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Executive Summary

The purpose of this document is to highlight the importance of standardized tests as a relevant tool to measure the cognitive abilities of students. On the other hand, it is proposed to analyze the success of two pedagogical interventions by specialists of the World Bank and their implications to raise the level of achievement in national standardized tests.

In the framework of the Permanent Seminar on the Evaluation of Educational Policy and Practices, co-organized by CLEAR for Latin America and the Interdisciplinary Program on Educational Policies and Practices (PIPE), Dr. Rafael de Hoyos gave the master conference entitled "Scope and Challenges of the educational evaluation".

Dr. Rafael de Hoyos, senior economist at the Education Unit for Latin America and the Caribbean of the World Bank, stressed that standardized tests are specifically designed to measure cognitive abilities and use in certain areas of knowledge. Thus, standardized tests are a source of valuable information about a given educational system and can serve to align the interests of the main actors involved in it.

Specifically, De Hoyos referred to two interventions aimed at improving the results of national standardized tests, which were the responsibility of the World Bank: "The Specific Attention Program

Executive Achievement", in the state of Colima and the "La Rioja evaluates to improve" Program, carried out in the Argentine province of La Rioja.

In conclusion, the usefulness and effectiveness of pedagogical interventions to raise the results in national tests, including in schools with very low scores, was demonstrated. This type of intervention consists of a diagnosis and minimal pedagogical support. Their main characteristic is that they align the objectives of the members of the school communities with a shared responsibility approach.

Introduction

There is evidence that education is an important driver of economic growth. There is also consensus that each additional year of education is associated with an approximate increase of 13% in GDP per capita in different countries (Thomas & Burnett, 2013). Thus, providing more education, knowledge and skills to individuals in a country, that is, accumulating human capital, increases productivity and employability of the population, which in turn increases the overall income and development of a country.

However, years of schooling in by themselves are not a sufficient condition for the formation of human capital, productivity and growth. Rather, what is triggered is a positive relationship between education and economic growth by the acquisition of cognitive skills, which can be measured with standardized tests (Hanushek, 2009)

Standardized tests can be powerful tools to raise the quality of the system, as long as they have statistical representation or are census. These assessments provide reliable information about the levels of knowledge in certain areas and function as a source of valuable information about a given educational system. (Woessmann, 2007)

These can also serve to align the incentives of all the actors involved in the teaching process, which allows designing improvement strategies to address the identified challenges and set clear goals. (Boudett, City, & Murnane, 2005)

Although this type of tests may be limited, since they focus on measuring cognitive abilities and are not designed to measure other dimensions, such as civic, ethical, emotional, among others. Standardized tests can be used to improve the quality of educational services. Therefore, the debate should not revolve around the existence or not of a standardized test, but rather in the characteristics that this test must have, the protocols of implementation and, above all, the uses that we want to give to the results to improve the quality of services.

Argument

Mexico has taken important steps in the use of standardized tests as a mechanism of monitoring compliance with the main goals of the education system. The best example of these is the National Assessment of Academic Achievement in Schools, (ENLACE), which began its application nationwide in 2006 until the 2013-2014 school year. This test was, since its creation, the standard of educational performance in Mexico and the evolution of it. (Campos Vázquez & Urbina Romero, 2011).

As of the 2014-2015 school year, the National Plan for the Evaluation of Apprenticeships (PLANEA) has replaced ENLACE as the standardized test to measure the level of learning in basic and upper secondary education. This test, whose operation is under the responsibility of the National Institute for the Evaluation of Education (INEE), in coordination with the Ministry of Public Education (SEP).

In his keynote speech, Dr. Rafael de Hoyos, argued that improving the level of learning in a standardized test as PLANEA requires a shared responsibility approach, characterized by a supportive and collaborative environment among education authorities, parents and teachers. This is contrasted with a punitive approach, based on sanctions and public denunciation of low results, which is predominant in countries with higher levels of economic development, such as the Netherlands or the United States. (De Hoyos, García-Moreno, & Patrinos, 2015)

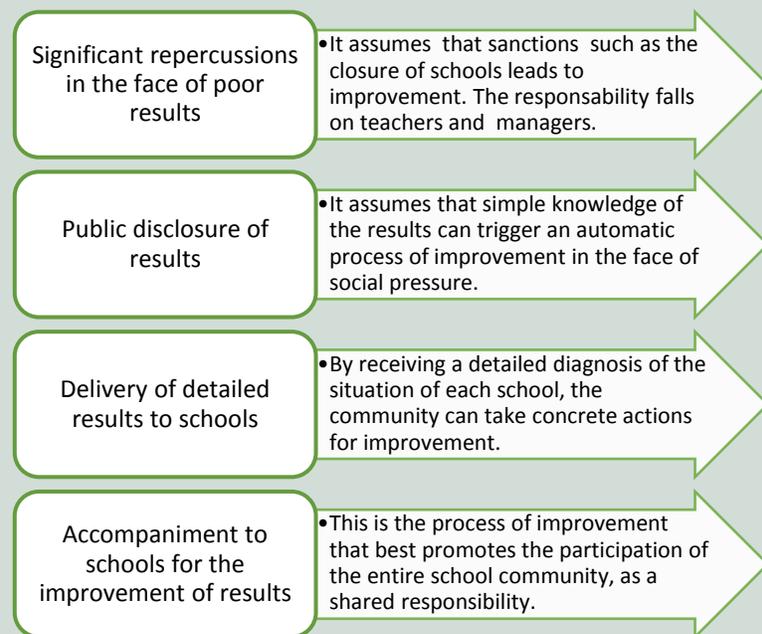
In his lecture he referred to a particular case of pedagogical intervention in the state of Colima, called "Program of Specific Attention for the Improvement of Educational Achievement" (PAE). In 2009, the entity had average scores below the national average in the ENLACE test. The program served 108 public elementary schools that had obtained the lowest learning outcomes in the state.

Each of the participating schools had pedagogical advisers, who developed a diagnosis of the results by group and an accompaniment to assess the degree of improvement. After 10 months of pedagogical intervention, the students increased their results by 0.12 standard deviations, in a standardized test with the same format as ENLACE.

Another example of pedagogical intervention alluded to by Rafael de Hoyos during his lecture is the program "La Rioja Evalúa para Mejorar", carried out by the World Bank in the Argentine province of the same name, in 2013. This intervention attended approximately 9,600 students in 104 public elementary schools in La Rioja, which obtained the lowest results in the national standardized test for basic education, the National Evaluation Operative (ONE). In summary, the program followed a methodology with two treatment groups (which received a report of results and an accompaniment by pedagogical advisors) and a control group (without any intervention). At the end of the 2013-2014 school year, both treatment groups performed a second standardized test with the same format as the ONE, in which they reported an average increase of 0.32 standard deviations in their results.

The mentioned interventions suggest that when you want to increase the results of the national standardized tests, the evidence shows that simple improvement guidelines based on a specific diagnosis for each school, followed by a process of pedagogical accompaniment are effective to improve the levels of achievement, even in schools with the worst initial results. When students, teachers and parents know that students' grades are low, a self-assessment and analysis process is triggered. Even without the adoption of sanctions, information on school quality, in a supportive and collaborative environment, can significantly improve the results of students on standardized tests.

Figure 1. Types of actions to improve the results of educational evaluations.



Recommendations

In order for the results of the standardized tests to serve as the basis for improving learning, it might be advisable to take into account the following recommendations:

- ⇒ Consider the results standardized tests as a source of useful information for decision makers, but not as a goal in themselves.
- ⇒ Design a training strategy for teachers, principals and supervisors so that they can better understand the nature of the tests.
- ⇒ Promote the participation of teachers and the academic community in the design of educational policies, based on empirical evidence.
- ⇒ Have a database of easy access to the results of national standardized tests, so that they serve as an input for future quantitative studies.

¹ It is worth mentioning that the program was discontinued during the 2011-2012 school year.

- ⇒ Detach the results of the standardized tests of the teaching economic incentives, to discourage cheating and avoid distorting the objective of these.
- ⇒ Recognize the profound influence on school achievement that has non-cognitive aspects, such as motivation, curiosity and self-esteem of students.

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Suggested Quote

González Muñoz, Carlos Armando (2017), *Alcances y retos de la evaluación educativa* (policy brief), Programa Interdisciplinario sobre Política y Prácticas Educativas (PIPE), 2017.