

# Standardized exams and teaching work

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Not long ago in Los Angeles (USA) teachers, families and students protested and demanded more time for learning and less for preparation for standardized exams. They delivered a clear message that confirmed that these exams had no educational purpose. The standardized exams that had been introduced into schools were foreign to their *raison d'être* and had changed the purpose of evaluation itself, which should always be to improve teaching and learning.

The fundamental supposition of this type of exam is that if an education system passes on knowledge to students, then by evaluating that knowledge we can determine the “quality” of the education system itself. This is, however, a mechanistic vision that doesn't understand education in a holistic and rigorous way. This is why it has been criticized for a long time by many different authors and identified with a technical and technocratic paradigm of education whose results have only supported marketing systems through which the best advertised is sold but doesn't necessarily deliver the best education. Among the authors that early on

criticized this technocracy are Pérez Gómez and Gimeno, 1983; Trillo, 1994; Zeichner and Liston, 1987. More recently, there have been many studies such as the one carried out by Education International for Latin America (Arancibia, 2015), which analyzes the failure of both the PISA exams in the region and of teacher evaluations.

Evaluating the quality of educational institutions is another unfulfilled promise of standardized exams as they aren't able to evaluate the system as a whole, and not just results for the learning of content in specific areas or topics, without taking into account

the factors associated with learning or the weight of the state's education policies.

Looking at the PISA exams, one of the most important at the global level, (Barquín, Gallardo, Fernández, Yus, Sepúlveda y Serván, 2011) state that:

It is not so clear that this type of exam has an immediate impact on the quality of educational systems so, as such, this evaluation can hardly be seen as an educational or formative evaluation. In addition, its design and conclusions do not allow for the detection of the system's

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faults in enough detail to be able to intervene. In fact, in the official PISA documents, it states that, “we don’t claim to measure what students learn.” What is certain is that the international projection that these exams have and the disruption that they cause, through the media, on the governments of different countries are real and clear, despite that from PISA they reiterate that “their intention is not to evaluate education systems.” Simply, they say that they try to measure results or performance, the outputs selected by PISA based on the inputs carried out by different education systems. There is nothing about what happens at both extremes, that is to say, a black box model (pp. 325-326).

Popham (2000, p.4) summarizes it categorically: “Using standardized exams for results in order to assess the quality of education is like measuring temperature with a spoon.”

## **Standardized exams and teaching work**

However, despite the inefficiency shown by standardized exams, they have become the main instrument of control over teaching work and the life of schools. Through them, curriculum and the work to be carried out is directed. Some of the effects on teachers’ work are the following:

### **Loss of teaching freedom**

Teaching freedom involves the teacher being able to sustain their philosophical position and determine their methodology and resources, and together with this, the expected learning results of their activity. Standardized exams already establish these expected results and they correspond to the textbooks that are given to teachers and students. Their work methodology is also pre-determined, through which the education

professional becomes merely a simple executor of foreign decisions, without their own thinking. Thus, they are not working in relation to the real needs of students but rather repeating, in a bureaucratic manner, one particular theme and learning exercise.

## **Abandonment of pedagogy**

This relationship between standardized exams, texts and imposed methodology, results in a social and scientific degradation of teaching work. It is no longer necessary to study pedagogy as the general science of education, nor other specific sciences, since the teacher is not allowed to decide how to guide the work of the student group, their connection with the community and any appropriate activities. They must simply prepare those who will be taking the tests and prepare themselves to cover topics that are not relevant.

## **Greater control generates higher teacher stress/burnout**

Foucault identifies exams in the following manner (2002, p. 71):

“The exam combines the techniques from the hierarchy that monitors and those from the punishment that normalizes. It is a normalizing gaze, a monitoring that allows for grading, classifying and punishing. It establishes a visibility on individuals through which they are differentiated and punished. Due to this, in all mechanisms of the discipline, the exam finds itself highly ritualized.”

Control, submission and punishment weaken the health of teachers and lead them to lose their morale and enter into states of anxiety and depression. This is a risk and reality that are not justified if we consider that these exams don't improve learning.

Teaching work is, in fact, complex work under pressure. Evaluation should happen constantly, but this is better reflected in results when the basis is self-evaluation, self-criticism, and an individual and collective intention to improve.

## **Reduction of labour rights**

Even though the social sciences, and within them the field of education, are differentiated from the natural sciences as relates to multi-causal phenomena, most standardized exams claim that the sole responsibility for learning results lies with teachers. This criteria is used to apply a series of typically neoliberal measures: making work more flexible, facilitating mass lay-offs, justifying low salaries, and reducing the right to participation.

On the other hand, the dissemination of results seeks to damage the social image of educators and their unions. Teachers remain alone in the face of measures by authorities and they are threatened by the use of the results in rankings that leave them socially condemned. Teacher stress, once again, increases.

We must not forget that this is also the way that the privatization of schools is justified, in which teachers, parents and students have their rights curtailed and defined by the bosses.

## **Competition weakens the group**

“Compete or die” is the logic that weakens the teaching team, its teamwork and their shared goals. It is justified through the application of a “meritocracy,” a mechanism that has nothing to do with either democracy or quality (Isch, 2013), but that deceives those who are caught off-guard.

To propose that a salary or a bonus be awarded in an individual manner according to the results of exams increases this competition, divides teachers as a social sector and increases egoism in all situations.

The super individualization of teaching work is, in reality, contrary to good education. And competition between teachers is fundamentally a tool of pressure and control that leads to a senseless busyness: producing papers that no-one will read, writing at the margin of reality, proposing innovations that, even if useful, no-one will take on, and constantly running without ever knowing what the goal is.

## First-class and second-class courses and teachers

Exams, as we know, are concerned with only a few subjects or disciplines. Because of this, they create the idea that some subjects are more important and others mere fillers. Being a teacher of filler subjects not only makes it possible to lose one's job, as happens when hours are eliminated or reduced for philosophy or art, but it also places teachers in the same categories. A "filler" teacher loses respect among the community and their knowledge is presented as insubstantial.

The attack on social sciences by this system is part of training a workforce that may have technical skills but lacks a social conscience. This weakens the social function of schools, at any level, which then leads to complaints that place the responsibility once again on educators.

## Conclusion

It is a fact that standardized evaluation destroys the individuality of students and teachers, since there are no "standardized" people and cultural origins are not standardized either. In this way its effect on education is undeniable. However, the promoters of these systems do not want to be evaluated or to have the changes they impose on the education system and on the lives of communities to be examined in a critical manner.

An important impact, of which very little is spoken, is how these types of exams have affected the teaching career, its social value and working conditions. Education professionals have seen themselves become less able to support learning and now feel obligated to prepare students for the exams. This activity is combined with

reports, checklists and other forms of bureaucratization of their work that kill off initiative and create conditions rife for illness and teaching malaise.

Here we find an additional argument to oppose standardization - to recover the role of the educational community in which teachers can exercise leadership guided by the principle of putting our rights and those of our students first, thus opening up the possibility of dignified education for a humanized society.

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