

Teacher union resistance to the onslaught of standardized evaluation in **Argentina**

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Photo: LA NACION/Silvana Colombo

In Argentina, since the 1980s and with increased emphasis during the decade of the 90s, standardized evaluation took hold in order to measure students' learning in accordance with the "suggestions" of international agencies.

From the beginning, the Confederation of Argentine Education Workers (CTERA) raised questions around this way of conceiving evaluation, pointing out that it reduces the education process to a simple "measurement of results", placing the full responsibility on students, teachers and schools.

For CTERA, standardized evaluation tests are: restrictive (by measuring only certain content in a superficial manner), punitive (by establishing rewards and punishment), and stigmatizing (by distinguishing "good" and "bad" schools, establishing an arbitrary ranking and/or quality indices). Similarly, they privilege "efficiency", "productivity", "merit" and "student performance" at the expense of forming conscious citizens with full rights.

1. Education Secretary of the Confederation of Argentine Education Workers (CTERA)

Out of the resistance to these tests, an alternative proposal was built where evaluation is defined as an essential dimension of teacher training and work. To that effect, a joint national agreement was reached in 2013 which allowed for another understanding of education: the understanding that the process itself is a collective possibility for defining teaching work and where knowledge can be conceived as solidarity and no longer as a commodity; where the topics of study are the result of a collective process of analyzing reality and not a simple arbitrary decision taken by specialists or public officials, who on some occasions have been able to respond better to the needs of capital than the interests and needs of the working class; and lastly, where evaluation instruments are dialectically integrated into the teaching process as both a form and possibility for learning and not as a mere technical instrument for measurement and control.

In Argentina, this joint agreement, endorsed by a resolution of the Federal Education Council (Resol. No. 201/13), places the state in charge of guaranteeing ongoing, free of cost teacher training as part of teacher's work, including evaluation as an additional component of the training process. It is foreseen therein that evaluation be carried out in a participatory manner, considering the "school" as an institutional unit. It also recognizes the condition of teachers work as a situated and contextualized pedagogical practice, which integrates individual and collective actions in the framework of a public institution of educational nature, and which entails participation from the entire community.¹

CTERA believes that these achievements represent a step towards continuing the cultural battle that will unfold strategies for developing evaluation which –by recovering its political-pedagogical character– will promote participation and take on the challenge of improving education for everyone.

In spite of this important achievement, Argentina still continues to participate in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) developed by the
1. Resolution 201/13 of the Federal Education Council

Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and the Regional Comparative and Explanatory Studies for Quality of Education organized by the Latin American Laboratory for Assessment for the Quality of Education (LLECE), OREALC, UNESCO (carried out in 1997; SERCE in 2007; and TERCE to take place). This is a contradiction that CTERA has always highlighted, since we continue to believe that the indicators elaborated by the OECD cannot reflect or represent the educational reality in Latin American countries, much less improve it, given that they were created under categories specific to developed countries. In addition, we consider that after having suffered decades of divestment, disarticulation and fragmentation of the education system, it is fundamental to generate spaces and time for collaborative work in order to build indicators that assess what is being produced in our schools, and develop the knowledge required to evaluate the set of public policies that are applied to the education system.

Change in context

Since the end of 2015, a right-wing political party has governed Argentina with the main objective of promoting a conservative revival and eliminating every social right that the working class had achieved over the past years.

The first measure taken by this government in education was the imposition of a national evaluation program called "Aprender 2016".

At CTERA we have opposed the implementation of this program, mainly because it is an initiative for disciplining education workers where evaluation is conceived as an end in itself and as a punitive mechanism that reduces the participation of teachers to mere implementers and students as mere subjects of study.

From a labour union perspective, this kind of evaluation system infringes on education workers' rights because it destabilizes conditions and extends the obligations of teaching work, establishing that principles and/or directors will be the "overseers" of the schools where the tests will be implemented and the teachers will be the "applicators" who evaluate students in a school

different than the one they teach in. It is clearly “work harassment”, since an employee cannot be awarded a different treatment, nor change their function nor place of work. It is important to underline that among the various teaching and administrative functions there is no obligation related to the application of external standardized tests. It involves a new “role”, distinct from the work teachers carry out daily and, furthermore, it was done without consultation.

In pedagogical terms, these tests interfere with the heart of the work of teaching and require extra time to assume responsibilities and tasks foreign to the teaching work itself, before, during and after the application of a program which was designed without the participation of teachers. The instrument developed by “Aprender 2016” reduces the contents of the tests to two areas, language and mathematics, in elementary and secondary schools for the second and third years. It is only in the fifth year of secondary that it covers four areas - language, mathematics, social sciences and natural sciences - leaving the door ajar for an “accreditation test”.

We know that standardized tests never assess everything that has been learned in each evaluated area because there is always an intentional cut to the curriculum. The ideal, then, would be to extend the evaluated contents in response to the social relevance of knowledge rather than paying attention only to the traditional disciplines.

In terms of methodology, the evaluation will be applied “every year” which indicates a certain “naivety” and “false expectations” about the possibility of educational change, since education does not improve solely by evaluating every year or by imposing a “culture of evaluation.” Evaluation on its own does not produce changes in education; teaching and learning have different timeframes and depend on diverse factors that go beyond instrumental evaluation.

The tests were designed using a closed response format which reduces to the absolute minimum any useful feedback for schools. If the goal is to improve education, evaluations should offer information, not only identify or monitor the problem, but also analyze

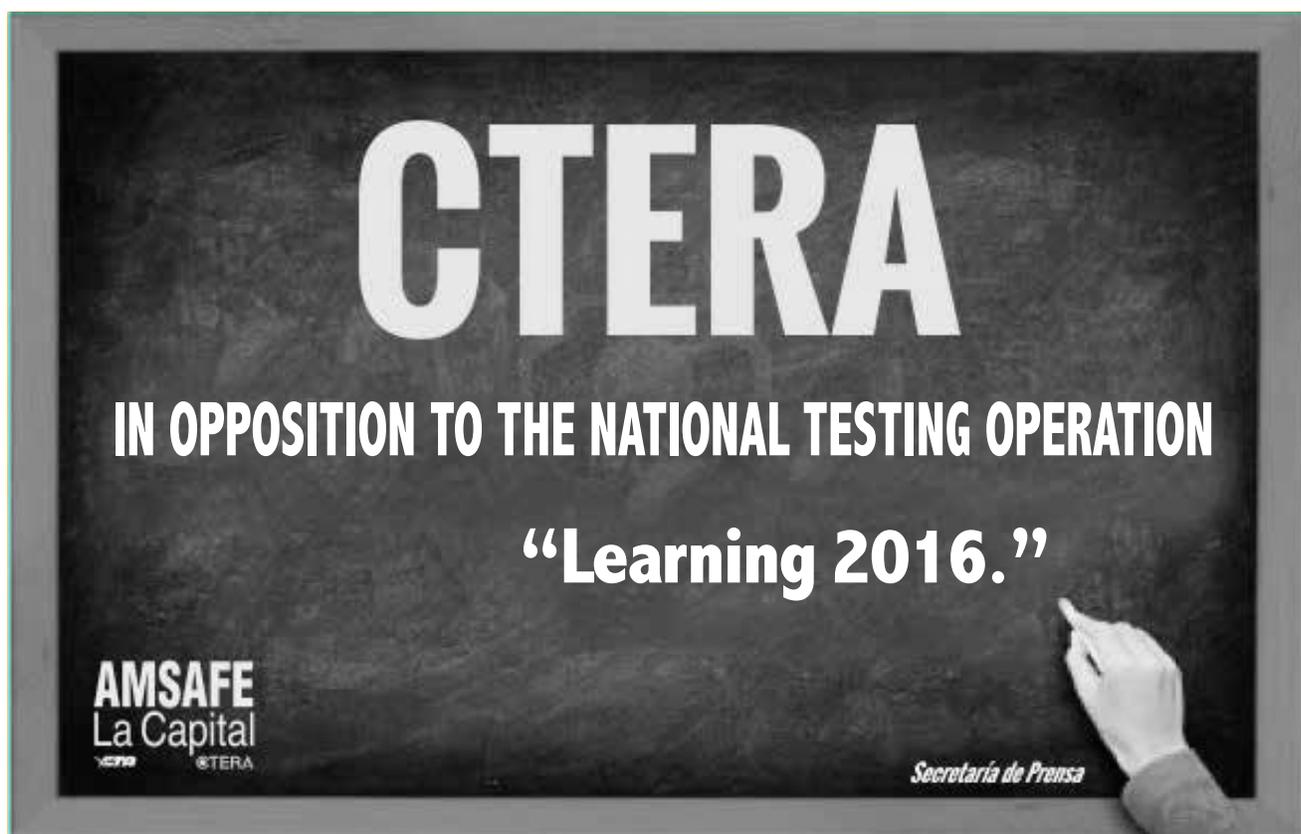


Photo: Otras voces en educación



Photo: Protest in a public high school in Buenos Aires against the educational evaluation of the government. Telam

the situation of education. And to that effect, evaluation needs to glean more information than that which is produced through the closed answers in multiple choice questions, that simply tell us if specific learning has taken place or not.

As CTERA we have warned about the new technocratic bias which attempts to understand the teaching work carried out by principals and teachers, since with “Aprender 2016” we are involved in an instrumentalist task that doesn’t incorporate the point of view of education workers which includes the political-pedagogical dimension so necessary to the entire evaluation process.

As a result, we have condemned the mechanisms established by “Aprender 2016” and have demanded its suspension by opening roundtable dialogues, debates and reflection throughout the country, to reach social agreements around the meanings, characteristics and conditions needed to democratically build a national evaluation system in the current context.