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Policies for the Assessment of Educational Quality in Argentina (2016-2018)

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ABSTRACT – Policies for the Assessment of Educational Quality in Argentina (2016-2018) This paper describes our analysis of the proposals, projects, and policies of the Argentine federal government headed by President Mauricio Macri to evaluate educational quality at a national level. The plan includes the standardized tests APRENDER and ENSEÑAR, the PLAN MAESTR@ and the project to establish the Instituto de Evaluación de Calidad y Equidad Educativa. The current administration justifies these measures as a means of improving on the policies of the previous government. We argue that these efforts apply to the national stage the experience accumulated in the Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires during the years in which Macri served as the city's Jefe de Gobierno. This is a jurisdiction governed since 2007 by the Alianza Cambiemos in which Macri's PRO Party is the dominant party. Using a qualitative approach and various sources, we analyze the characteristics and organization of the government's plan, and its conceptual basis. In addition, we analyze the difference between these policies and those implemented by the former Kirchner administration/s.

Keywords: Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires. Alianza Cambiemos. Assessment. Quality of Education. Public Policy.

RESUMEN – Las Políticas de Evaluación de la Calidad Educativa en Argentina (2016-2018). El artículo describe las recientes propuestas y políticas de evaluación de la calidad educativa del actual gobierno argentino: las pruebas APRENDER y ENSEÑAR, el Plan MAESTR@ y el proyecto de creación del Instituto de Evaluación de Calidad y Equidad Educativa. Se argumenta que estas propuestas y medidas, justificadas como un perfeccionamiento de las políticas del gobierno anterior, implican la transferencia al plano nacional de la experiencia acumulada en la Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires, jurisdicción en la que el PRO (Propuesta Republicana, partido dominante en Cambiemos) gobierna desde 2007. Con un abordaje cualitativo y el uso de fuentes diversas, se analizan sus características, organización supuestos conceptuales, y la medida en que se diferencian de las políticas implementadas por los gobiernos de N. Kirchner y C. Fernández (2003-2015).

Palabras-clave: Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires. Alianza Cambiemos. Evaluación. Calidad Educativa. Políticas Públicas.

Introduction

In the United States and developed countries, educational evaluation has taken on a strong impulse since the global crisis of the 1970s and the implementation of New Right policies, focused on the transformation of the state and public expenditure reduction (Morgenstern de Finkel, 1990). In these countries, academic and techno-political organizations which, early on, forged cooperation and exchange networks with international organisms, developed a robust theoretical-methodological body of knowledge about learning achievement assessment in formal educational systems. Thus conceived, evaluation was closely linked to the ambiguous and polysemic concept of *educational quality improvement*¹.

On the contrary, in Latin America, quality assessment arrived as a necessary and naturalized component of the structural reforms of the 1990s, and as beneficial in and of itself. Measurement of results, almost exclusively related to the responsibility of teachers and institutions, ended up replacing the historical concern for the democratization of the educational system. In Argentina, both the introduction of a homogeneous evaluation system and the transfer of secondary schools and higher education institutes from the national State to the provinces were part of the measures recommended by the World Bank (WB) since the end of the 1980s. The mandate for quality evaluation was incorporated into the legislation (Ley Federal de Educación, LFE, 1993) and regulated through resolutions by the Consejo Federal de Educación (CFE). Ministerial agencies were created (Dirección Nacional de Evaluación in 1993, Instituto de Evaluación de la Calidad de la Educación in 2000, Dirección Nacional de Investigación y Evaluación de la Calidad Educativa –DiNIECE – in 2003), a variety of plans and programs was organized, and a Federal Testing Program (Operativos Nacionales de Evaluación, ONE) was regularly applied at the elementary and secondary levels, to measure the achievement levels reached through compulsory education.

This contribution is part of a line of research focused on the development of a centralized system of educational quality assessment in Argentina, guided by questions about their meaning, their relationship with the implementation of public policies in the field and with structural changes observed in the educational system. Its object of study is the evolution of these policies in the Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires (CABA), a privileged district from the perspective of both its socio-economic and socio-educational indicators, focusing on the PRO (Propuesta Republicana) governments, with Mauricio Macri as Jefe de Gobierno since 2007. The research study has described and analyzed the process through which, since the mid-1980s, the City developed a sophisticated centralized evaluation system that encompassed students, teachers, institutions and programs at all levels and modalities of compulsory education. The jurisdictional system pursued differentiation while, at the same time, it adopted the national policies and the ONE, as well as the international tests of the OECD (Organization for Economic Coop-

eration and Development), the LLECE (Latin American Laboratory for the Assessment of the Quality of Education) and the IEA (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement); besides, it innovated in the management of these policies by transferring responsibility for quality assessment from the Ministry of Education to an autonomous agency, called Unidad de Evaluación de la Calidad y la Equidad Educativa (set up by CABA Law N° 5049/14).

The arrival of M. Macri to the national government in December 2015 (owing to an electoral alliance of the PRO with other parties, the Alianza CAMBIEMOS), was considered by some as the end of the political cycle represented by the governments of N. Kirchner (2003-2007) and C. Fernández (2007-2015), and the launch of a new politico-economic and social project². We were interested in exploring to what extent these ongoing policies reproduced, at the federal level, the conceptions and tools built at the jurisdictional one. We build up an initial approach to the points of convergence and divergence with the policies of quality evaluation of the Kirchner Administrations. The CAMBIEMOS Administration adjusted the ministerial structure in order to prioritize the assessment unit, it modified certain features of the ONE tests, and presented plans and policy proposals. All these changes seem to share features and elements of the educational evaluation policies previously developed in the CABA. In all cases, it was proclaimed that principles and content of the new National Education Law (Ley de Educación Nacional, LEN, 2006), which replaced the older LFE (Ley Federal de Educación) of 1993, and the corresponding CFE agreements would be respected, rightfully interpreted and fulfilled.

The set of theoretical assumptions that sustain our analysis draws from diverse Marxist schools that study the state and the transformation of the form and content of its intervention – in our case, in the field of education. It is assumed that the emergence, evolution and characteristics of educational policies can only be fully understood as product, object and determining factor of power relationships, political alliances, goals and characteristics of each politico-economic project, framed by specific structural features, as a local expression of a global process (Cfr.: Bonefeld, 2014; Offe, 1984; Poulantzas, 2005 [1978]; Lombardi; Saviani, 2005).

After presenting the educational quality assessment policies of the Argentine federal governments since the 90s, and of the PRO governments in the CABA from their inception until 2015, we characterize the main measures proposed and/or implemented by the CAMBIEMOS government from the moment it stepped up until the present; we identify points of convergence and divergence, both with respect to those implemented in the CABA as by the national governments of N. Kirchner and C. Fernández. Afterwards, we propose an interpretation of these changes, pointing out how shifts in style, priorities and discourses are compatible with the continuity of a dominant conceptual matrix in the field of educational quality assessment, also were influenced by the block of forces operating in the educational arena.

Federal Policies and Policies in the City of Buenos Aires since the *Programa de Transformación Educativa*: from the 1990s until 2015

Federal Policies (1993-2015)

As we have stated, the mandate for quality assessment was incorporated into the Argentine legislation as part of the *la Transformación Educativa (Transforming Education Program)* during C. Menem's Administration, and it was validated as a policy by the CFE resolutions. As a consequence, new bureaucratic spaces were generated in the Ministry. From the beginning, tension arised between two institutional strategies: to keep these spaces as a section within the Ministry, or to create an autonomous agency. In the 1990s, it was a section with the status of Dirección, tied to the Secretaría de Planeamiento. The De la Rúa government (1999-2001), by Decree N° 165/01, created a decentralized agency, the Instituto para el Desarrollo de la Calidad Educativa (IDECE), which also took over the functions related to traditional statistical surveys (Yearbooks) and the publication of reports on the results of testing program ONE, mainly connecting them to *teaching factors*³. During the transitional government of E. Duhalde (2002-2003), the Decree N° 357/02 closed down the IDECE and created the Dirección Nacional de Información y Evaluación de la Calidad Educativa (DiNIECE). The Kirchner governments preserved the DiNIECE, but they revised the political and technical foundations of the ONE program. In the years 2000, nonetheless, duality persisted with respect to the characteristics of a possible assessment unity. Thus, in a public document published in 2006, shortly before the National Education Law (LEN) enactment, proposals form creating a decentralized organism reappeared in the form of a new National Agency of Educational Information and Evaluation (Agencia Nacional de Evaluación e Información Educativa), to be replicated in each province:

It wouldn't be illogical to think that a possible articulation model would imply the creation of an autarchic entity, constituted by a technical-professional president elected through public competition based on background and qualifications, with an established term, and a Board integrated by representatives of diverse organisms connected to education. The Agency would work in articulation with the Provincial Agencies or similar entities formed in each jurisdiction (Gvirtz; Petrucci, 2006, p. 125-126).

A few years later, the ex Minister of Education, J. C. Tedesco (2007-2009), named responsible for a Strategic Planning and Evaluation Unit (see further below), proposed the creation of a National Agency that would be in charge of

[...] designing and applying tools that allow to compare results and provide information about progress in eliminating the high inequality levels identified in relation to

social origin, place of residence and territory... The evaluation of nationally and externally funded programs will be a necessary condition for expanding and increasing financial investments (Unidad..., 2010, p. 16-17).

This was not the political decision sustained by the governments of Kirchner and Fernández, who maintained the DiNIECE until 2015⁴.

Until 2002, the main measure applied by the assessment policy was the implementation of Federal Testing Program (known as ONE), as components of the National System of Quality Evaluation (SINEC), with their corresponding Implementation Units in each province (Unidades Ejecutoras provinciales). The purpose of SINEC was to assess the *academic achievement of the students*, to provide *valid and reliable information about how much and what the student learns... and what are the factors associated with that learning*; these elements were considered input for decision making and the formulation of educational policies (Argentina, 2000).

The ONE tests were implemented annually on a sample basis in selected years at the elementary and secondary levels, to measure learning in Language and Mathematics (shortly afterwards incorporating the Social and Natural Sciences), in public and private institutions. Starting from 1997, census-tests were administered in the final year of those levels of formal education. They were administered annually until 2003, with an *impasse* due to the 2001 crisis. Together with the main survey, additional questionnaires were incorporated (for students, families, teachers and administrators) in order to obtain information about the socio-economic status of the home, characteristics of the school/section and of the teachers and principals⁵. The conceptual foundations explicitly referred to the *school effectiveness* approach, centered in “[...] identifying the characteristics of schools (or sections) that positively affect school achievement, once the socio-economic status of the student is controlled” (Argentina, 1995, p. 2), justified by *quality and equity* principles. In the reports and regulations, *quality*, on the one hand, was associated with the scores obtained in the tests after controlling for the socio-economic level of the student; *equity*, on the other hand, referred to a school's capacity to compensate for the effect of those socio-economic differences on learning achievement (Argentina, 1995). The information would serve to *strengthen institutional responsibility for the results of the management of the educational unit*, to provide feedback on teaching, increase *control of the system performance and stimulate a more active demand for quality* from the side of the families, placing the *topic of educational quality at the center of the social agenda*, and allowing

[...] to identify the areas or sets of establishments that are serving the most disadvantaged population and/or reaching the lowest achievement levels and to design strategies focused on compensatory intervention... (Argentina, 1997, p. 16).

At the beginning of the 21st century, we witnessed the widespread of national education plans, stimulated by regional agreements that incorporated the proposals of the Organization of Ibero-American States (OEI)⁶. All the countries, including Argentina, designed Education Plans with variable regularity, always including a section on quality evaluation. Standardized tests were always considered a necessary tool to evaluate the fulfillment of the objectives, though warning that

[...] the monitoring and assessment system does not constitute an end in itself, but it must be understood instead as a fundamental tool to enable the achievement of the stipulated objectives. The main goal of such system consists of obtaining, processing and providing rigorous, accurate and relevant information in order to recognize the degree of progress recorded. (Organización..., 2010, p. 12).

In Argentina, these recommendations were incorporated into the National Plan for Educational Quality Evaluation (Plan Nacional de Evaluación de la Calidad Educativa 2003-2007, Resol. CFE N° 210/03). The Plan displayed new nuances in the definition and articulation between quality and equity, which would remain constant as underlying principles and discourse elements until 2015; they would undergo shifts in priorities and concerns about the meaning, use and dissemination of test results: it was necessary to deepen the interpretation beyond quantitative description, to disseminate the results among stakeholders, adapting the information to the supposed characteristics of each recipient (political officers, families, teachers). The tendency to *reduce evaluation to the results of specific testing operations* was to be avoided, while it was imperative to incorporate other *indicators*, integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches and a diversity of sources, and to include the teachers in the different stages of evaluation. The ONEs were to be transformed into formative devices, together with diagnostic assessments, the evaluation of policy programs, and the dissemination of results at all levels of the educational system (classroom, institution, jurisdiction)⁷.

This course of action was confirmed in 2010 (Resol. CFE N° 99/10 presenting a draft of the *Plan de Acción de Evaluación de la Calidad Educativa* and N° 116/10, approving *Lineamientos para la evaluación de componentes de la calidad educativa 2010-2020*). The discursive definition of educational quality moved away from the efficiency and effectiveness categories, to adopt the principle of *quality as a human right*, associated to equal opportunities and the social dimensions of education⁸. Educational planning was inscribed as political, not merely technical, while it configured:

[...] public spaces to raise the challenge of settling debts with wide social sectors concerning their rights. To overcome the system's fragmentation processes, the Plan summons the effort of everybody in order to widen political horizons and move forward in the construction of the national space, affirming the federal condition of the

educational policy agreements in the sphere of the Ministry of Education and the Federal Board (CFE). (Resol. CFE N° 79/09, Plan Nacional de Educación Obligatoria, p. 6).

Three years later, the National Plan of Compulsory Education and Teacher Training (Plan Nacional de Educación Obligatoria y Formación Docente 2012-2016, Resol. CFE N° 188/12) established, among its objectives, to strengthen and deepen the evaluation policies; it now stated that the new Plan would become the *announcer and enabler of hope stemming from definitions that have political density and transformative capacity, since it conveyed to citizens that not only have they worked in order to be better off, but they are better off*.

The enforcement of federal educational planning resulted not only in new plans approved by the CFE, but also in attempts to evidence-based, sectoral planning and diagnostic studies. In 2009, C. Fernández created the Unit of Strategic Planning and Educational Evaluation (Unidad de Planeamiento Estratégico y Evaluación de la Educación, Decree N° 957/09), appointing the retiring Minister J. C. Tedesco to chair it. The Unit was dissolved shortly after the publication of a 10-Year Educational Plan proposal (Plan Decenal de Educación) to be approved at the National Congress. The Plan contained ten action lines. One of them proposed strengthening citizen education for democracy, incorporating a second language in elementary education, and *significantly* improving the results on the PISA and ONE tests at the elementary level. To that end, it was also indispensable to “[...] improve the tools to measure the quality of the policies, the educational processes and their results” (Unidad..., 2010, p. 16).

This revision of political and technical criteria of the assessment policy resulted in modifications to the ONE; a 2005 official document pointed out the elements to be preserved and the significance of the changes to be made. The ONE itself and the elaboration of methodological recommendations for the improvement of teaching and learning based on their results were reclaimed as positive aspects; value was also placed on the development of experiences in the provinces, on guidance and techno-pedagogical support to the processes and technical teams. Experts at the Ministry showed satisfaction with

[...] the use of the results of assessment in political debate, its dissemination through the mass media and the harnessing of the information obtained by diverse actors in the educational system... a component that has an impact on the ideological dimension of evaluation and its ethical aspects (Leones, 2005, p. 10).

But it was necessary to introduce changes that went along with those taking place in several Latin American countries and the LL-ECE: to move from standards-based tests to criterion-based tests, and to adopt the *Item Response Theory* in the processing and production of results; the focus had to move from performance comparison (between individuals, sections, or institutions) to achievement description. The revision was not only technical: the proposal was to prioritize team

work, collaboration and participation among actors in the educational system, to improve teaching and learning (Leones, 2005, p. 12).

The DiNIECE sought to complement and articulate the results of the tests with indicators related to intra and extra school factors associated with learning, and decided to extend the gap between tests (from one to two years, then three). It advocated for a comprehensive evaluation of diverse dimensions, such as “ [...] collective construction and shared responsibility between all those involved in the educational act... [of] an eminently formative character” (Pascual; Albergucci; Duhalde; Abal Medina, 2017, p. 4). Besides the reports on the results of the tests, the DiNIECE elaborated booklets with *methodological recommendations*, some reports on the surveys referring to socio-economic conditions of individuals, the school context, and teachers’ work and conditions. Between 2007 and 2015, it developed and published reports on various topics (the role of supervision and the classification boards in the provinces, specific issues related to elementary or secondary levels, illiteracy, the evolution of private education, etc.). DiNIECE also launched program assessment studies, as for example, of the Integral Program for Educational Equality (Programa Integral de Igualdad Educativa) or of the Federal Student Scholarship Program (Programa Nacional de Becas Estudiantiles), statistical reports on a variety of indicators, and reports intended to raise awareness and acceptance of international tests. Nevertheless, the Plans and Resolutions approved by the Kirchner and Fernández governments were not explicitly founded on any of these policy lines with respect to educational quality, but almost exclusively on the results of standardized tests.

To end the summary of this period, let us remember that, together with the display of local evaluation policies, several international tests were introduced: since 1997, all the editions of the LLECE tests, and since 2002, the PISA and OECD tests. Until 2003, Argentina participated in some of the IEA tests: TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) in 1995 and 2003, and PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) in 2001. During the period of the Kirchner and Fernández governments, the country did not participate in the IEA tests, only in the PISA and LLECE ones.

The Particularities of the City of Buenos Aires⁹

In CABA, the centralized educational assessment programs appeared in the 1990s, like the ones at the national level. However, the evolution of CABA policies showed two particularities. The first one is the pioneering character of the jurisdiction in implementing measures and developing experiences according to globally disseminated concerns about the quality of the knowledge provided by the educational systems. In the mid-1980s, the then Municipality¹⁰ administered knowledge tests in Language, Mathematics, Social and Natural Sciences to a sample of students from diverse elementary grades, within the framework of a research study that wove concerns for the democratization

of education and for the equality of socially significant learning results (Bertoni; Poggi; Teobaldo, 1993; Briscioli, 2009). The second one is that the development of these policies led the City to stand out from the rest of the provinces, because it structured a complex tapestry of superimposed programs, a true *panopticum* of the Evaluative State, displayed over schools, students and teachers. The jurisdiction applied not only the tests organized and adopted by the federal government (ONE and the LLECE, OECD and IEA), but also tests designed by the City itself (jurisdictional evaluation tests, OEJ), in a continued and systematic way, in contrast with the experiences developed at other jurisdictions (Argentina, 2003). The OEJ began almost simultaneously with the ONE, in a process of expansion and deepening along all Administrations. Observing its evolution, the following can be stated about the jurisdictional policies:

- They were initiated with the claim that they were conceptually and methodologically different from the national operations. Interested in favoring the qualitative dimensions with the teachers' participation, the will to assess *educational policies* and an approach focused on the jurisdictional *curriculum* and *classroom practices*, they stayed within a complex and structured centralized system of managerial monitoring of processes and outputs¹¹.
- At the beginning, schools joined the quality assessment program on a voluntary-basis; starting from 2001, participation was compulsory.
- At start, they included only the public education sector; since 1997, the private segment was incorporated.
- They moved from non-representative to representative samples, and also census-based tests.
- They were regularly applied at the elementary level, and occasionally at the secondary level (1995/1996; 2007) until 2011, in which testing adopted the form of annual census tests in the last year of all secondary schools (Operativos FESBA).
- Starting from 2011, and in a limited way, the OEJ incorporated other devices for the evaluation of teacher performance, institutions and public *education programs*, comprising a *Participatory System of Educational System Assessment* (Sistema Participativo de Evaluación del Sistema Educativo, SIPEDUC).
- They led to new bureaucratic and technical structures within the City's Ministry of Education, which culminated in the creation of an autonomous Evaluation Unit.
- Subsequently, and in contrast with the Federal Government decision not to apply for IEA tests, the City administered TIMSS, PIRLS and ICILS (International Computer and Information Literacy Study)
- By linking accountability with a policy of publishing results, the content, organization and devices for communicating

results were gradually modernized, customized, in order to become more *friendly* and attractive to the “public”, but the information offered to citizens was progressively simplified, undergoing a series of changes in presentation and the entities responsible for sharing it.

These transformations were part of a set of changes in educational policies and in the structure and dynamics of the jurisdictional state apparatus of subsequent governments, finally interwoven with the characteristics of the PRO political-educational project starting 2007. The framework, organization and orientation of these actions gradually moved away from the conceptions and working model that had set the jurisdiction apart. Initially organized as an Evaluation and Quality Improvement Project (Proyecto de Evaluación y Mejoramiento de la Calidad), as a *collective and participatory* construction (1992), they became an *Evaluation and Prospective Program* (*Programa de Evaluación y Prospectiva*, 1997) that widened and diversified its activities, to constitute in 2001 a *System* (SIPEDUC) composed of programs for the assessment of learning, teachers, institutions and the Educational Projects and Programs of the City. These components followed an uneven evolution, with learning assessment through jurisdictional tests as the most developed; some Programs were evaluated, teacher assessment did not move forward beyond a few modifications in the traditional procedures – evaluations made by the administrators –, and institutional assessment took on the form of pilot tests at some levels and modalities, as an Institutional Self-Evaluation Program (Programa de Autoevaluación Institucional).

The organization and implementation of the quality assessment programs slid into a progressive decrease in the participation of supervisors, teachers and administrators in the decisions, design and exchange, in the discussion of results and elaboration of conclusions and proposals. Macri’s government introduced the *outsourcing* of test application, under the premise of higher objectivity. The testing consolidated as *top down* interventions, alien to the priorities of schools, as “extraordinary” events within institutional life which were tolerated, with more or less resistance, by teachers, students and administrators, and whose results, formally more *available* and *transparent*, were increasingly more hermetic and distant. The compromise with transparency and *stakeholders’* participation ended up very limited, given that the information was not available for everybody in the same way: responsibilities were assigned to each agent, according to their position, as well as a specific place in the assessment model and a particular use of data. Simultaneously, although the reports acknowledged that the results were associated to both intra and extra school factors, the defense of an approach centered on the school and student learning prioritized almost exclusively teacher and institution *performance*, what did or did not happen inside the classroom as fundamental factors of quality variation in education. In this way, the usefulness of assessments remained increasingly focused on their value to reshape teacher performance,

considering the teacher as a unique mediator between the student and the official *curriculum*, without significantly extending their analysis to other associated factors, such as the organization of time and space, the institutional characteristics, the effects of other educational or social policies at the jurisdiction, etc.

A similar approach is observed in the evaluation of educational Programs and Projects. Incorporating models and *policy management technologies* disseminated by the World Bank, since 2007 the City seemed to transcend asystematic and random experiences to make it *part of the inicial design of the activities contemplated in the life cycle* of the projects. In this approach, evaluators are not the main *subjects* of the program, but the specialists of the ministerial agencies.

Together with the development of the OEJ, there was a multiplication of ad-hoc programs, indicators and information on the educational system of the CABA, composing a variegated cluster of data: general annual reports, reports by 'comunas' (political-administrative districts in the City), and newsletters by school for each type of *audience*. Diverse indexes were elaborated and published: the HDI (Human Development Index) of the UNDP, and also the SVI (Social Vulnerability Index). In 2012, the Strategic Indicator of Educational Quality was presented, destined to analyze the fulfillment of the objectives in the educational sector, the system performance and the learning achievement of the students (made up of two indexes: the ICEP, Índice de Calidad y Equidad Porteño, and the IECEP, Índice de Calidad y Equidad Educativa Porteño). The preference for differentiated feedback, as well as the selection of data that are combined or presented with the claim to provide an integrated outlook on the situation of the institutions, the regions or Comunas and the jurisdiction, were handed as the result of technical decisions of expert statisticians and were not submitted for debate.

The stylization and the *scientific and technical* improvement of testing programs came together with a centralization process: the concentration of power on the Chief of Government and the Ministry of Education, legitimated by managerial conceptions. It was materialized in subsequent changes in the bureaucratic apparatus and in the agency in charge of these policies. Until Macri took office in the CABA, that structure was the General Directorate of Educational Planning (Dirección General de Planeamiento Educativo, DGPE), subordinated to the Under-Secretary of Education of the Ministry of Education (Subsecretaría de Educación del Ministerio de Educación). Through Decree N° 2075/07, the organizational structure of the Ministry was modified to create two Subsecretarías, and the Directorate was kept within an Under-Secretary for Educational Inclusion and Pedagogical Coordination (Subsecretaría de Inclusión Educativa y Coordinación Pedagógica). From that moment, the assessment office was progressively separated from the planning, until the Decree N° 500/08 transformed it in a General Directorate, constituted by two Directorates that had to be articulated: one dedicated to Research and Statistics, and the other one to Educational Evaluation, the latter composed of six areas (Learning Assessment, Institutional As-

assessment, Assessment of Teacher Performance, Assessment of Programs and Projects, Assessment and Statistics, and Assessment, Promotion and Accreditation Plan). The Decree Nº 660/11 made the Directorate of Educational Assessment depend directly on the Ministry; the Decree Nº 226/12 promoted it to General Directorate, with two Operational Managements (of Research and Statistics and of Educational Assessment). The culmination of this process was the passing of the law creating the Unit of Quality and Educational Equity Assessment (August 2014).

This Unit is equipped with a complex technical-academic structure: an Executive Director (designed by the Executive Power through public competition based on background and qualifications), an Advisory Council of 11 members (the Executive Director and two representatives of the Ministry of Education, three from the political players or blocks in the CABA Legislature, two from the unions with the highest amount of members, one from the school supervisors, one from the Board of Privately Managed Education, and the President of the Scientific Academic Committee -CCA). This CCA counts with seven members “[...] of renowned track record at the national and/or international level in the field of education, the Social Sciences, statistics, evaluation and/or educational research” (Law 5049, art. 22^o), designated by the Executive Director. The Unit has 5 General Coordinating Offices: Educational Assessment, Learning Assessment, Educational Information and Statistics, Educational Research, and Technical, Legal and Administrative.

The Educational Quality Evaluation Policy of *Cambiemos* Administration (2016-2018)

In this section, we will present the measures and proposals of the Cambiemos National Government with the aim to discuss how they represent the translation of the experience gathered at the CABA, just reviewed, to the national level. With that purpose, we will describe some measures and proposals, pointing out the most remarkable changes with respect to the past, particularly the 2003-2015 period. Considering the dimensions analyzed above, we will take three main points into account: a) the hierarchical organization of the responsible area in the ministerial structure; b) the elaboration of multi-annual Plans that include decisions related to education quality assessment; and c) the introduction of significant changes in testing organization and standardized test questionnaires, and also in the introduction of new tests in higher education institutions for teacher training, and the assessment of those institutions.

The Successive Transformations in the structure of the Federal Ministry

When Macri took office by the end of 2015, the ministerial structure was reformed. The purported intention was to strengthen and improve on the assessment policies by prioritizing the area in charge.

This aim was materialized in April 2016 through the Decree 552, which created an Office of Innovation and Educational Quality (Secretaría de Innovación y Calidad Educativa) and an Office of Educational Evaluation (Secretaría de Evaluación Educativa), later subject to new modifications. Although the previous Directorate was promoted to the higher rank of Secretaría, replicating the CABA experience, there was a separation between the areas of *quality and innovation*, on the one hand, and *assessment and evaluation*, on the other, which were expected to operate in coordination. Such regulation commissioned the Office of Educational Evaluation with the

[...] implementation of an articulate, reliable, relevant, friendly, dynamic and regular educational information and evaluation system, to serve the diverse users of the educational system and promote the use of evidence in decision making, with the aim to underscore the continuous improvement of educación and the reduction of inequality gaps (Argentina, 2017, p. 10).

The Secretaría is nowadays in charge of the design and implementation of the National Assessment System, based on federal agreements and comprised of specific studies, lines of educational research, the assessment of policies, institutions, *of contexts and system actors, and of students' learning achievement*. Topics, aspects and strategies get more sophisticated as external and internal evaluation processes are proposed, together with self-evaluations and national and international micro assessments, both qualitative and quantitative, all establishing a Comprehensive Evaluation System that will allow the setting of evidence-based priorities and will be progressively decentralized in its operation and management (Argentina, 2017).

As it had happened in CABA, there was an attempt to create an Institute of Quality Evaluation and Educational Equity (IECEE), stating that in this way the National Education Law (LEN) of 2006 would be more thoroughly fulfilled. The proposal, presented at the Chamber of Deputies in 2016, was signed by several political constituencies: Partido Justicialista, Cambiemos, Generación para un Encuentro Nacional (GEN) and Unión Cívica Radical (UCR). Towards the end of that year, the Education, Budget and Treasury Commissions released a verdict that, in general terms, only made minor changes, defending in its Foundations Section the importance of an autonomous Institute that “[...] responds to the need to count with a rigorous diagnostic of the current situation and with reliable information, in order to be able to measure progress and assess the impact of public policies, aiming to accomplish an effective planning of these policies” (Cámara..., 2016, p. 4). The proposal was similar to the CABA Institute, but with higher technical autonomy: it was comprised of an Executive Director (appointed by public competition based on background and qualifications) responsible for building its own structure, promoting the participation of the National Council of Educational Quality “[...] made up of educational authorities, specialists in different disciplines, union representatives, teachers and

students, according to what the Federal Board of Education (CFE) establishes" (art. 9°, Cámara..., 2016, p. 2). With the creation of the Institute, the Secretaría de Evaluación de la Calidad Educativa was dissolved.

Only two women deputies from the Frente para la Victoria (FpV) party signed a minority report, rejecting the project: they argued that it was necessary for the state to develop evaluations of the educational system, but that this goal would not be accomplished through the IECEEE, since it concealed the possibility that international organisms would finance the Institute and define the evaluation standards. Upon opening the legislative sessions of 2017, president Macri asked for the project to be treated *with the depth that it deserved*, but it was not discussed in the Congress again.

Policies and Plans

The CAMBIEMOS Administration stayed on the multi-annual plans of the previous government. In 2016, the CFE approved the document *Argentina Teaches and Learns. Strategic Federal Plan 2016-2021* (*Argentina Enseña y Aprende. Plan Estratégico Nacional 2016-2021*) in order to *promote a new commitment to education, aiming to build up learning communities that have a positive impact in the lives of students and educators*. One of its cross-cutting themes is the *evaluation and use of information, to serve the school, the community, and provincial and national authorities, towards the improvement of teaching and learning*:

Timely and reliable information enables the monitoring of educational action and anticipating obstacles and difficulties in its implementation. It is useful in order to diagnose problems and redirect resources and efforts for their solution. It also serves the purpose of identifying situations of exclusion and vulnerability, to design specific policies to approach them. (Resol. CFE 285/16, p. 25).

With the novelty of characterizing and naming the Plan as *Strategic*, the government returned to the regular annual testing programs, reaffirming, as previous governments did, the need to develop assessment mechanisms, not only of learning outcomes but also policies and institutional educational projects, maintaining the idea that there should be a promotion of

[...] a culture of data use and of decisions based on evidence, by way of sensibilization strategies and the training of all the educational system stakeholders, as well as the development of strategies for disseminating the information in a simple and clear way (Resol. CFE 285/16, p. 25).

Months later, and in spite of the Plan approval at the CFE, in March 2017, at a moment of high conflict with teachers' unions, the Government released a new plan, now as a draft of a law proposal submitted to Congress, named *Plan Maestr@*. The sections dedicated to educational quality assessment emphasized the need to disseminate the results of the APRENDER test and the responsibility of teachers for the results ob-

tained. In a first version, the Plan included 108 goals, without specifying financial projections, monitoring procedures, or distribution of responsibilities between Federal and provincial governments; in a second version, after strong critiques raised in the political, union and academic arenas, goals were regrouped as 53, and a section was added on *tracking and monitoring*, with some very general and ambiguous considerations for financing. In neither case was there any reference to the previously approved Plans, their impact or results, nor were the proposals for quality evaluation modified substantially.

The “APRENDER” and “ENSEÑAR” tests

During the campaign for national elections in 2015, the central point of the critiques of the educational policies of previous governments by the CAMBIEMOS candidates was precisely the low educational quality, confirmed by the low results obtained in the tests. Together with critiques referring to the stagnation and even decline in the results on the national and international tests, technical and implementation errors in the operations were pointed out, raising suspicions about the adequate dissemination of results. The main arguments of the Ministry of Education and Sports about the policy of quality evaluation were legitimated based on the idea of strengthening and improving efficiency in order to fulfill the LEN and the agreements reached by the CFE in the previous period.

As soon as they took office, Elena Duro, responsible for the area of educational quality, stated in an interview¹² that one of the critical problems of education was insufficient information about the impact of projects and programs, the reports on the results of the last ONE were delayed, showing *a depreciation of information and a depreciation of evaluation*. From her perspective, the inherited instrument was reliable, but not the administration process nor the guarantee of an adequate response index. Consistent with this diagnosis, changes were made in the operations, which began to be named *APRENDER*. They returned to annual regularity, and it was decided to administer the tests suspending regular activities in order to reach higher response levels, reaffirming their continuity, and using the same emphasis on the *culture of assessment*, the association of quality with equity, and the rejection of *rankings* (Argentina, 2016). Some changes were introduced, and new nuances and interests, some already present in the CABA: the preoccupation with the use of information and its friendly communication, differentiated and adapted for each type of *user*, the aim to accomplish the disaggregation of data at the municipal level, and institutional evaluation (combining self-evaluation with external evaluation). And for the first time (both at the national and jurisdictional level), evaluation operations were implemented among students of teacher education institutions for compulsory education (Pruebas ENSEÑAR)¹³.

Translating to federal policy the association of quality with equity, the Resol. CFE N° 280/16 created the National System of Educational

Quality and Equity Evaluation, and all the provinces confirmed their commitment to guaranteeing that the tests enable the gathering of *representative, timely, quality* information. The Resol. CFE N° 324/17 specified the distribution of responsibilities between the National state and the Provinces, the latter adopting an operational and, in general terms, subordinated role, as for example in the obligation to select a Body of Federal Observers to audit the APRENDER and ENSEÑAR evaluations as external observers.

The inherited federal structure of the Program, based on Jurisdictional Coordinators responsible for teams of overseers and executors, was reorganized as the Network of Federal Evaluation for Educational Quality and Equity (REFCEE). The results processing system of the APRENDER test was reformulated to provide information by school, jurisdiction, region and national total, for the elaboration of reports by theme, besides interactive data presentations and an open consultation system, available at the Ministry websites. As an innovation in federal policies, the organization of a Federal Collegiate Body of teachers and specialists was created for the construction of the test items. The complementary questionnaires were maintained. In 2017, a writing test was added to a 4th grade sample in public and private schools, and the APRENDER was adapted to the Braille alphabet.

As we have mentioned, the ENSEÑAR test was launched in order to assess the knowledge of last-year students of higher education teacher training institutions (ISFD), particularly those who were doing their student teaching practices in elementary education and middle school subjects (Mathematics, Language/ Language and Literature, History, Geography, Biology, Physics, Chemistry and English). ENSEÑAR assessed competency in written communication (reading and writing) and pedagogical judgment (teacher planning, implementation of teaching strategies and learning assessment). Its preparation involved the production of training workshops in which more than 500 administrators and deans of the ISFD throughout the country participated. For Elena Duro, ENSEÑAR represented *a diagnostic assessment of the teacher training system*, which widened evaluation to other dimensions that had not been approached by the previous government's policies, *highly focused on the self-evaluation practices of the institutes*¹⁴.

Conclusions

The characterization we have made of the changes in national educational quality assessment policies in our country allows us to state that certain assumptions and globalized conceptions on the topic have persisted, regarding how to evaluate quality and the factors that affect it. We pose that the paradigm has lived on, with changes in its nuances, discourses and educational policy priorities, since 2003 until nowadays. The governments of N. Kirchner, C. Fernández and M. Macri show differences in the organization and implementation of the assessment programs in which diverse ways of conceiving public policy and

the role of the federal and provincial governments, of negotiating with teachers' unions and articulating different aspects of sectoral policy (funding, salaries, investments, etc.), can be observed. Of course, the dominant ideological conceptions of each party and the interests that their political, economic and social projects defend, have a simultaneous influence on all of this.

The CAMBIEMOS Administration brought to educational policies the priorities, conceptions and nuances conducted at the CABA: managerialism in public policy, closer bonds with international expert fractions and leaders of the world's education business that hold public positions¹⁵, concern for cost efficiency, claims of higher technical effectiveness related to the design and implementation of the measures, preference for decentralized evaluation organisms isolated from political discussion, expansion of the areas covered by the tests, a taste for friendly *design* formats in the presentation of information at the expense of their "substance", and a strong confrontation with teachers' union organizations.

The aspiration to reach higher representativeness and technical perfection in the design and implementation of APRENDER had to face the reaction of the unions, which were supported, in many provinces, by the families and student organizations. As a result, the 2016 administration of the test ended up covering only 66% to 71% of the student body, and in some provinces, it did not even reach 50%¹⁶. Nevertheless, the reports presented conclusions with respect to the universe, which were used as tools of political pressure in a context of frequent and long strikes. What is remarkable in this shift in evaluation policy is that, always presented as an enhanced continuity of previous government policies, as a renewed commitment to educational inclusion and the right to education, it gained the support of the provinces represented at the CFE. It could all be accomplished without the need to face changes in the legislation approved since 2005.

The confrontation with the teachers' unions is a distinctive feature of the CAMBIEMOS government. Some supporters and education officials from the previous government concluded in 2017 that they had not been able to defeat the dominant ideas, which continued to be

[...] present in society's common sense and in the mass media, which habitually, responding to hegemonic power, made use of information to vilify public education and in detriment of education workers (Pascual; Albergucci; Duhalde; Abal Medina, 2017, p. 2).

At this point, it is possible to state that several nodal elements of this dominant global paradigm of quality education assessment remained in evaluation policies since the 1990s, until nowadays. This paradigm relies on the idea, among others, that there is a certain autonomy and incidence of the educational field over the structural constraints of a society. Although in some cases the importance of extra school factors, or institutional / educational system characteristics are acknowledged, this paradigm postpones or minimizes any integrated

analysis. This is justified appealing to the idea that *the school can make a difference*: exceptions are considered *normal cases* that can be extended to the whole educational system when proper decisions are adopted; but in doing so, contradictions and inequalities are hidden, as well as any links of education with the movement of society as a whole.

Thus, for example, even after 2001, when sectoral discourses, lines of work, research and surveys, and papers published by DiNIECE began to acknowledge that *a basic minimum degree of equity and social cohesion was a necessary condition for a successful educational process* (Tedesco, 2006, p. 21), and in spite of expressing that quality evaluation had to be comprehensive and not centered on standardized tests, their results kept to be presented as privileged indicators of quality, they kept referring to the actions, training and knowledge of teachers and their teaching proficiency, and were preferentially interested in the instructional dimension of the classroom. The standardized tests kept having a strongly performative character (Ball, 2003; Dahler-Larsen, 2007), in spite of the insistence on underestimating their weight within a web of tools and strategies. That was how J. C. Tedesco communicated it in an interview that took place in mid- 2016 in Santiago de Chile, when invited by the Agency for Educational Quality, showing his disappointment after the experience of several decades of educational quality assessment programs in Latin America:

[...] after 20 years of experience, we can already identify some painful lessons: 'we learned that measuring does not improve anything, this is obvious, nobody assumed that measurement in itself would improve quality, but measurement that generates competition does not optimize results either, and besides, it produces inequality, inequity and segregation, which are very strong, particularly in compulsory education,' he explained. However, he adds, there has been progress in coverage, in school construction, in materials and equipment, the laws have been changed, inclusion and the right to education have been promoted. 'The big challenge is to improve results, because all that is not yet reflected at the speed that we would like, in equity and in the learning results of those who come from the poorer sectors' [...]
'At the world level, the paradox is that countries that measure much, like the United States, do not do well, and countries that measure very little, like Finland, do very well' (Tedesco, 2016, p. 6).

The reflections and self-criticism¹⁷ of the protagonists and those technically and politically responsible for the introduction and implementation of sophisticated and costly systems of quality evaluation accept the limits of these instruments in giving sound responses to the problems of the educational system, and admit the determining role played by the position in the social structure, and the objective life conditions on learning achievement levels. The evaluation policy of CAMBIEMOS seems to be far away from these self-critical reflections at the moment.

In the light of the all the arguments explored, it could be said that a only an extensive and democratic public debate could give the opportunity to build a well-founded diagnosis and better proposals.

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Notes

- 1 There is ample literature analyzing the formation of a *global paradigm of educational quality evaluation*. As an example, see the following recent publications: Grek (2010); Lindblad; Pettersson; Popkewitz (2015).
- 2 This approximation is attempted, accepting the challenge to analyze policies that begin to unfold, and framed by unsettled discussions about the characterization of Kirchnerista and CAMBIEMOS governments.
- 3 Its executive director was Silvia Montoya, who would later move on to the quality evaluation area of CABA.
- 4 In 2016, Tedesco would remember that in the proposal of the 10-Year Plan (Plan Decenal) he had handed a draft of the decree that created the National Agency of Educational Evaluation to the PEN, but that “[...] unfortunately, at that moment there were no conditions to take it forward” (Tedesco, 2016, p. 6).
- 5 Tests were applied in 3rd, 6th, 7th and 9th grades of the EGB and in the last year of secondary education/polimodal (12th grade). The procedures included questionnaires to school administrators (in order to gather information about their profile and the diverse material and human characteristics of the institution), to the teachers (to find out about their personal characteristics, their track record, motivation and classroom activity), to families (about their dynamics of support and participation in the school), and students (study habits, sometimes about school environment).
- 6 The document of the Reflection Group on Education (GRE) (2016) mentions the following Plans as examples: Argentina (2012/2016); Brasil (2001/2013 y 2014/2024); Colombia (2006/2015); Costa Rica (2003/2015); Ecuador (2006/2015); El Salvador (2021); México (2001/2006, 2013/2018 y 2025); Paraguay (2009/2015); Perú (2005/2015); República Dominicana (2003/2012; 2008/2018).
- 7 Indeed, in the aforementioned National Plan, *other evaluation strategies* were listed together with the ONE and the international tests: institutional assessment, compensatory policy programs, complementary qualitative research coming from the context questionnaires of the ONE and other quantitative indicators, diagnostic assessments and research studies on diverse aspects and problems of the educational system.
- 8 The *Action Plan for Educational Quality Evaluation 2010-2020* (ANEXO Resol. 99/10) said: In the last few years, the notion of educational quality has undergone some changes. It is no longer conceived as an abstraction related to a given concept of excellence and, thus, it is not enough for educational systems to limit themselves to offer everyone the chance to learn. There is strong evidence with respect to how much weight the cultural environment has on the educational path of children and adolescents, and the value that differentiated educational action has to genuinely guarantee equal opportunities. From a perspective of

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deepening the democratization processes, the discourse of quality is not a way out of failure in education, but a reflection with respect to the challenge that those processes pose. As a consequence, the discourse of quality evaluation also needs to be reelaborated in relation to its meaning and ends.

- 9 This whole section gathers the results of a previous research study conducted by the authors on the policies of educational quality and evaluation in CABA, in relationship with the policies for secondary schools, which can be accessed at: Vior, Rodríguez y Más Rocha, 2016.
- 10 The City of Buenos Aires depended on the National Executive Power until the constitutional reform of 1994. Since then, it acquired an autonomous status, at level with the provinces, and it chooses its own Chief of Government and Legislature.
- 11 The DiNIECE itself (2003) acknowledged that the operations organized by the City were using *a very different methodology from the ONEs* because they wanted to *understand the cognitive processes and strategies* used by the students in the tests and infer the characteristics of the teachers' pedagogical strategies. To that end, the instruments were open-ended and the results were contextualized based on the family's socio-economic and educational data and the students' track record. Another characteristic that the DiNIECE considered to be peculiar to the City's programs was the interest in the *planned participation* of supervisors, directors and teachers in charge of the grades that were assessed at the different stages of the process.
- 12 Available at: <<https://www.lanacion.com.ar/1892062-elena-duro-generar-una-competencia-entre-escuelas-no-suma-a-la-cultura-evaluativa>>. Retrieved on April 10, 2018.
- 13 In Argentina, the major part of teacher education programs at the Pre-School, Elementary and Secondary levels of the different modalities is administered by the provinces, and it takes place in teacher education institutes of higher education, not in universities.
- 14 Available at: <<http://misionesonline.net/2017/10/13/elena-duro-las-evaluaciones-ensenar-aprender-necesitamos-informacion-tomar-las-decisiones-politica-educativa/>>. Retrieved on April 10, 2018.
- 15 For example, the track record of government officials like Elena Duro, G. Sánchez Zinny, Minister of Education of the Province of Buenos Aires, and Esteban Bullrich, National Prime Minister Education and Sports.
- 16 Student respondents at the elementary level: CABA, 37,4%; Chaco, 50,7%; Neuquén, 24,8%; Santa Cruz, 45,2%. Student respondents at the secondary level: CABA, 44,1%; Neuquén, 32,0%; Santa Cruz, 29,7%.
- 17 See the case of Diane Ravitch (2010), who was Assistant Secretary of Education in the United States during the governments of G. W. Bush y B. Clinton, and in her book acknowledges the negative consequences of measuring educational quality with standardized tests, for institutions, teachers and students.

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