

# Old Formulas and New Business in Education

Liliana Pascual, Luz Albergucci\*

## Summary

The quality of the education system and its assessment have become the main subjects debated in society today when speaking of education. In Argentina, the current government has exacerbated these questions and set the agenda of educational debate, displaying the results of standardized evaluations to justify policies of adjustment and commodification in the public sphere, starting from a plan of neoliberal and conservative restoration in the education field. Standardized evaluation and information regarding the education system have become a major educational business. The public agenda has come to be defined by private interests, with the entry of companies and NGOs into the educational field by means of agreements with the

---

\* LILIANA PASCUAL and LUZ ALBERGUCCI are members of the Team of Investigation regarding Educational Evaluation of the “Marina Vilte” Institute of Investigations of CTERA (*Confederación de Trabajadores de la Educación de la República Argentina* - Confederation of Education Workers of the Argentine Republic).

state to define, implement, and evaluate public policies. The results of evaluations are like scores “listed on the stock exchange,” and teachers and students are blamed, denying the importance of public policy in generating the best conditions for teaching and learning. Evaluation thus conceived serves to prepare the ground for educational privatization and meritocracy and answers to the interests of the companies which seek to profit from education understood as a business.

Key words: commodification of education - standardized evaluation - meritocracy - quality.

## Evaluation in the logic of the market

In our country, and in the rest of Latin America, standardized evaluation was established during the nineties through a technocratic approach, guided by the economist paradigm of accountability, hegemonized by neoliberal ideology, in keeping with recommendations of international credit institutions. The objective of

quality was defined as the formation of abilities for a market of flexible and changing work, and the function of education would consist in increasing the possibility of “less developed” countries to compete in the international market. Evaluation was also put at the service of the “accountability” of the hand of fiscal adjustment.

However, after the passing of the National Education Law, debated and passed during the governments of Néstor Kirchner and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2003-2015), educational evaluation began to acquire a different meaning in Argentina, as a tool which—among others—offers information to guide the actions of public policy. The concept of quality education was used to examine characteristics of educational institutions, management styles, curriculum proposals, available resources, working conditions, didactic strategies, learning, characteristics of job positions, and the process of teaching work, etc. This new framework considered that the evaluation of learning by means of standardized tests does not measure “quality,” but a very reduced aspect of one of the many components of “learning.” Further, the utility of tests does not lie in their being an “indicator of quality,” but a tool, among others, to

monitor public policy. At that time, the state had abandoned the role of controller to become the guarantor of the social right to “public education of quality.” From this perspective, the concept of quality, far from being associated with competitiveness and efficiency, is conceived as inseparable from the categories of inclusion, equity, relevance and pertinence of various forms of learning. The belief that “quality” can only be reached by a few is broken, because the only education that is truly of quality is for everyone. Note here an important conceptual change: one speaks of “education of quality” and not of “educational quality.” In this conception the substance is education and quality is only an attribute which is realized to the extent that everyone can gain access to it. Nevertheless, this new discourse did not fully take hold in Argentine society, nor within the teaching community, so that we currently see that, with the new government administration at the end of 2015, the most conservative sectors have resumed the economist paradigm in talking of “educational quality,” where “quality” is an attribute of education to which only some can have access.



## Standardized evaluation: using results to justify adjustment and commodification

Since the coalition Cambiemos<sup>1</sup> came to power in December 2015, there has been a redefinition of public education and an opening up to private capital (Feldfeber and others, 2018); which can mainly be seen through the outsourcing of state educational functions.

Educational policies which are implemented through this conservative restoration place emphasis on educational evaluation, and preserve a link with various documents of international bodies, for example, the document “Excellent teachers: How to improve learning in Latin America and the Caribbean,” produced by World Bank economists in 2014. That paper promotes a formula for educational improvements based on three steps: 1) general tests for students with a transparent disclosure of results, under the slogan of transparency; 2) payment of bonuses to schools based on the learning progress of the students, under “the logic of the prize”<sup>2</sup>, 3) individual and voluntary evaluation of teachers so that they are accountable for their performance, accompanied by financial compensation for those who accept being evaluated and turn in good performances.

In keeping with these changes to public policy, the evaluation budget grew at the expense of the budget for teacher training, school resources (netbooks, books, children’s play-centres, etc.) grants for students, infrastructures, etc. The budget for evaluation grew from 125 million pesos in 2015 to 988 million in 2018, which indicates a budgetary increase of 690%.<sup>3</sup> In 2016, the new

administration tabled a bill for the creation of an autonomous “Institute for Evaluation of Education Quality and Equity.” Although it has not been passed because of strong resistance by various sectors, it has been taken up in presidential speeches at every opening of regular sessions of Congress. Until the Institute comes into effect, the government has decided to raise the national entity devoted to evaluation, in the administrative hierarchy, transforming it from a Department of Evaluation within the Ministry of National Education to a Secretariat of Education Evaluation. This Secretariat has implemented standardized general and annual evaluations for both secondary schools and the primary level (Operative Learning), and a new standardized evaluation for the last year of teacher training (Operative Teaching)<sup>4</sup>. This latter measure was implemented in 2017. It couldn’t be implemented in all the schools due to the resistance of teachers and students, but has been used to discredit teacher training and to justify adjustment policies which were already being implemented throughout the country: closure of teacher training institutes, closure of degree programs and courses and transfers to the private sector of teacher training activities. It is important to point out that policies of adjustment, and especially the closure of courses and degree programs, were rejected by the affected educational communities. Several protest actions were undertaken, enrolment continued, and other actions were undertaken that, by the beginning of 2019, had diminished the impact of these policies in some areas of the country.

Without a doubt, these old neoliberal formulas have

---

1. Cambiemos (“Let Us Change”) is an Argentine center-right coalition. Their candidate, Mauricio Macri, won the Oct. 2015 presidential election. (Translator’s note.)

2. This refers to the logic of prizes and punishments which consists of awarding money to schools which obtain good results, and punishing those that do badly by withholding money. – L.P.

3. CTERA (2018), “The adjustment in educational financing in Argentina: An analysis of the Educational Budget during the government of the Cambiemos Alliance.” June 2018. Marina Vilte Institute, Secretary of Education, Confederation of Workers of the Argentine Republic. Available

---

in: <https://mediateca.ctera.org.ar/files/original/902b2dag-7919f705ef5a9cc3ae89253.pdf>.

[CTERA stands for Confederación de Trabajadores de la Educación de la República Argentina --Confederation of Education Workers of the Argentine Republic – Translator’s note]

4. “Operative Learning” and “Operative Teaching” are two kinds of standardized evaluations. The first applies to students of primary and secondary levels. The second applies to students of the Institutes of Teacher Training which belong to the higher level. – L.P.



been accompanied by the establishment of new power relations between members of the dominant elite and the state and its education policies, arrangements which Ball (2008) calls new “networks” or “political community.” In these new networks, various hegemonic groups carry out agreements with the state to define, implement and evaluate public policies. In terms of evaluation, various initiatives which were already being developed in our country by international bodies such as the International Development Bank and World Bank are continuing. These organizations, together with local consultants, such as the Centre for Public Policy Foundation and others created when agreements were reached with the state, offer technical assistance to schools and provincial governments to carry out external standardized tests in accordance with the interests and demands of these international bodies. The public agenda has begun to be defined by private interests, starting from the sale of digital educational platforms, the training of teachers,

and the “exam industry,” centred on standardized evaluations. This business, which is carried out in the public schools and at the expense of the right to education, has spread widely in various countries of Latin America.

Argentina has also increased its participation in international evaluations. In 2018 there was an increase in the number of jurisdictions which participated in the PISA<sup>5</sup> tests as regions considered independent. (Until 2015, only the City of Buenos Aires participated, and currently three provinces more have been added). This means that each one pays the sum of 43,000 euros to the EST (Educational Testing Service, International Syndicate of the OECD<sup>6</sup>), in addition to the levy which each country pays for its participation. This business transaction is then completed through the sale of educa-

5. Programme for International Student Assessment.

6. Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development



tional contents, such as the “Singapore Method” for the teaching of mathematics. Singapore gained first place in international PISA tests of 2015 and the international tests of TIMMS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Studies) of 2014.

At the same time, the new education goals established through resolutions of the Federal Board of Education use the results of the PISA tests as indicators of success. This exponential growth of standardized international tests on the public scene indicates the opening up of new business opportunities for Pearson Education, the world’s leading education company which was chosen by the OECD to develop the framework for the PISA test after 2015. Pearson is one of the four most important publishing companies of the world, the majority of its gains being obtained through digital texts, virtual education tools, and the development of digital platforms for online exams. This multinational company owns shares in Penguin Random House, in Penguin Longman, in the Financial Times newspaper, and in the magazine The Economist, and is owner of the U.S. company National Evaluation Series which is dedicated to the preparation of standardized exams. Furthermore, in the U.S., Pearson has taken charge of directly administering teaching evaluations through filming of classes and peer reviews.

Educational information has also been converted into business; the agreement with the NGO “Argentines for Education,” created months before the establishment of relations with the Ministry of Education, has seen the privatization of the definition of policy on information and data publication which was previously in the hands of the Director of Information and Statistics of the Ministry [of Education] and the Federal Network of Education Information.

## Conclusion

With the new government administration, standardized evaluation and information regarding the educational

system have been transformed into a big educational business carried out through agreements with companies, either directly or through NGOs. The participation of business is also seen in the sale of products and educational services which are presented as solutions to the supposed low quality of the educational system, measured through standardized tests.

The results of standardized evaluation are also used to instill judgements. Thus, teachers and students are blamed, ignoring the importance of public policy to generate the best conditions for teaching and learning. Evaluation thus conceived serves to prepare the ground for educational privatization and meritocracy, responding to the interests of companies which seek to profit from education, and the decision of the state to implement adjustment policies in educational matters. Nevertheless, the privatizing blows by the new administration have been met with a strong rebuff from the educational community (unions, teachers, students and academics), who have mobilized massively in different ways to reject these policies and have succeeded in some cases in putting a halt to their advance.

## Bibliography.

Hall, S (2018). “New Philanthropy, New Networks, and New Governance in Education,” in *Political Studies*, No. 56(4), pages 747-765.

CTERA (2018), “The adjustment in educational financing in Argentina: An analysis of the Educational Budget during the government of the Cambiemos Alliance.” June 2018. Marina Vilte Institute, Secretary of Education, CTERA. Available in: <https://mediateca.ctera.org.ar/files/original/902b2dag7919f705ef5a9c-c3ae89253.pdf>

Feldfeber, M.; Puiggros, A.; Robertson, S.; Duhalde. M. (2018), *La privatización educativa en Argentina*, 1st edición, Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires, Confederación de Trabajadores de la Educación de la República Argentina, CTERA.