Evaluation and educational improvement policies in Latin America

Margarita Poggi

This article considers the debate on knowledge-building for the improvement of education systems, particularly in relation to the contribution of standardized evaluations and the design and development of policies in Latin America. In particular, it will analyse some of the basic assumptions that have characterized these policies in recent decades.

While much of the discussion is focused on understanding processes taking place across the region as a whole, this does not imply neglect of the specific experience of different countries in the region. However, studying and analysing more general trends can provide a comparative framework which each country can use to recognize or distinguish their own unique, qualitative aspects, as well as to understand the collective constructions that help shape educational policy processes within the region.

**Education systems: from information to knowledge-building**

The complexity of education systems is becoming clearer to all involved parties, including policymakers, technical teams working within ministries of education, teachers, and the general community.²

As the demands to expand participation in mandatory education and knowledge distribution have increased, the number of organizations and actors involved in the educational process has also multiplied. Within this complex system, it is important that we recognise both the difficulties involved in developing and administrating public policies and the need to collect and analyse relevant information for its design, tracking, monitoring and evaluation. As new scenarios emerge, broader perspectives are required to understand the diversity that characterizes all systems.

Therefore, in recent decades, and particularly since the eighties and nineties, ministries of education, in practically every country in Latin America, have promoted the creation, development and strengthening of information systems. These generally have the following functions:

a) To detect and visualize key trends and achievements in education systems.

b) To contribute to the objectivity of discussions regarding certain topics and place specific issues on the public agenda.

c) To enhance understanding of problems within systems, subsystems and institutions, and guide the selection of priorities in the design of educational policies.

d) To clearly communicate aspects of this complex system to different audiences.

The coordination of these types of information, all of which require deeper analysis and enhancement, contributes to a more integrated view of the systems and their characteristics.

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² Themes introduced in this section have been further developed in Poggi, M. (2014a, 2014b).
In this context, information systems are formed of indicators from different sources, chosen for their relevance to the topic. These indicators are essential in building analytical perspectives on education systems. It is important to keep in mind that an indicator is ‘a device that provides relevant information about a significant aspect of the educational reality’ (Tiana, 1997) and that, as such, it is always an outcome of construction and consensus.

Considering the region’s national information systems two main trends emerge, which can be characterized as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Systems with a high level of aggregation</th>
<th>Systems with a high level of disaggregation</th>
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<tr>
<td>These are regularly updated, computerized and improved systems, with a high level of aggregation, intended for central administration, regardless of political structure (federal or unitary governments). Some countries have more than one central level of government.</td>
<td>Given their high level of disaggregation, these newly promoted systems can provide information on a case-by-case basis. The systems are relevant and useful for macro and micro educational planning as they allow aggregations for different levels of analysis (from individual, classroom, school, municipal, provincial, state and national levels), all depending on how the education system is administrated and managed in each country.</td>
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The contribution of evaluation to the understanding of education systems

Educational evaluation – particularly standardized national, regional and international studies focusing on the academic achievements of students, and the evaluation of policies, programmes, and projects – and its contribution to the understanding of education systems, has been extensively studied. Evaluation is widely considered an essential and inseparable part of decision-making processes and education planning and management, which explains the vast amount of literature dedicated to these topics.

While national evaluation studies of student achievement have been consolidated, involvement in international evaluation studies has also expanded within the region. Among these PISA, a study conducted by the OECD since 2000, is particularly significant, with more and more countries within the region engaging with it. In addition, the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) has developed several studies (TIMSS, PIRLS, CIVED, and ICCS), in

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3 Programme for International Student Assessment, developed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).
which participation is less consistent. UNESCO’s Regional Bureau for Education in Latin America and the Caribbean, in Santiago, has also coordinated three studies at primary-education level, through The Latin American Laboratory for Assessment of Quality of Education (LLECE), in coordination with agencies responsible for the assessment of ministries of education within the region. This remains the only study that covers the region as a whole.

The participation of Latin-American countries in the main international and regional evaluations is shown in Table 1 (Annex 1). It can be seen that involvement in educational evaluation studies has expanded over time. While the scope and depth of the above studies vary, all have helped institutionalize the use of information systems within the region and support the functions for which they were created.

These initiatives, and others, have been successfully consolidated over time because of the information provided by government agencies from each of the countries involved. This allows not only for national analysis but also for the detection of regional and international trends over the longer term.

However, it is important also to consider how the information produced by these studies is used. To avoid drawing incorrect conclusions, information must be handled with strong methodological care to ensure proper interpretation and the contextualization of the analysis, based on an in-depth knowledge of national education systems. As long as the appropriate pains are taken during the collection process, and in the interpretation of the information, its contribution can be of the utmost importance.

**With different levels of institutionalization, national evaluation systems have consolidated around the following aspects:**

- Data collection on a regular basis, which allows information to be continually updated.
- Application of evaluations in different grades.
- Use of various instruments (tests, socio-educational surveys on family environment, school variables, etc.).
- The proper implementation of methodologies that allow comparison over time, and between the countries, in the case of regional and international studies (a more recent development).
- Public access to the information by different actors, and dissemination strategies, though these vary considerably between countries.

In this regard, the region has made much progress. Although challenges remain, particularly concerning the second generation of information systems, and the analysis and interpretation of the extensive amount of information collected, indicator systems and evaluative studies are being merged to produce a greater understanding of the trends in education systems and their schools.
Finally, an important challenge lies in improving the ways in which such analysis is communicated to different audiences. The complexity of educational systems often leads to partial or incorrect readings, especially among those less familiar with this complexity.

**Evaluation and policies for educational improvement**

This section surveys a number of hypotheses regarding the design and implementation of educational improvement policies with a view to the creation or strengthening of national evaluation systems. The creation and development of national evaluation systems in the region goes back many decades, reflecting countries’ gradual realization of their potential. Table 2 (Annex 1) shows the year in which each country within the region began standardized national evaluation studies.

Latin America witnessed the consolidation of national evaluation systems during the nineties. Over that period, demands for the fundamental improvement of educational quality entered a policy agenda which, in previous decades, had seen increased demands for wider educational access. Many of the educational evaluations developed in that time included an objective to improve education systems and schools.

As national evaluation studies expanded and consolidated, there was a parallel development of literature attempting to define educational quality. Muñoz Izquierdo, Schmekes, and Martínez Rizo were among a number of Mexican authors who added new dimensions to the concept. UNESCO also made a significant contribution, developing a perspective of education as a fundamental right, founded on the principles of being mandatory, free, and non-discriminatory.

In addition to the classic dimensions of **effectiveness and efficacy**, UNESCO’s regional perspective allowed it to develop a multidimensional concept of quality, emphasizing not only the right to education for all, but also **relevance, pertinence, and equity**.

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‘The **relevance of learning** refers to the need for educational experiences to guarantee the development of the kinds of learning that truly prepare people for modern life. In order to understand the state of education in the region, attention must be paid to the extent to which educational experiences make possible the development of learning related to personal identity (learning to be); to the capacity for mutual understanding, valuing, and practicing harmonious and democratic social relations (learning to live together); the preparation of people for life-long learning (learning to know); as well as the ability of people to act in the various areas of their lives (learning to do). The **pertinence of educational experiences** refers to the flexibility of educational experiences so that they can adjust to the particular conditions of individuals, can value diversity, and can provide venues for participation. **Educational equity** demands that we inquire to what extent the right is effective for all. Otherwise, its universal nature would be denied. Moreover, the establishment of the right to education promotes the creation of more just societies and contributes as well to guaranteeing other fundamental human rights’ (EFA-PRELAC, 2007: p. 25).
This broader understanding of educational quality has resulted in some interesting views, leading to the redefinition of policies for the region. Even though the issue of educational quality has been on the agenda for the last two decades, in recent years it has taken on a complexity that requires not only different strategies for its evaluation, but also more comprehensive approaches to ensure improvement.

**Main policy factors in improving the quality of education in the nineties**

As standardized national evaluations were implemented during the nineties, national education policy in the region also developed, along three main general lines:

1. Changes were made to basic education curricula, following the expansion of compulsory schooling in line with new laws and regulations. Primary or basic education was extended to nine years\(^4\) (regardless of the institutional format or terminology used in each country in Latin America). It should be noted that the curricular changes often updated designs that had been approved during dictatorships but had not been modified with the arrival of democratic governments.

   A few examples of this line of intervention warrant mention: the curricular and pedagogical reforms which followed the signing of the national accord to modernize basic education in Mexico (ANMEB); the definition of national curricular parameters that emerged in Brazil; and the definition of common basic content agreed in Argentina. Curricular changes in Chile, Colombia, and Peru are also worthy of mention.

2. The delivery of massive programmes of teacher training aimed at directors, teachers, and professors to update them on curriculum content and new teaching approaches introduced as a result of changing curricula.

3. The implementation of policies for the production of teaching materials and books (either produced by the state, as in Mexico, for example, or by publishing firms) to equip schools and classrooms.

Throughout the decade, the development of evaluation systems to produce improvements in education was based on two key assumptions:

The first was the notion that a focus on educational results would support the improvement of education for two reasons: the competition between schools to improve their results, and the pressure from parents and society as results are made public. This assumption was usually accompanied by measures of public dissemination for results and school rankings.

Second, schools were considered almost exclusively responsible for the improvement of education, with little recognition of the importance of other governing levels within the education system and

\(^4\) Corresponding to ISCED 1 and 2 (International Standard Classification of Education developed by UNESCO-UIS).
their potential impact on the improvement of learning outcomes. In some cases, market mechanisms have been introduced rather than a more public rationale, where the state guarantees the right to education and assures the conditions to protect it.

These policies were in most cases developed under neoliberal governments promoting the restructuring of the state. This caused some difficulties when it came to the implementation of evaluation studies (McCormick, 1996; Poggi, 2008). These concerned the effects of what some analysts call **negative incentives**, and included, for example, the reversal of means and ends and the reduction or impoverishment of the curriculum. More specifically:

1) Sometimes evaluative studies dedicated more attention to organizational survival than to specific issues related to the improvement of teaching and learning, thereby undermining innovations (Levin, 2012).

2) The issue of rankings had a stigmatizing effect on schools with low results, especially with the first wave of standardized tests, in which factors associated with students’ social context and its effects on academic achievement were not taken into consideration.

3) In many cases, evaluation was the main concern in these studies instead of a being means to an end. Improvement was sometimes neglected.

4) Selecting certain disciplines or areas of curriculum for evaluative purposes meant that the ones not selected became less relevant.

**Moving forward in the implementation of evaluation in the 2000s**

Over the last decade, discussion of educational quality has become less one-dimensional, reflecting a more complex, multi-faceted conception of educational quality. Studies of the internal and external factors which impact on the quality of education have contributed to the process of revision, supporting an improved understanding of school results and processes. The contribution that regional and international studies have made in this area has been acknowledged.

Evaluation, by itself, does not ensure educational improvement, nor is there a simple, linear relationship between evaluation and quality improvement. Evaluation is necessary, but not sufficient to improve education (Ravela, 2008). This will only be accomplished once evaluation becomes an integral part of a broader approach to educational policy and action (Tiana, 2009). Both the conceptual and methodological changes discussed above show that there is now a better understanding of the complex relationship between evaluation and educational quality.

The importance of standardized evaluation, its methodological and technical development, and its consolidation as a relevant source of knowledge about education systems and the factors that underpin processes and outcomes, all point to its key role in improving education. However, its impact on educational improvement has been less solid and less progressive than might be expected. This has resulted in a need to develop other strategies to complement what has been
implemented before. Nevertheless, the main goal remains to promote the improvement of educational systems and schools.

**Complementary strategies and future challenges of educational evaluation**

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, several countries began to develop other strategies\(^5\), though without neglecting the standardized evaluations already being implemented. Two types of strategies have developed in the region, in some cases combined. The first refers to external institutional support given to schools; the second to the strengthening of the internal capacities of school actors.

**External institutional support** is achieved through technical assistance mechanisms which deliver improvement programmes or projects. The formats can vary, as can the emphasis on intervention processes, but this support essentially focuses on school management (through actions addressing teams of directors), or on teaching strategies in certain curricular areas, with specific actions for teachers and professors. Some policies may combine both of these dimensions.

It is important to consider the development of pedagogical and didactic proposals in the specific, real-world contexts experienced by teams of directors and teachers in schools (Poggi, 2011). Alongside the massive programmes of training promoted during the previous decade, which were necessary to update teachers’ skills, strategies have been developed to address the specific problems of these actors, thus contributing and enriching pedagogical knowledge. There is evidence that improvements are enhanced when policies and programmes are supported with comprehensive monitoring and evaluation, producing relevant knowledge for actors involved in the implementation process. Evaluation, in this context, is not about control, though it is not necessarily absent. Instead, the focus is on supporting the education and understanding of those involved in the process.

Although policies and programmes might not combine or articulate all the dimensions of intervention mentioned above, some interesting examples to support the existing analysis include: *el Programa de Escuelas de Calidad* in Mexico; *el Plan de Mejoramiento Educativo*, which is linked to *la Subvención Escolar Preferencial* in Chile; *la Política de Mejoramiento de las Condiciones de Enseñanza y Aprendizaje* in Argentina; *el Proyecto de Apoyo a la Educación Secundaria para la Reducción del Abandono Escolar* in Costa Rica; *el Programa Contemos Juntos* in Guatemala; and *el Programa Pequeños Matemáticos* in Paraguay. These are only a few of the many programmes being implemented in the countries of the region.

**The internal capacities of institutions and school actors** have been strengthened through the implementation of career development activities that can combine the promotion of institutional self-evaluation mechanisms and the formulation of improvement plans. The rationale behind these measures is based on the assumption that, as it is not possible to design homogenous strategies for

\(^5\) Although some of the strategies that will be addressed were already applied in some countries in the previous decade, since 2000 they have developed further and been rolled out in more countries.
an entire education system, the specific characteristics of each school need to be taken into account. Nevertheless, to implement these measures, when universal coverage is not achievable, demands a degree of intervention, if significant numbers of schools from a sub-system are to be engaged.

Institutional self-evaluation mechanisms, and the knowledge that derives from them, supplement the information produced by other sources, such as indicators pertinent to analysis at the level of a school unit, as well as the standardized evaluations conducted at census level.

Some advantages of this approach are highlighted in research on the subject: self-evaluation allows for better organization of information and contributes to the rationality of decisions. When the right conditions are created and the necessary precautions taken, it can facilitate greater appropriation of the produced results and can empower institutional actors.

In order to accomplish this, however, three conditions must to met. There must be:

1. strong institutional support;
2. broad and effective participation; and
3. a solid methodology.

It is important also to note the risks of self-justification, which can occur when there is no evidence that what is being done is improving conditions, processes, or outcomes.

Over the past decade, institutional improvement plans have been widely promoted in various countries within the region. Although they all have different names, scales, scopes and levels of detail, these policies have been implemented in Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Chile, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru, and Uruguay, among others.

Improvement plans offer advantages at school level as well as, in some cases, at sub-national levels (local, state, and provincial). These plans allow for a review objectives and the development of priorities and goals, and thereby form a better guide for the work of institutional actors in the short and medium term. They also contribute to the professional development of school actors. However, there are also risks to which schools and school staff must remain sensitive, among them the danger that the plans become no more than a bureaucratic instrument to meet guidelines or the directives of ministries or secretaries, and have little impact on institutional practices or the improvement of processes and results.

The role of supervisors and school inspectors is to address the risks identified in relation to institutional self-evaluation and the formulation of improvement plans. This, of course, requires a thorough review of the functions of supervision in relation to evaluation practices. A key aspect in this process is the need for supervisors to have a territorial base for development while analysing institutions from both an internal and external perspective. They can also be responsible for the design of improvement strategies at a local, regional, or sectorial level to develop processes which adequately support policy development.
Numerous studies have demonstrated the importance of this role in any education system. However, there has not been enough progress in the region towards creating the conditions and specific training necessary to strengthen the capacities of these actors in the evaluation and promotion of academic improvement.

It is too soon to assess the effects of improvement strategies, as their implementation is a recent phenomenon. It is important though to mention that these effects are fundamentally related to cultural changes, which require sustained effort for longer periods of time as they aim to change representations (linked to what all students can learn, regardless of gender, social, and cultural backgrounds) and modify practices that would lead to more pertinent school trajectories for all students. Thus, standards, structures, and processes are modified in the medium and long term.

Changes require appropriate strategies at different levels, both on a policy and an institutional level, including, in particular, classroom strategies. A change in teaching practices which takes into account the problems that teachers face today, will contribute to better academic results.

In conclusion, it should be clear that certain aspects of policy improvement need to be strengthened so that their effects are consistent. It is important, therefore, that we do not lose sight of the need for a systemic approach that is not in any way fragmented, with interventions which reach all schools within a system or a subsystem, while at the same time being consistent with the proposed aims of educational improvement. The challenge remains to improve schools in a collective manner.
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http://www.iipe-buenosaires.org.ar/documentos


http://www.preal.org


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## ANNEX I

### TABLE 1. Participation in the main international and regional standardized evaluations, by country.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>OECD(^i)</th>
<th>IEA(^{ii})</th>
<th>LLECE-OREAL(^{iii})</th>
<th>PERCE(^{iv})</th>
<th>SERCE(^v)</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>OECD</td>
<td>CIVED(^v)</td>
<td>ICCS(^vi)</td>
<td>TIMSS(^vii)</td>
<td>PIRLS(^viii)</td>
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<td>Argentina</td>
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Notes:
- OECD: Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
- IEA: International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement
- LLECE-OREAL: Latin American Language Education Study Group-Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
- PERCE: Portuguese Education Research Council
- SERCE: Spanish Education Research Council
- PISA: Programme for International Student Assessment
- CIVED: Civic Education
- ICCS: International Competence in Communication Skills
- TIMSS: Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study
- PIRLS: Progress in International Reading Literacy Study
- PERCE: Portuguese Education Research Council
- SERCE: Spanish Education Research Council

X indicates participation.
The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. [http://www.oecd.org/]

The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). [http://www.iea.nl/]

The Latin American Laboratory for Assessment of Quality of Education (LLECE) as part of the UNESCO’s Regional Bureau for Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (OREALC/UNESCO Santiago).

Programme for International Student Assessment, evaluates 15-year-old enrollee students. [http://www.oecd.org/pisa/aboutpisa/pisaparticipants.htm]

The Civic Education Study, evaluates 14-year-old students. [http://www.iea.nl/cived.html]

The International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS), evaluates grade 8° [http://iccs.iea.nl/]

Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, evaluates grades 4° and 8°. [http://timss.bc.edu/]

Progress in International Reading Literacy Study, evaluates 9- and 10-year-old students. [http://www.iea.nl/]

First Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study, evaluates grades 3° and 4° in Language and Maths. Sixteen countries participated, but seven did not participate in the Natural Science Evaluation: Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico and Nicaragua. [http://www.unesco.org/new/es/santiago/education/education-assessment/]

Second Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study, evaluates grades 3° and 6° in maths, language and science in 16 countries [http://www.unesco.org/new/es/santiago/education/education-assessment/]

The Third Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study, evaluates grades 3° and 6° in science, maths, language and writing in 15 countries. [http://www.unesco.org/new/es/santiago/education/education-assessment/]

Table 2. First year of implementation of a standardized national evaluation in Latin-American, by country.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Year</th>
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