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Evaluation at the Forefront of the Neoliberal Agenda for Education in Latin America: Disclosing the Contradictions of the Recent Argentine Experience

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Abstract

This article frames the main problems and challenges of state, provincial and jurisdictional-mandated assessment programs introduced in the early 1990s within the context of broader goals of the educational policy in Latin America and particularly in Argentina, which is considered as a paradigmatic case of such policies. The content of the article will be organized as follows. First, I will introduce two main conceptual frameworks which have been leading the scenario of the global educational policies in Latin America since the early 1990's. Second, considering Argentina as a case study, I will characterize the recent educational reform, paying special attention to the role of the national testing system, and reviewing the criticism that this system received. I will also disclose the philosophical, political and pedagogical assumptions that this reform has been based upon and the contrasts with the leading principles accepted in the past. Third, I will suggest some elements that an alternative discourse and practice of public assessment program for Latin America should take into account in order to overcome the mistakes and critics of the described reform.

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Introduction

In this paper, I will argue that the policies applied to the education arena in the Latin American continent are contradictory. These policies construct and divulge a discourse that stresses the benefits of evaluation as a means of improving educational practices and educational planning. At the same time, these policies do not facilitate the material and symbolic conditions for the realization of such benefits for the whole society. I will also suggest that this is one of the reasons why the material structures and the symbolic constructions, which have been officially used to support and defend these kinds of policies and which will be identified with a neoliberal framework, ultimately deprived the evaluation policies of social legitimacy. My point will be that this lack of social legitimacy operated as a boomerang against completion of the explicit goals of the evaluation policies, i.e. improvement of the quality of education and achievement of more transparency and social responsiveness of institutional and system planning.

The content of this paper will be organized as follows. First, I will introduce two main conceptual frameworks which have determined the scenario of global educational policies in Latin America since the early 1990's. Second, considering Argentina as a case study, I will describe the recent educational reform, paying special

attention to the national testing system and the criticism that it has received. I will also disclose the philosophical, political and pedagogical assumptions upon which this reform has been based and demonstrate how these assumptions contrast with the leading principles accepted in the past. Third, I will suggest some elements that an alternative discourse and practice of assessment program for Latin America should take into account to overcome the mistakes indicated.

I. The Global Educational Agenda for Developing Countries

Two main conceptual frameworks about educational reform in the developing countries emerged in the international discussions of the last decade. In this section I shall analyze these frameworks and demonstrate their connection to the new educational scenario created in Latin America and particularly in Argentina.

The beginning of the 1990s ushered in a completely new chapter in the history of educational policies for the whole of Latin America and other developing areas in the world. New uses and meanings for assessment emerged at the core of educational policymaking and educational reforms. To frame the discussion of the changes instituted in educational policies in developing settings since the 1990s, I shall borrow from Beatriz Avalos (2000) the idea that the wave of reforms in the Latin American education systems in the 1980s and 1990s gravitated between two different macro perspectives, evident in the explicit discourse that led those reforms. The educational goals defined within the two frameworks for the system of education were formulated in international meetings. Identification of both frameworks facilitates analysis of the potential for and the achievements of the various educational reforms in the promotion of inclusion or the maintenance of exclusion of the poor from high quality education in their societies. My analysis of the two macro perspectives framing educational reform for the developing countries of Latin America, and particularly of Argentina in the last decade, will demonstrate the contradictions and tensions between discourse and action.

The first perspective refers to what Avalos (2000) called the Jomtien-Dakar approach, which is aimed primarily at excluded populations and at the poorer countries in the world. It derives from the worldwide conference "Education for All: Meeting Basic Learning Needs" that took place in 1990 in Jomtien, Thailand (Inter-Agency Commission, 1990) and the international meeting held 10 years later in Dakar, Senegal (The Dakar Framework for Action, 2000). Both meetings were sponsored by a vast number of organizations, including lending banks and donors, and United Nations' agencies, such as UNICEF.

The second macro perspective, identified by Avalos (2000) as the "Economic Development and Information/Communication Society" approach, set the educational policies of most countries in the world, including the poorest ones. The regional seminar organized by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) and by the Oficina Regional de América Latina y el Caribe (OREALC)¹ in Santiago de Chile in 1991 entitled "Education and Knowledge: Axis for the Productive Transformation with Equity" exemplifies this approach very well (ECLAC, 1992).

A. The Jomtien-Dakar Heritage: How to Adjust Education to the Minorities' Needs

From an educational point of view, the Jomtien-Dakar approach pushed towards encouraging access of the poor population to schools and aimed at guaranteeing its retention over time until basic educational necessities were fulfilled. This goal encompassed the education of both children and adults (Inter-Agency Commission, 1990). Policies derived from this goal were adopted in many developing countries, including the Latin American region. The resultant structural reforms of educational systems enlarged the number of years of compulsory basic education and focused on the improvement of teaching and learning through implementation of a more relevant curriculum and more efficient instructional strategies. These policies also translated into actions aimed directly at balancing the consequences of the population's social, cultural and economic diversity (Avalos, 2000).

In 2000 the Dakar meeting critically reviewed the achievement of goals set in Jomtien ten years before. The review reaffirmed commitment to the "expanded vision" for education stated at Jomtien, but it acknowledged that fundamental goals, such as access to basic education for children and adults, had not yet been realized considering that 113 million children and 880 million illiterate adults still remained outside the educational systems. It also declared that unfair social structures, poverty, wars and extra-school situations were constraining the beneficial effects of the best-intentioned educational reforms in Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and Latin America. In these regions the exclusion from formal education of girls and of rural and urban poor indigenous populations was and still remains crucial (Avalos, 2000; The Dakar Framework for Action, 2000).

To deal with these problems, the delegates of the Dakar meeting in their concluding resolutions recommended that improvement of educational planning be integrated into a wider policy framework which should target poverty reduction and sustainable development. The delegates appealed to the international community to support national efforts for continued improvement of educational quality by increasing monetary aid from lending

agencies to poor countries. However, critical voices anticipated that any improvement would have to resolve the contradictions embedded in the implementation of measures proposed by the international agencies. For example, measures like increasing instruction time, provision of school textbooks, in-service teacher training, school feeding programs, compensatory strategies for poor and disadvantaged students, were often contradictory with measures like increasing class size, promoting multiple shifts for educators and freezing teachers' salaries, etc. The second package of measures undermined and even cancelled out the positive impact of the previous one.

B. The ECLAC Heritage: How to Adjust Education to Economic Growth
As Avalos puts it:

The economic development and information/communication society policy approach is part of the logic that moves countries concerned with the possessing of a workforce that will increase their competitiveness in world markets, and that recognizes that education is a key element in a world where work structures are changing dramatically as a result of information technology and networks. (Avalos, 2000).

The regional seminar organized by the ECLAC in Santiago de Chile in 1991 was one of the first steps in the orientation of the Latin American educational agenda of the 1990s. Indeed, this seminar became a symbol of this period. This seminar established the priorities for the educational policies of the region, pointing at the development and economic growth for that decade. "Authentic competitiveness" and "equity" were the objectives of the decade, negotiated and agreed upon by all the participating governments. However, as I will show, while "equity" (social goal) was the main concern in Jomtiem-Dakar, in practice ECLAC emphasized the achievement of "authentic competitiveness," an economic goal beyond the accomplishment of the social goal. In order to achieve these goals, education, training human resources, and scientific and technological development were located at the very core of educational discourse and consequent policies (Fajnzyblber, 1992, p. 7).

In his diagnostic of the Latin American situation for the period 1960-1980, Fernando Fajnzyblber (1992, pp. 7-19), the director of ECLAC at that time:

- a) recognized the past efforts of all the countries of the region to broaden the schooling enrollment rates of all educational levels;
- b) highlighted that those efforts were not sufficient, in view of the fact that demand for education had increased even more;
- c) held that educational supply was unbalanced in terms of levels of education: While elementary and higher education had been extended considerably to provide access to new sectors and had been very dynamic in adapting to new populations, secondary education remained almost unchanged;
- d) worried about the lack of links between education and work, considering the low impact of education on strengthening science, development and technological innovation;
- e) stressed the poor contribution of the educational investment on the economic production;
- f) acknowledged that the political strategy that the region had set two decades before -- to integrate the educational outputs to the production world -- had failed; and
- g) announced that, at that time, Latin America was at the end of a whole economic, political and educational cycle in which the sources of dynamism, especially financial, had dried up.

1. Education, Competitiveness and the Market

As a consequence of the above diagnosis, in the course of the 1990s, Latin American educational reforms commenced with well intentioned policies aimed at favoring the socially marginalized population: allocation of resources for learning for the poor, extension of obligatory education and actions directed to the most vulnerable children. But over time, these reforms became trapped in schemes framed in the logic of the neoliberal economic competitiveness.

The financial incentives for teachers, the school vouchers and the school choice policies implemented in Chile clearly exemplify these trends. In an empirical study about the vouchers' system in Chile, Martin Carnoy (2000) finds that the increasing choice and competition do little or nothing to improve overall student achievement. Dan Goldhaber (2000) responds to these findings, declaring that there is still not enough empirical evidence to support either side of the debate. Finally, Stephen Gorard, John Fitz and Chris Taylor (2001), basing their conclusions upon what they call the largest study of school choice in publicly funded schools in England and Wales, affirm that socio-economic stratification of students declined after the introduction of choice policies.

Linking the results of students' achievement with financial rewards for schools and individual teachers is another example of the repertory of policies that serve the market rationale and that started to be applied in this region. In Chile monetary incentives are provided to good performing schools (Avalos, 2000) in a system similar to those in several U.S.A. states (Duke, Ed. 1995). Dissemination of the Chilean system by lending agencies has resulted in similar proposals for other countries, such as Bolivia (Avalos, 2000). All these proposals illustrate the neoliberal "solution" to highlight the conditions of the often underpaid teacher workforce. All these measures have in common the fact that they apply the scheme of economic competitiveness to the educational system.

C. The Presence of the World Bank in Support of the Reform

The neoliberal educational reforms in the entire Latin America region have been intrinsically linked to pressure exerted by some international banks, particularly the World Bank, which provided the material resources, the discourse and the conditions for the reform. The conditions that these organisms set can be easily aligned with a complete political recipe consistent with neoliberal principles of marketization of educational practices and discourse. Adriana Puiggrós, at that time professor at the University of Buenos Aires and a representative of the Confederation of Educational Workers of the Argentine Republic [CTERA, in the original] remarked at the Fifth Ibero-American Summit, held in Argentina in 1995 and dedicated to the theme "Education and Development":

The region's governments are taking their cue from the World Bank, which has been in the vanguard in defining social policy in the neoliberal era. The Bank recommends drastically reducing public investment in education through privatizing and breaking up school systems, and nullifying teachers' contracts. Such a restructuring of the educational system is part of a larger effort to wipe out the remnants of the region's so-called "paternalistic" states. (Puiggrós, 1996).

The rationale associated with this lens for judging the quality of the educational services provided is consistent with the idea of measurement, more precisely economic measurement, rather than the concept of evaluation:

The Bank's educational policy has an exclusively economic logic. It is based on a short-term cost-benefit analysis. As a researcher from the Fundación Mediterránea, a think tank affiliated with Argentina's Minister of Economics Domingo Cavallo [Minister during Menem's administration], put it recently: "What we try to measure is how well the training provided by each school fits the needs of production and the labor market." [...] The World Bank advocates reducing all investment in education that does not supply direct income or cannot be recouped right away. Only educational spending that is immediately profitable is considered justifiable. Disciplines like anthropology and cultural studies, for example, are considered irrelevant. (Puiggrós, 1996).

While essentially shifting the definition of good education to vocational preparation, this rationale clearly has altered the existent liberal premises which used to support the connections between investment in public education and development:

[T]he logic of economic discourse is different from the logic of pedagogic discourse. To educate, you have to be looking toward the future and believe in a better world. Better worlds, however, aren't profitable in the short term. The World Bank's current educational policy is the reverse of the traditional liberal thinking that had characterized U.S. educational policy with respect to Latin America since the end of the Second World War. Liberalism and "development theory" encouraged investment in public education so that Latin America's citizens would become productive participants in the institutions of capitalism. U.S. policymakers viewed public education in Latin America as a key component of the social peace which was needed to guarantee the security of U.S. investments in the region. Today, the bottom line is most important. The Bank's educational policy is part and parcel of a larger neoliberal economic program whose overarching goal is to reduce state spending so that governments are able to continue making payments on their foreign debt. (Puiggrós, 1996).

The World Bank's explicit recipe for Latin America in the 1990s focused on primary instruction (Schiefelbein, Valenzuela & Wolff, 1994). To do so, the Bank did not recommend increasing public investment in the elementary schools; rather, it proposed diverting funds that used to go toward financing high schools, colleges and universities in order to expand the access to primary schooling.

But that recipe represents a short-term and partial solution. It is not possible to improve the quality of elementary education unless the quality of teachers' education is also seriously addressed. And this necessarily requires

more investment in teachers' colleges and universities (where educators are trained). On the contrary, far from recognizing the need for more and better trained teachers, the Bank proposed cutting back both the number of primary school teachers and the number of government-funded teacher-training and education programs.

Those who accept as a given the social injustice of failing to educate all citizens also accept that universal access to elementary instruction will only be accomplished if more resources can support the education of rural, indigenous and poor urban children, as well as illiterate adults. Such programs, however, would raise the average cost per student, which contradicts the economic rationale of the structural adjustment. As a consequence, none of these programs was accorded priority status by the World Bank.

II. The Argentine Experience: A Paradigmatic Case for Analysis of the Contradictions of the National Assessment Programs

In this section, I shall endeavor to present a balanced critique of recent Argentine educational reform. I shall focus on the national policies for students' performance evaluation and the criticism that these policies have received locally. Additionally, I shall reveal the philosophical and ideological premises upon which this reform is based. In so doing I shall try to highlight the tensions between the explicit goals and the practical social and political effects of the reform.

A. The Educational Reform

Like most Latin American countries, Argentina has recently experienced structural changes in its education system, changes which have produced contradictory effects. These changes may be used to illustrate the new priorities of the decade for the whole subcontinent. The educational reform began in 1993 during the national administration of the then president Carlos Menem with the enactment of the Federal Education Act (Act No. 24195). This Act introduced significant and structural changes in the educational system (MCyE, 1994 a. & b.), which affected the contents and the organization of the curriculum and of teachers' education, the duration of compulsory education, and the responsible agents of the educational service. Among all these changes, I am particularly interested in focusing on the following ones.

1) Increase of Obligatory Instruction. As a consequence of the reform, compulsory education now includes 10 years: from pre-school up to the last grade of General Basic Education (grade 9). Before the reform, there were only seven years of compulsory instruction. The increase in the number of years of obligatory instruction can be seen as a progressive measure, as it tends to promote that more children receive greater benefit from education.

2) Decentralization of the Administration of the System. Unlike the Anglo-American tradition, education in Latin America, following the continental European model, had a long history of centralization and control exercised by the national state. In 1992, the Argentine educational reform completed a middle-term process of transferring the responsibility for managing education from the National State to the provinces and the autonomous City of Buenos Aires. This process had been initiated in 1978 during the last military dictatorship. As a result, the system is now decentralized in terms of administration, financing and pedagogic planning. Support and management of schools and the curriculum design (except for universities) constitute now a role of each of the 23 provinces and the autonomous City of Buenos Aires. In other words, the National Ministry of Education no longer directly manages the system. This policy opens the door to already existing and to new private agents to gain terrain in the administration of schools. Turning a critical eye upon the trend to decentralize the system, which characterized educational reform all over Latin America, Beatrice Avalos disclosed some hidden aspects of this process:

There is a distinction to be made between de-concentration and decentralization. De-concentration generally refers to the pragmatic purpose of a central state to devolve certain functions to local groups without ceasing to retain overall control [...]. De-centralization, on the other hand, today has strong ideological underpinnings related to the public/private issue of control. While the de-concentration model may involve partnerships between central government and local school government as in the case of Nicaragua [...], decentralization in its more ideological form, as in Chile for example, is justified on the basis of greater school efficiency based on the shrinking of the State's involvement; it is seen as a first step towards privatization of schools. (Avalos, 2000).

3) Curriculum Update. Before the reform, there was social consensus about the obsolescence of the Argentine curriculum in relation to the current social, economical and technological demands. Therefore, the reform encouraged the various social sectors to engage in serious discussion of the revision of what must be taught and how it must be taught at each level of instruction. As a result of this revision, new Common Basic

Contents (called CBC) for all the compulsory instruction were designed in 1994. This completely changed not only the contents and their organization but also the pedagogic approaches through which the teaching process would be carried out. The curriculum reform was inspired primarily by a similar reform of the Spanish educational system. One fundamental pedagogic change was to recognize that there are three types of contents to be taught and learned: concepts, procedures and attitudes (Coll, Pozo, Saravia & Valls, 1992). This change has been at the forefront of the national debate on curriculum issues. Despite the controversy, these new CBC are valid for the whole country, but each province as well as the Municipality of the City of Buenos Aires must plan its own curriculum.

4) Changes in the System and Policies of Teachers' Education. In 1994 a Teachers' Training Federal Network coordinated by the National Ministry was created so that teachers' knowledge, skills and practices could be updated according to the new CBC. This system includes in-service and off-service teachers' education. However, the reform of the teaching profession is still incomplete. Deep changes in teachers' pre-service education, as well as in professional career and work conditions are still demanded not only by teachers but also by the whole society. It is a pending task for the current administration.

5) Evaluation of Education. Within this wave of regional educational reforms, the Argentine and Latin American administrations started to give high priority to national assessment programs. In practical terms, this priority materialized in the design and implementation of a policy of testing the academic achievement of students. In Argentina, the National System for Quality Evaluation [SINEC] was created in 1993 to implement a policy consisting of annual standardized tests of students' achievement learning (mainly based on objective tests) in the main disciplines of the curriculum at the elementary and high schools (Tulic, 1996).

6) New Responsibilities for the National Ministry of Education. As a consequence of the administrative and financial decentralization, the Argentine National Ministry of Education was assigned new roles, such as carrying on the national program of evaluation of students' performance (which will be explained below) and the support of the so-called teachers' training net, which deals with teachers' education.

B. Objections to the Reform and to the National Evaluation Programs

This reform cannot be separated from the public criticism it received. The analysis of this criticism reveals why the reform was not popular among educators and different sectors of the Argentine educational community. It can also help in explaining why the reform was unsuccessful in building the necessary social legitimacy for the educational policies to be effective. Most of these objections circulated orally within the society and others were systematized and documented (Feldfeber, 2000; Hillert, 1999). This section first reviews general criticism of the educational reform, then focuses upon specific objections leveled at the national testing program.

Overall, the critics objected that the reform did not promote a more democratic educational system. They stated that the changes superficially seemed to give more decision-making power to the provinces but otherwise they resulted in a greater concentration of power at the national level. Critics argued that while national authorities, through the decentralization process, rid themselves of the difficult responsibility of funding the education of the whole country, they retained important decision-making power and control on what to teach and how to do it. Indeed, the National Ministry has kept a high degree of control over the rest of the provinces through self-assignment of new functions: carrying out the annual national evaluation, monitoring teachers' training, and designing the CBC for the whole country. Paradoxically, although the nation stopped directly financing public education, it still continues its surveillance of the system.

Further, the critics added that the transfer of responsibility to the provinces for financing their own instruction, without the intervention of the national government at all, would sooner or later increase the still existing differences in the quality of the educational supply. Since a very important percentage of the education budget is allocated for teachers' salaries, the critics also highlighted the fact that this new financing policy did not solve the central endemic problem of deficient labor conditions for teachers. It actually delegated this problem to the provincial governments.

The Argentine national testing program proved to be contentious from the very beginning. It encountered resistance from different sectors of the educational community and its social legitimacy was under question (Hillert, 1999). The transfer of the economics rationale into the educational agenda and, as a consequence, the definition of the term "quality of education" as a synonym for "efficiency" and "efficacy" of the system, was particularly objectionable. According to their critics, this policy assessed investment in education rather than the quality of the teaching-learning process (Diker & Feeney, 1998). This, in turn, denied official support to certain kinds of social projects whose objectives were to fulfill the educational needs of the poorest groups.

A second criticism targeted the application of uniform criteria and instruments designed for large-scale evaluation policy to measure a very diverse reality. As a consequence -- it was argued -- certain styles of learning and teaching which did not fit the expected uniformity were not considered valid (Diker, 1993). Furthermore, some experts maintained that standardized tests cannot measure appropriately what they are supposed to measure, especially within disciplinary domains which involve complex and open knowledge such as the Arts, the Humanities and the Social Sciences (Litwin, 1998).

A third objection pointed to the external, compulsory and final character of the national assessment program. As external appraisal, the national program was designed and interpreted outside the classroom and the schools, excluding the participation of the main actors of school life. Because of the fact that it was compulsory for both students and institutions, the critics associated the national appraisal policy with control rather than improvement. Further, as final evaluations, this centralized assessment program measured outcomes but not processes, making it difficult for educators to benefit from the feedback of the results (Hillert, 1999).

This, in turn, gave rise to a fourth argument against the national policies for assessing the quality of education: the political uses of the evaluation results to punish and control teachers' and administrators' work. This argument held that the result of these policies had been used to justify the introduction of reforms in teachers' professional careers, reforms based on this new economic rationality and the consequent cutback in educational budgets. Accordingly, the most important teachers' unions argued that it was unfair to consider this kind of evaluation as an indicator of teaching efficiency, without improving their still poor labor conditions (insufficient salaries, lack of materials, low public image of teachers, overly long labor shifts, etc.) (Diker & Feeney, 1998).

Finally, another criticism pointed to the perverse effects that this evaluation system could create inside the system. The promotion of individualistic competition among students, schools and the provinces, because of the scarce rewards associated with the results in the evaluation (Bianchetti, 1994), could lead to fragmentation of the entire educational system. In sum, although the federal assessment program (FAP) has been carried on in Argentina since 1993, its social legitimacy and its potential for improving the instructional system have been under question.

C. Premises and Assumptions Supporting the Reform

The hegemonic project for Argentine education in the 1990s gave rise to evaluation policies grounded on new philosophical, political, economic and social bases. These bases were consistent with the neoliberal educational project. In the following lines, I will outline some of these assumptions, focusing on the effects that each of them had on the whole pedagogical discourse. Particularly, following the hypothesis of some local authors, I will highlight how I see that these premises affected the public's view of education, as well as the relationships among the educational actors.

1. New Assigned Roles for the National State: The Emergence of the So-Called "Evaluator State"

In the past, in Latin America, mega-national-states had responsibility for both the educational supply and its control. The large size of the national education ministries and other public bureaucracies can be seen as evidence of this situation. This state model gave signs of being inefficient and very expensive to be supported, especially in view of scarcity of resources and management difficulties. As a result, policies of financial and administrative decentralization and progressive privatization of education assigned the responsibility for the quality of the offered services and products to smaller units (provincial and municipal states, NGO's and private entrepreneurs). In this new model, national ministries of education did not disappear. On the contrary they have kept control of the educational results (through centrally-mandated assessment programs), without directly intervening in the model's supply (Follari, 1994). This way of functioning may be very familiar to the North American establishment since education there has always been a decentralized enterprise. However, the Latin American educational system, since its origin, was constructed following the continental European tradition of national state-centralism in which one of the reasons for the direct intervention of the national state in educational affairs was to balance social differences (Gvirtz & Palamidessi, 1999, pp. 85-86). As a consequence, within this new scenario, national evaluation policies are often seen by the civil society -- educators, parents and students -- as an external and foreign control over schools' activities. The so called "evaluator state" controls what other administrative units do, but without providing direct technical, financial and administrative resources to the units to enable them to fulfill their charges. As I will show later, the distribution of these resources becomes dependent on the evaluation results. Under this rationale, educators, schools and provinces, on a wider scale, are usually charged with the responsibility for the education failures. But, paradoxically, nobody can hold the national state accountable because of this new distribution of roles. This is a very clear source of conflict and discomfort when this model is applied.

2. Introduction of Elements from the Marketplace to Education

This new management model is built upon two conceptual elements: (i) the premise that individuals freely

compete for education from equivalent starting points and conditions; (ii) the idea that education (even a public one) is a commodity to be bought and sold according to the free play between supply (the education offered by schools) and demand (students' families). The publicity given to yearly national evaluation results, which adopts the form of a school ranking, provides a new type of advertised information which modifies the traditional relationship between parents and schools. The perspective which considers individuals as free rational decision-makers implies that students' families decide about their children's education and exercise pressure upon teachers' work. This logic places parents in the role of clients or consumers, rather than in the role of individuals affected by social and economic circumstances or in the role of conscious and critical citizens (Diker & Feeney, 1998, p. 62). However, as the composition of the population in Latin American societies is not homogeneous, the described role is played only by a small segment of middle and upper class parents who have the possibility of choosing. Beneath this minority lies the vast majority of families that do not enjoy the same advantageous social and cultural conditions which would enable them to win the rewards of this new game. In addition, these poor sectors have been growing in the last decades, due to economic crisis, recessions and policies that did not favor them. Historically, the role of the old centralized national state had been to offset differences between the poor and the rich population by providing a free, public and good quality education for all. As the decentralized model does not create new mechanisms for such compensation, the differences will persist, even broaden, and will finally culminate in two separate educational experiences for the poor and the rich people.

3. Reduction of Public Investment in Social Programs

The forms of public educational financing are shifting in the whole region due to economic recession, crisis, growth of foreign debt and fiscal deficit. As a consequence of the application of neoliberal policies, certain areas of the educational budget are reduced. With this rationalization, some knowledge domains in the curriculum, some educational activities and some institutions face the risk of disappearing. They are considered luxurious, despite the fact that they were supported in the past. For that reason, rational arguments to legitimize these cutbacks are created. In addition, the old non-conditional and fixed payments (especially for salaries) are now paid off only under certain conditions. For instance, these include new forms of payment, such as payment for performance, merit incentives, etc. (Duke, Ed. 1995). Within these new rules, evaluation becomes attached to payment mechanisms. This, in turn, overwhelms education workers (they are required to achieve more but they receive less) and creates a scenario in which everybody compares his/her own performance with that of others and competes destructively to obtain the scarce material rewards. It is easy to deduce that these are not the best conditions for improving educational practices.

4. Emergence of a New Profile of International Agencies to Support the Model

While in previous periods, educational reforms were encouraged by international organizations, especially devoted to the promotion of science, culture and education (such as the ones created by the United Nations, e.g. UNESCO), in the 1990s a new form of aid to developing countries emerged. Now, credit institutions and international banks, such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank, support the new model by setting intermediate and even direct objectives for social reforms (Narodowski, 1996). It is easy to notice that the perspective of these agencies is quite different from the ones which supported educational policies in the past. With respect to evaluation policies, these banks fix an agenda of priorities and terms. The possibilities to negotiate these conditions are generally low for local administrations. Nevertheless, local administrators take these loans even if they increase the foreign debt for developing countries. The acceptance of these credits and the interests they generate contradict the austerity policy for social program described in the previous section. The asymmetrical position for the developing countries in the context of the entire world places them in a situation of dependency in which their governments do not have much room to re-negotiate these rules (Coraggio, 1997). The globalization and regionalization of the economy and the trends towards internationalization of the cultural industry, including education, favor the above described situation. As I see it, there are two obscure points here. The first one has to do with the economic dependency that these external credits generate for the debtor countries. The other involves a political problem: the lack of sovereignty and power of self determination and self-deliberation attached to these loans.

5. Experts' Knowledge vs. Educators' Knowledge

This is another controversial point in the educational reforms based on a neoliberal rationale. On the one hand, evaluation programs require the professional experience and the specialized and technical knowledge of university professors, researchers and technicians for setting methodological and theoretical aspects of those programs. This is, without doubt, an interesting and necessary way of linking academic thought with policy-making. But, on the other hand, at least in the Argentine experience, the active contribution of teachers and principals' perspectives in the elaboration of these evaluation programs has been insufficient and sometimes neglected. The value of this contribution is strategic in two different ways. First, educators' knowledge about the possibilities and limits of teaching and learning, constructed everyday through their experiences inside the classrooms and schools, can add substantive value to educational evaluation programs. Second, their inclusion

in the design and application of these kinds of programs is a crucial element in order to motivate them to take profit from the evaluation's results as well as to create political legitimacy for these evaluation policies. On the other hand, the lack of this legitimacy is one of the main sources of inefficacy in the application of these programs (Hillert, 1999).

III. Challenges: Prospective Alternative Orientations of the Program Evaluation

In this section, considering what has been criticized about the recent trends in the evaluation field in Latin America, I will summarize and explain the most important aspects that, in my opinion, a new discourse about evaluation should address in order to overcome the main failures of the now hegemonic discourse.

From the analysis of recent Argentine experience it can be argued that the panorama of the educational reform described above is complex and somehow contradictory, as one local scholar suggests (Hillert, 1999, p. 97). On the one hand, these reforms have been rejected by vast and crucial sectors of the local educational community, whose support should have been acquired in order to facilitate the deep changes that the reform seemed to pursue. On the other hand, it is important to recognize that these reforms have served as a starting point to introduce urgent and important changes in order to achieve the more progressive goals set by ECLAC at the beginning of the decade. These goals include transparent and participatory assessment programs possessing the potential of offering accountability for public educational policies and systematic feedback to the educational system. But it is evident that the national assessment program installed in Argentina during Menem's administration is still very distant from these goals.

In addition, there is even more distance between the achievements of the described Argentine reform and the most important goals set in the Jomtiem-Dakar framework. Now the challenge for educational leaders and administrators is to close this gap. My point is that to face this challenge, the two described frameworks must be considered as complementary targets: ECLAC for economic productivity and competitiveness and Jomtiem-Dakar for equity and distribution. The past mistakes denounced by the critics and the light shed by the recent experiences of the authentic assessment movement must also be taken into account.

By way of conclusion, I propose that the following political, pedagogical and technical elements be considered as lines of action to organize a prospective educational long-term and large-scale assessment program for developing countries facing this challenge.

An assessment program should:

- 1) Balance educational, administrative, and financial decentralization policies (which de-concentrate power and promote responsible autonomy in smaller units) with active federal policies of offsetting differences among provinces, institutions and individuals, in order to avoid fragmentation of the educational system and to create fairer conditions of departure for evaluations.
- 2) Recruit educators and administrators to work together with external specialists (professional evaluators, curriculum domain-experts, etc.) to discuss and set standards, and to design, pilot, apply and grade evaluations.
- 3) Improve labor conditions for the teachers' workforce and for the teaching profession to make said conditions consistent with a more demanding teaching career, regulated partially on the basis of information derived from assessment programs. The same can be applicable to the administrators' profession and career.
- 4) Avoid attaching evaluation results to mechanisms of material punishment or symbolic rewards in order to encourage authentic pedagogical uses of evaluations, rather than economic and discipline-based uses which promote destructive individual competitions.
- 5) Increase the possibilities of evaluation resources, going beyond objective tests. Promote the use of genuine methods, instruments and procedures of assessment designed by teachers together with specialists; such means of assessment, which are commonly used in the classroom (Paterson, n/d), should replace sophisticated evaluation techniques created only by experts who often have had no exposure to every-day classroom practice. For example, these programs should encourage the inclusion of all kinds of self evaluations, portfolios, log books, reflective journals, anecdotal records and observations (Cairney, 1995) to record the accomplishment of educational tasks.
- 6) Promote assessments in meaningful and natural teaching and learning settings so that students and

teachers can feel more connected, motivated, and involved, and they can act as collaboratively as they usually do in their classroom and institution every day (Stavis Levine, 1992).

7) Highlight the importance of the reporting and feedback processes especially for the inner school community. The evaluation should further include those processes from the very beginning of the evaluation enterprise and should use those processes as a space and opportunity to motivate stakeholders in the evaluation, and to invite them to participate instead of just keeping them informed.

8) Make the borders between qualitative social and pedagogical research and evaluation more permeable. Evaluators should know that, although social research and evaluation enterprise are guided by different purposes, the logic of the social action that takes place in the schools remains the same whether it is observed by a researcher or judged by an external evaluator. So, if one of the ends of education evaluation is a more profound understanding of what is going on in the schools in order to orient further policies, educators -- in the role of evaluators -- together with external evaluators should review the already existent research and include its findings as a rich source of secondary information (Peterson n/d). They also may find in the research procedures some complementary resources with respect to classroom evaluations.

My conclusion is that all these elements need to be articulated within a renovated political and pedagogic discourse about evaluation. Such discourse would transform large-scale educational evaluation into a real strategy for participatory change within the context of Latin American education and would resolve the contradictions debasing the recent evaluation experience.

Notes

1Both the ECLAC and the OREALC (in English, the Regional Office for Education in Latin America and the Caribbean) are organizations supported by the United Nations.

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