblages while challenging the assumptions of methodological nationalism, which too often oversimplify the complexities of federal governance.

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