

The evaluation that we have, the evaluation that we need

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In comparing countries like Canada and Mexico, we tend to emphasize the obvious: deep differences in their history, politics, social structure, and, more specifically, in the features of their respective educational systems. For example, it is hard to get away from the fact that the Mexican basic education system has nearly 20 million students, that there is basically one single teachers’ union in the whole country, with 1.5 million members, and that the Constitution mandates that the President of the Republic and its cabinet would determine the contents of the official school books that are issued to every student of basic education. These features may be noteworthy, but they hide the fact that neoliberal globalization in many respects is pushing vastly different educational systems into a uniform culture. One of the most notorious and important is, no doubt, the conception and practice of the assessment of schools, children and teachers. Countries of many different continents we all seem to be converging in a common culture of what it means to evaluate, to assess and, thus, what it means to educate.

In countries like Mexico, the pace has been especially rapid and profound. To the point that this country is now an extreme example of just how far the promoters of the new assessment are willing to go. Before the nineties, for example, evaluation, as we now know it, was practically non-existing in Mexico. Practices such as standardized testing were confined to verifying a few samples of students of basic education, or to select those who will be admitted in some of the most demanded public universities of the country. But by the beginning of the nineties, the IMF, the World Bank, NAFTA and then the OECD explicitly pressured Mexico to organize a complete structure of evaluation. Therefore, in 1990–1992, the federal government established the first merit-pay programs in its history for teachers and faculty; promoted a private system of accreditation of professional programs; created a replica of the American Educational Testing Service (ETS) (called Ceneval or National Center for the Evaluation of Higher Education) and has recently (2006) started a massive program of testing for students of elementary and secondary education.

As a result of this latter initiative, students in grades three to twelve, absolutely all of them, must now undergo a federal standardized test on Spanish and Math, called ENLACE (Examen Nacional de Logro Académico en Centros Escolares). In addition, those who finish Grade 12 and want to continue to Grade 13 are evaluated by a single national admission standardized test called EXANI-I (Examen Nacional de Ingreso-1). Those who finish Grade 15 and want to proceed to higher education must pass the EXANI-II, also a multiple-choice test; those who finish the second year of higher education may be tested with EXIL or intermediate standardized exam (Examen Intermedio de Licenciatura); those who conclude higher education are evaluated with EGEL (Examen General de Egreso de Licenciatura), an exiting test that also serves as a certification of readiness for the job; in addition, those who desire to go to a graduate school have to pass the EXANI-III, similar to the previous ones. Furthermore, all those who wish to become teachers in public schools have as the only requisite, to pass an 80-item test, and in the works is a law that will require every one of the three million professionals of the country to pass a standardized test every five years to renew their certification.

As a consequence of all this, right now about 17 million students are evaluated every year. In about three years we will be reaching the 100 hundred million subjects tested, a number equivalent to the size of the entire population in Mexico. All this means that from the age of 8 to the age of around 70, people will be tested, and tested, and tested again. It has been said that in the medieval ages the church was to accompany people from cradle to grave. It is clear now that evaluation has emerged as a new and equally powerful religion.

How to explain this test mania? One truthful but incomplete explanation points to the pressure brought to bear by the above-mentioned international financial organizations. They had “helped” to solve the enormous debt crisis of the eighties, but in return they demanded and gained the right to place Mexican public finances under a close scrutiny. Education, being the single-most-important part of the national budget—up to 25 percent—and the bigger of the public administration in terms of expenditures, personnel, and infrastructure, was the obvious main target of the surveillance. Accreditations, tests, merit-pay programs, were then the concrete instruments of this big-brother strategy. Seen from this perspective, for Mexicans educators’ accountability was born, not as a way in which they can see what was going on with education, but rather as an instrument to keep a close check on them. The implicit rationale seemed simple: if you follow the American way and use the American rituals, then you are in the right track, you have an efficient and quality-oriented system. In this perspective, assessment was to be considered mostly as an imperialistic instrument.

However, this hypothesis does not explain something rather paradoxical in our continent. Like the fact that both the Canadian and Mexican structure of assessment or evaluation share some very important and essential characteristics of subordination. The bone structure of assessment as a control instrument seems to be the same. If this is true, it means that there is something in common between the two countries that is creating the same type of structure in spite of the fact that Canada can hardly be considered as a country as subordinated as Mexico.

Following is a list of traits that Mexico and Canada now share in the field of evaluation:

We—Mexican teachers and faculty—did not conceive or design the evaluation structure, it was simply imposed on us. And, as far as is known, neither did Canadian teachers have a chance to voice their opinions regarding the creation of the evaluation structure which begins to be constructed around British Columbia schools. In that respect, in both countries assessment shares a similar *authoritarian* trait.

Besides being authoritarian, the present strategy of assessment appears as essentially *external* to schools, both in Canada and Mexico. It is not something that flows out of the educational processes that take place in classrooms, and teachers do not participate in the conception, design, and operation of the assessment practices.

It is an assessment that is *culturally imposing*. A single form of assessment for all schools; a uniform way of thinking what achievement means that is imposed upon many different and diverse cultures, languages, regions, educational needs, and schools throughout the country.

It also tends to be *irrelevant* in the sense that it does not address the contents and issues that are capital in a given province, region, culture, and school. A Canadian school may be located in an area of strong immigration from Asia or a Mexican school could be in the middle of a region with a strong presence of original people, yet the present assessment strategies do not consider or include this at all.

The assessment that is used both in Canada and Mexico (and more and more other countries) contributes to the *impoverishment* of the curricula. Many studies have confirmed that “studying to the test” is a classroom strategy that greatly reduces the attention and time teachers devote to other areas of the study plans. For schools in poor contexts, especially, the test becomes the reference of the basic curriculum, as they strive not to fall too behind in the scores. The triviality and superficiality of the test, furthermore, induces to a reduction of the complexity of what should be studied in the classroom.

Assessment in the form of standardized testing emphasizes the *individualization* of teachers, students, and schools. By ranking schools, the evaluators prompt them to become competitors. Students face learning collectively as a group in the classroom, but then the test emphasizes individuality. In Mexico now, and probably later in Canada, evaluating children has become an evaluation of teachers, and the state and local authorities use the results to subtly pitch teachers against each other.

Test results tend to be *used also to disqualify* schools, teachers, and students. By parading test results of different schools, the links of collaboration between parents, communities, with schools are eroded. Recrimination usually follows the insistence in comparing and disqualifying teachers and schools.

Standardized testing, nevertheless, is usually not a very good instrument to measure achievement. A significant number of items of these tests have confusing, incorrect, or several correct answers. Paradoxically, the instrument that is used to measure “quality in education” is in itself a manufacture of *questionable quality*.

External assessment *takes the place of and excludes the professional educator* and their complex and multiple functions as a day-by-day evaluator. It also excludes the active and democratic participation of students, parents, and school communities in the assessment of what is going on in school. From being the main actors in the educational process, teachers and students become a passive object, the evaluated.

Standardized testing, as the Mexican and American experience shows in many studies, has been proven openly *discriminatory* against women, and those students that come from poor families, indigenous communities, or different cultures.

Both in Mexico and Canada, testing is not done by a public university, a group of schools, or a public office, but by private agencies responding to *private interests*. Assessment not only tends to be bias against the more vulnerable public schools but has also become a lucrative enterprise in spite of the claims of being provided by “non profit organizations”. Evaluating

70 million people again and again, as it the case in Mexico, has certainly demonstrated its potential as a very *profitable industry*.

-II-

This convergence of traits between so-different countries requires a different explanatory hypothesis. A more-comprehensive one. In that direction we can think that the international financial organizations simply play a subsidiary role in the case of countries like Mexico. They were only the instruments of a deeper strategy. Such strategy is a world trend aimed at reducing education, to deny the majority of children the opportunity of constructing significant knowledge. We are dealing with a trend that emphasizes that most students of all ages should only receive a minimal kit of abilities, information, and values (the so-called “competencies” of the European Tuning Project) that are relevant for their future as part of a planetary workforce. A docile workforce that is prepared by a disciplined army of teachers always controlled and afraid of what the tests will be. A trend that is actively promoted by governments, corporations, and by the circular logic of the evaluators (if things do not get better with systematic evaluation, that only means that more evaluation is necessary). This is a trend that has no boundaries, and makes no substantial distinctions between rich and poor nations. The basic idea is that globalization should also create in every country a globalized workforce destitute of present labour and social rights.

In spite of this preconceived future, teachers in many countries are resisting. In different manners they try to analyze and respond to the meaning and implications of this new wave of assessment. They also resist in different manners, like demonstrating, bringing the case to parents, media, communities, and other organizations, trying to raise consciousness and gain force *vis à vis* this new phenomena. But in both Canada and Mexico we are also witnessing that teachers not only choose to resist, but seek to create new ideas about what assessment should be. A different assessment, that brings together the point of view of teachers, students, parents, communities. And an important part of that process consists of collecting as much inspiration as possible to gain perspective and force in order to venture into creating other possible worlds of assessment.

One of the possible sources of creativity and strength for us is to try to define what we want by moving in the opposite direction to where the above-mentioned traits insist in taking teachers and school communities. With that in mind, it is possible to say that we want assessment strategies that are 1) defined from the dynamics of the schools themselves; 2) culturally and academically diverse; 3) flexible, that is, capable of responding to local, regional, and school issues, as well as capable of responding to priorities and concerns of parents and community; 4) a source of enrichment for the curriculum and for schools, parents, and community activities around the school; 5) a manner for strengthening the collectivity and solidarity traits among teachers, students, parents, communities, and other schools; 6) of a quality defined by the schools’ and students’ needs; 7) not based on standardized testing; 8) a source of growth in democratic and citizens’ values and practices; 9) a source of pride for the schools and communities; and 10) a public and free good.

Another important source of inspiration consists of taking a look at what teachers, students, and schools are doing at the classroom, school, and community level. As alienating assessment begins to occupy more and more territory, teachers tend to feel the need to individually or collectively defend themselves and respond. And they create a vast multitude of small, anonymous, almost clandestine spaces of a counterculture of learning and assessing.

These initiatives are the stuff from which the dreams of other possible education and assessment are made. These initiatives should be recovered, systematized, and circulated. In Mexico, for example, some teachers of the state of Oaxaca are engaged in a project that is called *Tequio educativo*, which involves a more respectful relationship with the community, as teachers in a public assembly present to parents and others what their plans are for coming into this village, and they ask permission to educate their children and invite them to participate in doing so. Other teachers are seriously involved in recovering the language, legends, and other cultural practices of the indigenous communities, and including them in the curriculum, with the help of the members of the community. In Chiapas, the zapatista communities themselves created their own educational system, choosing teachers among the young of the communities, arranging for their training, and supporting them. Initiatives like this all have some type of implicit way of assessing or evaluating what is considered important.

In other cases, like in the Xochimilco campus of the Metropolitan University of the City of Mexico (UAM), a different teaching-learning strategy has been officially in use for more than thirty-five years, based on intense student participation, with the teacher acting as a coordinator; lots of readings and discussions; the development of teams of research on socially sensitive topics; and, also, a form of assessment democratically designed by teachers and students. This assessment explicitly intends to respond to the question on how can evaluation help to better learning. This strategy in fact has displaced not only standardized testing, but even writing exams, from the institutional culture. As a result, the grade that students obtain depends mostly on their effort, as they are evaluated by the indicators they choose, and does not depend on the subjective appreciation of the teacher—or on external evaluations. It's a concrete way to return to students power over the learning process.

Experiences such as the above have recently become relevant in the Mexican context of deep teacher unrest, due to unilateral government reforms (including assessment) that deeply affect their job stability. Since the year 2008, the discussion among teachers has moved from the perspective of merely organizing resistance to also the general idea that teachers have to begin making their own proposals for other education. And in such a trend, the need for a different assessment quickly surfaces, also in unexpected manners. Like it happened in two states of Mexico, where teachers decided to boycott the National Exam from Grades 3–12. In one instance, teachers barred the entrance to the school of the applicators of the exam, and in another instance, a group of teachers simply closed the road and stopped and retained the trucks that carried the booklets for the exam. As a result, the official “Evaluation Week for ENLACE” had to be cancelled. But then teachers were faced with the question of what to do during the five days that there was no classes (nor exam, of course). Weeks later, some of us proposed to engage in a completely different evaluation, a community- and student-based assessment week to know and reflect about the school in a truly “Parents, teachers, students, and community evaluation week”.

During five days—the proposed week—parents of the students of each group gather to discuss where the students and the school is. This, to be done in the form of a mixture of events that include teacher-parents conferences; a discussion of parents and students of each group in every grade, and sessions of assessment of the school as a whole involving students, parents, teachers, and members of the community. Teachers explain the situation and problems of the school and offer solutions; parents and community ask specific questions, voice their criticisms and make suggestions; and then in a final event at the end of the week, some tasks and initiatives are approved to be carried out jointly. Later, teachers and local school authorities discuss how to support and set in motion the approved initiatives.

The dynamics and results of the session of each school can be shared—in the form of a brief summary—with other schools, in the form of a growing net. This net may pass from the simple stage of sharing the results of local assessment to the creation of links of solidarity among schools more distant. How one school solved one problem may be of interest to many others. How another school came about evaluating itself may help others. The proposal also includes the idea that after the evaluation week is finished, selected representatives of schools and communities come to a gathering at the local level and, later, at the state and national level. In this succession of events it will be possible not only to strengthen the relations of solidarity between students, teachers, and parents of different schools, regions, and states, but also to review the overall report on the situation of the schools at each of these spaces. A state report on the situation of the schools is possible, and it could be used as the official teachers' evaluation of the schools. Solutions to the most recurrent and widespread problems can be proposed at every step, as well as initiatives to be taken by the union, communities, groups of schools, or by higher educational authorities for the betterment of schools and the students' education.

With proposals like this it is possible to say in a concrete manner what do we mean when we say that we want assessment strategies that are—like we said before—defined from the dynamics of the schools themselves; that are an open space for schools culturally and academically diverse; flexible, that is, where it is possible to respond to local, regional, and school issues, as well as to priorities and concerns of parents and community; a source of enrichment for the curriculum and for schools because students, parents, and communities say what they expect from the school; a manner for strengthening the collectivity and solidarity traits among teachers, students, parents, communities, and other schools; a source of growth in democratic and citizens' values and practices, and a way to revitalize the presence and function of the schools in the communities. A public space to run the schools offered by teaches as a public and free good.

If nothing else, proposals like this could be used as a starting point of a discussion about how far the idea of “other” assessment can possibly go. And, above all, it serves to show that we should aim at a cultural change deep from the schools themselves. When gatherings and dynamics like the one here exemplified start involving more and more teachers and schools, they become unstoppable. As George Martel puts it, “they will not have enough people to police schools once teachers decide to begin to create their own alternatives”. In this and many other ways, Canadian and Mexican teachers, already brethren by the resistance to neo-liberalism, can also become brothers and sisters by the search of another wider, more-socially-just and humane definition of education. This could be the best of the contributions from the local schools to change the predatory course of the present neo-liberal globalization.