

Standardized assessment and the transformation of public education in Mexico

**Lucía Rivera Ferreiro,
Marcelino Guerra Mendoza
Roberto González Villarreal***

Summary

Using the metaphor of an infection, we describe the origin and evolution of standardized assessment in the Mexican educational system. Taking stock of the political changes and different official reforms, we show how standardized assessment quickly became the only acceptable way to determine the professional skills of teachers, or to prove the level of learning achieved by the students during their formal education. The conclusion is that standardized assessment is, without a doubt,

a fundamental vehicle for the neoliberal educational projects which have so deeply damaged public education both in practice and in the discourse of experts, economic organizations and the entrepreneurial sector of civil society.

Key words: standardized assessment, educational reforms, learning achievement, teachers' performance

* Full-time professors at the National Pedagogical University (UPN), the Ajusco Campus, Mexico City, Mexico. E-mail: labandelxs3@gmail.com



Introduction

How and when did standardized assessment take hold in Mexico? What effects has it had on teachers and students? By using the metaphor of an infectious process, we attempt to answer those questions. First we identify the time in which standardized assessment emerged. Then, we explore its transformations and applications until we get to the 2013 Educational Reform. Considered to be a reconfiguration of the national education system (Gonzalez, Rivera and Guerra, 2017), this reform made the assessment of teachers mandatory.

The breeding ground: 1970-1980

During those years, the educational system did not have psychometric or statistical techniques to guarantee the comparability of results and the stability of scales. Efforts centered on obtaining census data to create reliable statistics about coverage, graduation figures, efficiency parameters, drop-out rates, etc. The first large scale tests were applied in 1972, for junior high school entry. In 1974, the Assessment and Accreditation Sub-Directorate was created.

The first large scale learning assessment was known as the “Academic achievement evaluation for students in the 4th and 5th year of elementary education”. It used sample students with national representativeness (Martinez, 2008). It was done during the 1976-1982 administration.

The results were not shared publicly. Apparently, they were not used to justify political demands, neither were they used to make strategic decisions for education. Teachers were kings in their classrooms, since they decided on the strategies and instruments to perform assessment. Exams were the main tool to evaluate and control classrooms. They were either written by the teachers themselves, or they were bought from commercial test suppliers.

No one ever imagined the eruption that was about to happen when the results of the first international assessments started coming off the desks.

Innoculation (1990-2000)

During the 1990s, in the context of structural reforms that focused on the review, restructuring and reduction of public officials, the Secretariat of Public Education (SEP) continued applying the Diagnostic Tool for Junior High First-Entry students (IDANIS), which had been systematically used since 1989.

As of 1994, the School Learning Achievement Assessment was developed, in the framework of the Teachers Professional Development Program¹ and the Program to Reduce the Lag in Education (PARE). Two years

1. Carrera Magisterial was a program of economic rewards for teachers that was created as part of the School Modernization initiative during the Carlos Salinas de Gortari Administration (1989-1995). The Educational Reform in

later came the Elementary School Evaluation Program (EVEP) and in 1998 National Standard Assessments began (INEE, 2008). The assessment pilots and experiments multiplied. Mexico started to participate in international assessments such as TIMSS (International Association to Assess School Achievement-AIEA and the Latin American Lab for the Assessment of Educational Quality-LLECE).

At that time teachers were still the maximum classroom authority, and they still used their instructional assessment based on observation, experience or common sense. But they also started participating in the Knowledge Olympiads (1997), a competition between schools. There was no other reward rather than the acknowledgement of the authorities, students and parents for being the winning school. These seemingly harmless practices would soon be transformed into large scale assessments, fostered as a part of national education policies.

Contagion (2000-2011)

During the first decade of the twentieth century, assessment was clearly identified as part of state policy, and that is when it acquired relevance as an instrument to manage educational systems. Let us remember that by then, standardized national and international assessments had already been applied with merely comparative purposes. However, when PISA results began to be shared, assessment fever erupted.

The news that Mexican students had gotten low grades on the PISA assessment stirred social outrage, ignited in large part by the media, and it was used by the governments in power to accelerate the adoption of different measures. One very important one, because of the key role it would later play, was the creation of the National Educational Assessment Institute in 2002. New areas and organizations were created and multi-

2013, installed by the Enrique Peña Nieto Administration (2012-2018), ended the reward program and established the mandatory teachers' assessment.



plied to assess provincial state educational structures while larger budgets were allocated for the centralized evaluators, such as the General Directorate of the Public Education Secretariat. They designed the first general test, known as ENLACE, to assess the national level of student achievement, in spite of the fact that the INEE already existed.

Even though at that time teacher assessment was not yet mandatory, it did become a very important criterion for the granting of economic incentives for teachers. Just to give an idea of how relevant this was, ENLACE's grades represented 50% of the total points required to have access to an economic incentive or to improve the already existing one.

Soon afterwards, all teaching became focused on preparing for the exam. When the exam date approached, most teachers devoted all of their time on training the students for the test. There is no doubt that the idea that Mexico was seen as a country of failures led the public to accept standardized assessment without questioning it.

Epidemic (2012 to the present)

Standardized assessment came to stay. The outbreak became a full-blown epidemic and no one is safe from it. On February 26, 2013, the passing of a constitutional reform of all laws and regulations regarding education changed teachers' working conditions completely and abruptly.

Tests to assess students also changed. In 2015, the general assessment called ENLACE was cancelled and replaced by PLANEA (INEE, 2015) which is still current.

As part of its international commitments and responsibilities for 2018, INEE considered applying around ten different assessments to teachers, schools and students: TALIS², a video to assess teachers while teaching; the Comparative and Explicative Regional Study (ERCE), the Latin American Lab to Assess Education Quality (LLECE); the Knowledge Olympiad; PLANEA for preschool, elementary and high school education; PISA 2018; and the Diagnostic Assessment CENSAL which is self-applied and meant for teachers to plan their classroom activities based on the results. These are just some examples of INEE's assessments.

But as if the list were not long enough, there are also exams for entry, promotion and permanence in the teaching profession. "An assessment that started as an invitation to test skills and knowledge became an ongoing obligation that operates as a production control device, and that keeps teachers under the constant threat of losing their jobs" (Rivera, González y Guerra, 2016:94).

Conclusions

The fever for standardization is not exclusive to the Mexican educational system. It affects practically all systems around the world. For some time now, assessment -or rather measurement- has become a part of the agendas of all politicians; in effect, it has become a political problem. Therefore, the implications for public education supersede by far the mere technical dimension of education, since they are now placed in the political and even ethical dimensions.

Assessment is a government tool that was created to regulate behaviors, first through punitive measures but later through self-control. Today, it is a series of discursive practices –programs, norms, organizations-, which are widely accepted and determine what ought

to be said and done, separating good practices from those that are not and dictating who is considered the successful ideal and who is not. (Vasquez, 2013).

There is no doubt that assessment fever has had serious consequences in daily practices, such as distorting the educational process and limiting teaching to only those things that will be assessed. The constant threat of the tests causes teachers to excessively "teach to the test" and to use methods that are not always ethical.

The situation became even trickier when the measurement of student learning and competition among schools were added to the teacher assessment policies that offer economic incentives based on test results. Or even worse, they condition job security, as with what happened with the Reform in 2013.

Bibliographical References

González, R.; Rivera L.; Guerra, M. (2017) Political Anatomy of the Educational Reform. México, UPN. Taken from: <http://editorial.upnvirtual.edu.mx/index.php/9-publicaciones-upn/379-anatomia-politica-de-la-reforma-educativa>

INEE (2015) Plan Nacional para la evaluación de los aprendizajes (PLANEA). Taken from <http://planea.sep.gob.mx/content/general/docs/2015/PlaneaDocumentoRector.pdf>

Rivera, L., González, R., y Guerra M. M. (2016). Reconfiguration of the teaching profession in Mexico: from the voluntary accreditation to the mandatory assessment. (1992-2015). *IICE Magazine*, 0(39), 83-98. Taken from <http://revistascientificas.filo.uba.ar/index.php/iice/article/view/3999>

Vasquez, J. (2013) Evaluation of learning. Assessment as a political technology. Master Degree's thesis in Education. Bogota Universidad Pedagógica Nacional.

Vidal, R. (2009) ¿Enlace, Exani, Excale o Pisa? México, CENEVAL. Taken from http://www.educacionyculturaaz.com/wpcontent/uploads/2013/01/Enlace_Exani_Excali_Pisa.pdf

2. TALIS: Teaching and Learning International Survey.