



# Assessment Processes and Standardized Tests. Are they compatible if we look for quality in education?

## Procesos Evaluativos y Pruebas Estandarizadas. ¿Son compatibles si buscamos la calidad en la educación?

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### ABSTRACT

Is there a disjunction between evaluative processes and standardized tests? Are they compatible if we seek, in these terms, quality in education? In the literature, there are terms on quality linked to education; however, quality is a score on a standardized test. On the other hand, they treat the school from the point of view of the business world, where success is attributed to academic performance, confusing quality in education with the necessary structural and material conditions. The importance of this article lies in exposing this disjunctive, which was approached theoretically, presenting an inquiry-type research that allowed us to reflect on this correlation. The results showed a latent distance between evaluative processes and standardized tests oriented toward summative evaluations. It is concluded that education and, in particular, evaluation has become a lucrative business whose purpose is to make comparisons between individuals with specific and, on several occasions, unique characteristics, measuring the student body without a value in the object to be measured.

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### INTRODUCTION

Being a teacher in Chile and in Latin America requires more love than vocation; terms that are not quantifiable. However, vocation is a term that can cause confusion. Sometimes, it is attributed to martyrdom because it is a term used in the priesthood; ergo it is a value judgment on the service a teacher performs. However, can a teacher bestow different degrees of love according to the level at which he/she works? For example, López Arrillaga (2019) points out that the performance of the primary teacher must be guided by a pedagogy based on feelings and affective processes and



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the personal development of the students' personalities. However, his thesis is focused on the primary education teacher, not considering the levels that follow him. Regarding the term "martyr", the Royal Spanish Academy defines it as one who endures suffering, injustice, or deprivation due to the action of something or of third parties. It also points out that this condition is enhanced if vocation or other processes that value the person's performance, emphasizing religious aspects, act on the consequences.

As a result of the texts, articles, and publications that exist on the network, on the questioning just raised, a series of answers to many questions that have been born throughout the professional trajectory of many teachers arise (Angulo, 2020; Angulo, 2019; Casassus, 2007; Espinosa, 2020; Espinoza, 2017; Nichols & Berliner, 2007). Regarding the above, it is enough to enter a group of teachers on a social network such as Facebook to read the number of questions that afflict them. However, now it is called to place itself in the following question and questioning: Are evaluative processes and standardized tests compatible if we seek quality in education?

Specifically in Chile, since a considerable time ago (creation of SIMCE in 2012), an insistent inclination has been born and remained on the part of school directors and politicians in the Ministry of Education to elaborate and apply evaluation instruments that do not comply with the basis of education, nor represent the love of teaching or the inner interest in dedicating oneself to this way of life (teaching). Education should be aimed at training, promoting the development of intellectual and affective capacities, preparing future generations to make the best possible use of the wealth of knowledge and shared experiences, as well as to contribute to social improvement. In this sense, Casassus (2007) wrote an inspiring and revealing article that shows how standardized norm-referenced tests undermine the purpose of education, fostering inequality and diminishing the quality of education, questioning, in addition, the following:

What has happened that the tradition of educating for human formation, of caring for students, of educating to improve society, has been abandoned? Why have teachers been forced to abandon their enthusiasm for their work, making them enter the game of pressures and threats? (p. 78). The second question has a strong impact, as it expresses those repressed feelings that perhaps teachers have kept for years; teachers who entered the educational system with a laudable eagerness to improve the world and contribute to future generations' formation. However, they encounter pressures and threats within the school system itself when changing the traditionalist classroom rules or simply when questioning why the human tradition of educating for the betterment of society has been abandoned; this in light of the first question posed by Casassus (2007).

In Chile, since 1968, there has been an educational system based on external evaluation and the dual functionality of generating valuable data for decision-making by educational actors. Its declared general objective was based on two bastions of education; in the discourses of the academic and political mainstream, quality and equity. That is, based on a quantitative methodology and a positivist epistemology, the data needed to evaluate learning would be generated.

The Evaluation System of the Education Quality Agency (SIMCE) has existed since 2012; its purpose is to evaluate the learning results of educational institutions through a process of measurement and comparison that is applied to students across the country in various grades of the school system, in the areas of language and mathematics (2nd grade, 4th grade, 6th grade, 8th grade, 2nd grade, and recently added 3rd grade in the area of English). Their website states that they collect information about teachers, students, parents, and guardians through a questionnaire (a quantifiable measure). This information is used to analyze the results of Chile's students contextually, but how do we reconcile educational processes with standardized tests if the educational process is not a measure, is not quantifiable, and learning outcomes are not a number?

As mentioned above, there are ambiguous terms that have been used in education and that, due to ignorance or prudence, are not questioned (perhaps), and the origin or nature of their use is not studied in depth in daily praxis. Next, we ask ourselves, what do we understand by quality of education?

Different authors have made an analysis of this phrase, but we try not to separate its terms: quality and education. For example, at the beginning of the 20th century there was a debate about how intelligence should be defined. They concluded that intelligence would be what intelligence tests measure, a simile of what happens with quality of education, since learning would be considered equivalent to a score on a standardized test (Angulo, 2020; Angulo, 2019; Casassus, 2007; Espinoza, 2017; Nichols & Berliner, 2007).

But in the early 1980s, as Casassus (2007) mentions, there was a shift in education policy worldwide that did not take long to reach Latin America. This shift was concentrated within the system, moving from an approach focused

on quantity to one focused on quality, but also with the intervention of state agencies in the design of measurement indicators (Burstein, 1988). However, it does not explain what is understood by quality of education. On the other hand, Espinosa (2020) mentions that from business contexts comes the term “quality of education”, which acts as the curative potion to the current crisis in the educational world. However, the solution lies in relegating education to teachers, transforming their pedagogy into an administrative function. Therefore, Mejía (2006) indicates that educational establishments’ results behave like the factory’s world where they must show them as products.

For his part, Lovaglio points out that in Latin American and Caribbean countries, there are two specific interpretations of “quality of education” (2016, p. 6). On the one hand, it is understood as the basis of coexistence and democracy, highlighting the importance of citizenship, civic and value dimensions. And on the other hand, it is related to the socioeconomic effects of education, which are limited by factors such as the contribution to economic growth, access to employment, and social integration; elements that guarantee the population’s access to school where everyone can access the competencies, knowledge, skills and values that current educational models establish as indicators of promised quality.

On another point, Lovaglio (2016) points out that: «when we talk about «quality», most of the time adjudicated to standardized evaluations, it is somewhat excessive since there is more to educational quality that cannot be adjudicated by standardized evaluations» (p.13). From the foregoing, it is possible to raise two perspectives. One is the «technocratic» conception, where low quality in education is linked to the inefficiency of the educational system and that actions to improve it depend on technical and pedagogical decisions (Filmus, 1997). These decisions impact the productive character of actors and institutions, but also their secondary position concerning external actors (Aydarova, 2021; Cruickshank, 2019; Mehta, 2013).

The second conception is oriented from the market perspective, where the quality of education is subjected to the laws of supply and demand, this creates situations of competition between schools. In addition, it implies submission to market movements, the penetration of economic factors and the substitution of educational aspects in decision-making (Khoshtaria et al., 2020; Williamson, 2021; Williamson et al., 2020).

In both conceptions, concern for education is biased and tends to elitize it because quality in education is transformed into a privative quality since it is for the few; a fact supported by selectivity measures and an established culture of the desirability of the elite student (Lorbeer, 2020; Telling, 2020). These perspectives absolutize the relevance of endogenous factors that occur in the environment and those elements directly controlled by each educational institution. The risk in both perspectives is not to consider that for there to be quality in education, attention must be paid to those factors that are strongly determined by socioeconomic contexts and educational policies. Consequently, attention must be paid to various dimensions or approaches that are complementary to each other.

Casassus (2007) mentions several of the initiatives designed to improve the quality of the educational process, such as increasing the number of class hours; extending the curricular calendar; decentralizing curricula; standardizing and centralizing evaluation; greater privatization and regional competition among educational centers, among others. Thus, the author points out that these would be the main elements to be considered by school and administrative leaders, who are also a focal point in the initiatives to “raise” the quality of education.

In this sense, Lovaglio (2016) indicates that quality is a political concept that is related to the idea of education as a right and process that is at the service of building a more just and democratic society where every child attends school, being the context par excellence of meaningful experiences in the early stages. However, the history to date shows that several of these policies favored the management of the system rather than education (Salazar & Rifo, 2020). These currents were not generated from an in-depth examination of philosophy, psychology, pedagogy, or sociology but in economics and political control mechanisms (San Martín et al., 2015; Vázquez, 2015). Lovaglio also points out that Unesco poses the concept of quality in education as a range of diverse meanings that often do not coincide among the different actors because this concept “implies a value judgment regarding the type of education that is wanted to form an ideal of person and society” (p. 5). This is because the definition of the term “educational quality” is transformed and adapted according to the period, society, or group of individuals who are developing it at a given time.

In addition, Blanco (2007) mentions that the term “educational quality” is often assimilated with efficiency and efficacy, where education is considered as a product and as a service of what would be considered an educational market, which must satisfy the needs of the users. However, when talking about education, this must be based on a set of values and conceptions that oppose the value judgment held about the quality of education (Lovaglio, 2016).

When analyzing the phenomenon of quality in education, one must first allude to effectiveness since there are elements associated with the outcome of the process, such as learning objectives or performances, which are

contained in the programs and must be achieved. In addition, it is understood that quality is based on a physical counterpart, which represents the appropriate environment for conducting the teaching-learning process, in which students interact with a faculty prepared to teach and that supports its performance in appropriate didactic and pedagogical strategies. In simple terms, the quality of education must consider aspects related to effectiveness and efficiency, but it must also respect the rights of the entire educational community for it to be a relevant, pertinent, and equitable process.

## METHODOLOGY

### Approach and design

This research was of a reflexive type since it presents the results of a completed investigative sweep, being an article created from the researchers' analytical and critical point of view. It is based on a reflexive critical paradigm since its focus was qualitative, and the interpretative connotations necessary to deepen the present research were considered. This research arose as a result of a Master's course in Education, with mention in Educational Evaluation, given by the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso, and carried out by Dr. Félix Ángulo Rasco. The course, of a qualitative nature, sought to promote critical reflection on the subject of Educational Evaluation and Standards.

### Search strategy

The materials used were articles indexed in Scopus, Springer Link, latindex, Dialnet, Scielo, etc. A search was first performed in Spanish, due to the authors' native language, and then in English, due to the high impact of the publications at international level.

Key words were used in search engines such as Google Scholar, with filters of time, relevance, language and types of articles, as well as in databases such as: A+Education Database; Education Full Text; ERIC; Education Research Complete; Unesco Thesaurus, etc. The search used keywords in Spanish and English, including: "calidad en educación"; "quality in education"; "educational quality"; "evaluación de la educación"; "educational assessment"; "estudiante"; "student"; "docente"; "teacher"; "calidad de la educación"; "estudiante de primaria"; "estudiante de secundaria"; "docente de primaria"; "docente de secundaria"; "docente especializado"; "school teacher".

The selection criteria were broken down into a series of steps to eliminate articles older than 10 years and to store relevant articles in a complementary database. Research with both pure (which-which-which) and mixed approaches was selected. The selected texts were inserted with their metadata in a spreadsheet to proceed to order them according to their methodological approach.

In this way, we pursued a procedure similar to those carried out in the scoping review methodology for the exploration of thematic or first approaches to an object (Ruiz & Petrova, 2019; Westphaln et al., 2021), but without reaching the degree of rigor proposed in the PRISMA statement, since the study was directed more towards comprehension and less towards generalization. The purpose was to coordinate the analyses and synthesize knowledge on the main study question: Are evaluative processes and standardized tests compatible if we seek quality in education?

## RESULTS

At this stage, it was necessary to present the findings in two parts. First at the point, as Evaluation Process; then as Standardized Tests. The reason lies in achieving a contrast according to the information found. Thus, the discussion will be clear, orderly, and precise, achieving a consonance with the stated objective.

### Evaluation process

This process began in most Latin American and Caribbean countries in the early 1990s (Gysling, 2016; Lovaglio, 2016; Rodrigo, 2019). With the aspiration of modifying the previous school designs and institutional organization of the education system, most countries created national systems of evaluation and measurement of quality in education. This generated the development of regional mechanisms for measuring results and joined international measurement instruments such as PISA (Program for International Student Assessment), TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) or PERCE, SERCE, and TERCE, which are Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study tests conducted every 6 years in fifteen countries of Latin America and the Caribbean. These

standardized tests provide data on various aspects of the educational phenomenon (Delprato, 2019; Delprato & Akyeampong, 2019; Fernández et al., 2019).

About these evaluations, despite the variety of sociodemographic data they provide, Lovaglio (2016) mentions that they are risky since any outcome evaluation system should aim for comprehensiveness and not reduce the educational task to the mere instructional form. In addition, these ways of evaluating education make comparisons and classify establishments unfairly without considering their contexts or particularities (Díaz & Osuna, 2016; Ravela, 2001), which is usually understood as a weakness in the cross-cultural validity of the findings and requires complex meta-analyses to be able to fairly employ the processed data (Fernández et al., 2019; Strello et al., 2021).

Several of the sources consulted criticize the flaws in the logic behind standardization, among other reasons, because their predictive nature is not infallible, and they could be more useful these instruments for descriptive purposes since they do not really assess learning but rather how many students fall within a norm established a priori (Berliner, 2020; Lovaglio, 2016). The latter, in light of the importance of feedback in any formative evaluation process, is relevant to understand that the standardized type of evaluation does not show interest in showing individual situations, as it seeks to account for the educational system, but as a whole, without dwelling on particularities, given that it presents a global vision (Contreras & Zúñiga, 2017; Muñoz & Solís, 2021; Muñoz, 2020).

This means that this type of assessment models is not concerned with socio-educational diversity, as their designs do not analyze the punctual learning situation of each student but dilute the singularities in raw data. However, the teacher plays a preponderant role in these particularities since his or her internal assessment is subject to subjective phenomena and is concerned with designing an instrument that adjusts to the particular needs of his or her students.

### **Standardized tests**

Regarding standardized tests, several authors consider that they emphasize the student's weaknesses (Espinoza, 2017). Chile has the System for Measuring the Quality of Education (SIMCE), a standardized test referred to the norm. Its purpose is to determine positions and establish rankings among the schools that answer them. This national educational system is based on a controlled/reduced curriculum that measures the basic knowledge of the curriculum, which also allows the State to determine and apply measures such as intervention and closure of school establishments (Gysling, 2016).

In this sense, teachers, students, managers, and proxies, i.e., the educational community as a whole, revolve around this summative assessment. Literally, the school or educational establishment is paralyzed when it looms, changing (or dismissing) the teacher's planning, forcing him/her (although it sounds imprudent) to become an operator, a technician. In this scenario, the teacher loses his professional status and becomes an executor who punishes when the results are not as expected or rewards in the opposite or expected case. Despotically, it transforms the teacher into a punitive entity.

Results? Social consequences, as explained by Angulo (2020), Casassus (2007), and Nichols & Berliner (2007). One social consequence is the increase in inequality, where schools with low scores pressure their teachers not to educate but to train their students to answer tests of alternatives. In these realities, if families have a higher economic income, they invest in private classes (outside class time or school day) to "train" their children to take standardized tests, as is the case of the PSU (University Selection Test) or PTU (University Transition Test), which was the transition between the PSU and the PAES. Since 2022, we have the PAES (Higher Education Access Test), created by the Department of Evaluation, Measurement and Educational Registry (DEMRE) of the University of Chile.

Certainly, many families assume their income level according to the results of their daughters and sons in the summative evaluations without considering that these evaluations are of the multiple-choice type, which do not validate the learning obtained or acquired. In this sense, Espinoza (2017) mentions that, seen the school from the business world, academic success is reduced to performance (note, grade) in these tests, which is produced from the confusion between quality and the material conditions that surround the process and reproduce inequities and other similar social phenomena (Redon et al., 2021). In addition, Berliner (2020) points out a fundamental flaw, the insensitivity of these tests to the qualities of the school and the teachers. Instead, they are susceptible to socioeconomic factors, such as social classes and poverty levels, hence the importance of the idea mentioned above.

## DISCUSSION

Angle (2020) explains that tests do not involve evaluation since evaluation emphasizes the quality of the service, and therefore, its interest is in the components of the process and the performance of the people who participate in them. Instead, testing is the application of standardized tests, which discriminate among those individuals who have taken advantage of the possibilities offered by the education system, discriminating and selecting among those who have prepared themselves to take it. When referring to formative and summative processes, it is referred to as “assessment”. Angulo Rasco (2019) points out that “assessment” refers to the impact that a certain service has had on the recipients (students). An assessment process can be part of an evaluation process, so its hierarchy must be adequately explored but in no case limited to a phenomenon of equivalence.

It is important to know, understand, and apply this Anglo-Saxon difference since some terms are abused to explain teaching processes without thinking about whether what is being transmitted is correct. Talking about assessment without making a break in the discourse when trying to express to the educational community about assessment processes, the term assessment should start to be used making a distinction or difference when referring to an assessment process or testing in the case of using an instrument.

Therefore, some teachers base their classes on the application of tests and attribute this to an evaluative process when preparing their students to take a standardized test. This reality, contrasted with the authors’ experience, suggests the following questions:

Will they reflect on whether the use of this instrument is focused on denoting the student’s evaluative processes?

Will they ask themselves if the SIMCE test is representative of the curricular content?

Will they question whether the national curriculum content is representative of the disciplinary curriculum content?

- Specifically, the SIMC generates a poor representation of Chilean culture and curriculum development. The above refers to the construct to be evaluated (measured) since it changes and is sensitive to the context, as previously mentioned. As pointed out by Angulo (2020); Angulo & Redon (2023), the SIMCE serves to stigmatize, discriminate and control schools, teachers, and individuals, although its original purpose was to provide relevant information for better parental decision-making (Gysling, 2016). Likewise, Nichols and Berliner (2007) point out that these tests classify people, installing a new form of discrimination. In Chile, in 2010, a “SIMCE traffic light map” was used, an idea of the Minister of Education of that period, who proposed to use the color classification system to locate schools with respect to the average.

- According to the rationale of this measure, it helped parents to choose a “good school” instead of a “bad school”, motivating “bad schools” to increase their enrollment because they were “losing students, to get their act together and start improving”. In educational practice, this generated counterproductive effects, without considering the schools’ progress, comparing establishments with different realities, where the number of students who took the SIMCE did not ensure the validity of the result obtained. Not to mention stigmatization, since schools with students with high social vulnerability were not considered in terms of their geographical, family, or emotional environment; factors that are exogenous to the quality of the school and that influence the test results. This measure was able to show the social inequalities and “undress” the existing education in Chile.

- The results showed that, on the surface, it seemed a good measure that let the market work: treating education as a lucrative end, a consumer good, and not a guaranteed good. However, this measure transcended as a plan that, despite its flaws, evidenced the existing gap between private, subsidized and municipal schools. The following is a synthesis of the findings analyzed in the main sources of this reflective study:

- Nichols and Berliner (2007) point out that standardized tests were made to measure productivity and, without spending money, hold schools and educators accountable.

- Espinoza (2017) refers to how the pedagogical culture was transformed into a market culture. He indicates that international organizations encourage the gradual loss of autonomy of school systems, which end up submitting to mercantile educational policies. He points out that students have become products, parents have become clients, schools have become companies, transforming education into a product instead of a process.

- On quality of education, Espinoza (2017) indicates that it is a business term from 1980, of neoliberal stamp, which is related to organizational jargon and common indicators in that environment (e.g., efficiency and effectiveness, low cost, profitability and excellence).

- In this regard, Sahlberg (2016) used the term “Global Educational Reform Movement” (GERM) to describe the emergence of a new global orthodoxy in educational policy and identified its main characteristics:
  - Competition among schools, which would lead to better outcomes.
  - Autonomy of schools, necessary for them to compete adequately. Freedom for parents to choose schools for their children.
  - Information for the public, based on comparable measures of student achievement and a single national curriculum.
  - Increased standardization and narrowing of the curriculum to focus on core subjects and knowledge.
  - Use of corporate management practices, as the key characteristics of the new orthodoxy.
  - These policy indications began more than three decades ago in the educational reforms introduced in the countries of the United States, Chile and the United Kingdom.
- On standardization, Sahlberg (2016) points out that it is too strict, reducing freedom and flexibility in schools to promote truly meaningful changes for young people. That is, it limits teaching and learning. The more testing, the less freedom, creativity, risk, and learning.
- Lovegio (2016) points out that, although tests cannot account for reality in its entirety, they do allow us to know the general lines about the needs to be considered in the design of public policy. He points out that one of the most worrying educational issues is to know the causes behind why some educational centers have better results when they set out to achieve their objectives while others do not achieve the expected results, even considering similar contexts. This concerns researchers, teachers, managers, politicians, and, in short, the entire community that circumscribes the educational world.
- Murphy (2010) also distinguishes the PISA test by its connection with the OECD, understanding it as a comparative advantage or disadvantage because it can be determined and used politically and economically. He indicates that it is a maneuvered instrument that privileges certain types of knowledge.

When we speak of standardized tests, we refer to evaluations that respond to the act of measuring attributes and comparison among participants, as well as to a hypothesis of functioning. These tests do not directly contribute to improving the quality of education, nor are they necessarily a platform for teachers to develop better classes; they are not even useful for management (Casassus, 2007).

The final purpose of these tests, masked among altruistic principles, is deeply positivist and allows the establishment of rankings and distinctions among the subjects in the pool of participants. If this notion based on scales, quartiles, and separation of members according to raw numbers is triangulated with the psychosocial factors previously discussed, the impacts in terms of discrimination and the generation of structural advantages that perpetuate the status quo are understandable.

Given these arguments, it is necessary to review Glaser’s (1998) current proposals, which state that the standardization of assessment is nothing more than instituting an arbitrary measurement that, in the end, does not provide relevant information regarding what students “truly” know or about the quality of the teaching process. The main contribution of this author is to point out that for this purpose, it is vital to diversify the assessment and triangulate the results in different ways to explore what students know.

Among these ways, they highlight portfolios; tests to evaluate performance and different experiences associated with projects; the resolution of practical problems, and similar initiatives. However, the authors consider it valid to emphasize that even in these alternatives, there is a “risk” of measurement as a criterion, which contrasts with the tendency of educational systems to establish numerical criteria to define the quality of learning and its projection in the performance of students and as a measure of teacher evaluation.

Finally, teachers must continue learning, learn new methodologies, and immerse themselves in the world of didactics from their specialty (Acaso, 2014; Mena, 2010). This means not being satisfied with what is learned in undergraduate because this will be the tip of the iceberg; constant investment in lifelong education and training remain the main ways to promote educational quality.

## CONCLUSIONS

As a result of the synthesis carried out, the triangulation of the authors’ teaching experiences, and the general assessment, it is concluded that although the differences between evaluation and measurement, as well as their

importance in the educational sector, have a wide literature dedicated to the field, the educational reality is far from being the desirable one. The analysis conducted points not only to conceptual difficulties rooted in discourse and practice but also to severe structural problems that are frequently invisible.

These structural problems affect all educational actors, both individually, as a sector (students, teachers, administrators, communities), or from their interrelations. Therefore, the subject analyzed goes beyond the traditional conception, and its classification as educational would deny the interdependencies between the different sectors of society.

It is hoped that the reflections made may contribute to the current discussion on the impact of the standardization of evaluation, as well as its social consequences and, specifically, on the figure of the teacher. The data consulted in the sources, as well as the assessment of the state of the art, suggest the need to deepen the subject through future studies, mainly with a mixed approach and with special attention to the related experiences from the perspective of multiple stakeholders.

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## **DECLARATION OF CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

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