Political uses of educational assessment systems:
The case of Argentina[1]

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Abstract

This article focuses on the political dimension of assessment systems, taking as its case study the Argentinean Assessment System of Education Quality (SINEC) from 1993 to the present. The author assumes that assessment systems are not just *policy-relevant* but also *political* instruments in the sense that, beyond their declared aims, they often pursue *non-declared* aims related to political endeavours that are interlinked with the control and steering of education systems. Based on this assumption, actions taken by the Argentinean Ministry of Education are analyzed related to the results from each assessment round, aiming to understand how the Ministry used its assessment system and what functions were effectively intended, irrespective of the declared intentions. The article shows how the uses and functions of the assessment were driven in different periods by diverse short-run political tensions and interests rather than by policy aims.

1. Educational assessment systems in the context of a new form of steering education

In the last decades there has been a worldwide expansion of programs, models, and policies which constitute a new form of steering education systems (e.g. Bellmann, 2006; Bellmann & Weiß, 2009; Benveniste, 2002; Berkemeyer, 2010; Carney, 2008; Espinoza & Popa, 2005). Designed at least partially by economists and supported by international organisations, these programs, models, and policies are described as a "larger ideological package which includes, but is not limited to, decentralization and privatization, choice and accountability, testing and assessment" (Carnoy & Rhoten, 2002, p. 2). Part of the novelty of this form of educational steering or governance consists in the combination of two processes which at first glance appear to be contradictory: on the one hand, the shifting of responsibility away from the centre to local governments or schools and, on the other hand, the central control of education quality

through standards and tests. In this context, assessment systems became the object of growing interest first in the United States and then in some European countries and later on, a fundamental of institutionalised accountability in the international education policy discourse – as international studies such as TIMSS, PIRLS and PISA suggest (see Ferrer, 2006; Tiana Ferrer, 1996).

Since the early 1990s, the assessment of education systems has taken a central place also in the education policy agendas of many Latin American countries. In the context of important reforms following the "change of paradigm" (Bellmann & Weiß, 2009) towards steering education systems as described above, Honduras, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Brazil, El Salvador, Mexico, Costa Rica, Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, and Nicaragua implemented some kind of national assessment system (Tiana Ferrer, 2000) (see table 1).[2] In 1993, also Argentina created the National Assessment System of Education Quality (*Sistema Nacional de Evaluación de la Calidad Educativa*, SINEC) under the National Ministry of Education.

Table 1:   Implementation of assessment systems by year and country

Year	Country
1990	Honduras
1991	Colombia
1992	Dominican Republic
1993	Argentina Brazil El Salvador
1994	Mexico
1995	Costa Rica Venezuela
1996	Bolivia Ecuador Paraguay Peru Uruguay
1998	Nicaragua

Source: Done by the author basing on Arancibia (1996) and Ferrer (2006).

Nevertheless, assessment systems in different countries show important disparities regarding their aims and design – as Benveniste (2000, 2002) exemplarily shows for Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay and Ferrer (2006) illustrates for nineteen Latin American countries.[3]

2. Research assumptions, questions and methodology

In spite of the centrality educational assessment systems gained in the last decades, little account exists about why they developed in certain ways in particular countries. With the exception of a relatively small number of studies (amongst others Benveniste, 2000, 2002; House, 1994; MacDonald, 1989; Weiss, 1998), the research literature has focused mainly on technical aspects of the assessment systems, treating them independently from the political environments in which they are embedded. Bearing this gap in mind, I focused on the political dimension of assessment systems for the case of Argentina in a research study conducted from 2001 to 2002 (Oelsner, 2002; Gvirtz, Larripa & Oelsner, 2006). In agreement with Benveniste (2000, 2002), House (1994), MacDonald (1989), and Weiss (1998), the study was based on the assumption that assessment systems are not just *policy-relevant* but also *political* instruments in the sense that, beyond their declared aims, they often pursue *non-declared* aims related to political endeavours that are interlinked with the control and steering of education systems. Following this assumption, the study analysed actions taken by the Argentinean Ministry of Education related to the results from each assessment round, aiming to understand how the Ministry used its assessment system and what functions were effectively intended, irrespective of the declared intentions. By doing so, the study did not examine the effects of the assessment and the related policies on, for instance, student achievement or teaching methodologies but it showed how the uses and functions of the assessment were driven in different periods by diverse short-run political tensions and interests rather than by policy aims.

This article resumes and updates the study from 2002. Its main focus lies on the 1990s (the foundational and strongest period of the Argentinean assessment system), but it also gives an overview of the development of assessment from 2000 to the present.

The sources used are mainly all the reports of results and didactic recommendations for teachers issued and distributed by the Ministry after the assessment, all the studies on the factors associated with the results also done by the Ministry but not distributed that were made available to the researcher, a document with assessment instruments for the last year of secondary school, and articles from the two largest newspapers edited in Argentina, Clarín and La Nación, disseminating the results provided by the Ministry from 1994 to the present. These sources represent virtually the complete range of concrete actions taken by the Ministry of Education after each assessment round and inform the analysis of the *de facto* intended uses of assessment. In addition, legislation (laws, decrees, and resolutions) produced during the respective period is considered in order to identify the Ministry's declared intentions regarding assessment. Three in-depth interviews with officers directly involved in the Argentinean assessment system serve as supplementary sources.[4] These provide key information supporting the analysis of the written documents. Table 2 offers an overview of the analysed

sources, specifying which were used in the original study finished in 2002 and which sources were considered in the updating process.

Table 2:   Overview of the analysed sources by period of analysis

Period 1994–2001	
Type of source	*Analysed quantity*
Reports of results	13
Methodological recommendations for teachers	22
Studies on the factors associated with the results	13
Document with assessment instruments	1
In-depth interviews with officers	3
Newspaper articles	27
Period 2002–2010	
Type of source	*Analysed quantity*
Reports of results	3
Methodological recommendations and reflections for teachers	11
Newspaper articles	4

This article uses the method of discourse analysis, as proposed by Foucault (1977). Accordingly, the analysis considered the discourse in the sources, trying to identify tendencies (regularities and ruptures), first without paying attention to the political circumstances. In compliance with Foucault, the aim of initially leaving aside considerations of the context is to prevent awareness of the prevalent political situation from influencing the analysis by causing the researcher to see only the political intentions he or she expects according to the context. For that reason, hypotheses about the political nature of the discursive tendencies that were identified by following this principle (the interpretation of these tendencies taking into account the political context) were formulated in a second step.

In case of sources related to the dissemination of results, criteria for the analysis were: the targeted audience (e.g. public opinion, provincial authorities, school authorities, and teachers), the kind of disseminated information and its aggregation level (e.g. student achievement at national, provincial, school, or student level, and contextual factors associated with achievement), and dissemination media (e.g. the press, printed reports, reports published on the Internet, and CD-ROMs). Sources related to the improvement of educational practice were analysed regarding mainly the defined problems, the hypothesised causes, and the proposed solutions, as well as the correlation of these latter solutions with the reformed curriculum.

The following pages briefly present the functions ascribed to assessment systems by the specialised literature. In line with the conceptual framework and following a

description of the context of emergence and main characteristics of the Argentinean assessment system, the main part of the article deals with the political, non-declared aims of the assessment system in the context of the education reform of the 1990s. The article subsequently outlines the Argentinean assessment policy from 2000 to the present. Finally, it offers a brief summary and some concluding remarks.

3.   Educational assessment: Just a policy tool?

Depending on its function the literature distinguishes between two types of evaluation: the *formative* and the *summative* type (Scheerens, 2001; Rossi, Freeman & Lipsey, 1999; Weiss, 1998; Lawton, 1996; Gipps & Murphy, 1994; Shadish, Cook & Leviton, 1991; Rowntree, 1977). Evaluation is *formative* when it is used to increase the knowledge about and improve the comprehension of educational processes; for example, identifying what students have or have not learned and where their difficulties rest. This kind of use is called *illuminative* (Rossi et al., 1999; Weiss, 1998; Tiana Ferrer, 1998; Shadish et al., 1991) or *diagnostic* (Lawton, 1996). When this diagnosis also serves as data for decision making processes, the use of evaluation is called *instrumental* (Rossi et al., 1999; Weiss, 1998; Tiana Ferrer, 1998; Shadish et al., 1991). Since this kind of evaluation or assessment does not generally have any direct consequences (like reward or punishment) on actors or institutions, it is also considered to be of *low-stakes* or *low-impact* (Ravela, 2001; Messick, 1999; Heubert & Hauser, 1999).

Evaluation is *summative* when it is used to certify courses, to select students, or as a tool of *accountability*. In this latter case, it produces results that allow to compare the performance of teachers, schools, or whole districts (Gipps & Murphy, 1994; Lawton, 1996), making them accountable for the results. This sort of evaluation or assessment is often of *high-stakes* or *high-impact* because it generally implies the application of positive or negative sanctions on actors or institutions (Ravela, 2001; Messick, 1999; Heubert & Hauser, 1999). Their advocates consider that both providing information to all actors in the educational systems and different actors and sectors holding responsible for their performance are a requisite for a more democratic education system as well as an incentive for performing better, more efficiently and efficaciously (e.g. Scheerens, 2001).

However, these attributes of evaluation are often considered as desirable but not always feasible or real. For example, some authors (House, 1993; Chelimsky, 1995) indicate that the instrumental use of results from assessment systems is often seriously limited and that accountability does not easily encourage improvement of school or pupils' achievement. Moreover, Scheerens (2001) claims that empirical evidence challenges the belief that assessment results are used honestly by politicians. Other authors (for instance, House, 1993, 1994; Weiss, 1998) even call assessment a *highly political activity*. For some, assessment systems often fulfil *covert purposes* beyond what is officially proclaimed. Some of these purposes can be those of legitimising and gaining

support for governmental plans or already implemented policy – for example, according to House (1993, 1994), by using the results in order to *persuade* the audience about the necessity of such plans or actions or, according to Weiss (1998), as a mechanism of *window dressing*, that is of providing legitimacy to a course of action which has already been decided. Other authors see assessment systems as one of the instruments of the new form of governing education systems, given that particularly in decentralised systems assessment allows authorities to control and steer the actions of subordinate levels (e.g. Benveniste, 2000; Carnoy & Rhoten, 2002; Gvirtz & Narodowski, 2000; Lundgren, 1992; Weiler, 1996). Lundgren (1992), for example, argues that decentralisation demands coordination and new sources of information. In his view, assessment is frequently seen as the instrument that can satisfy these demands, at the same time replacing old central mechanisms of governmental control. Thus, what at first looks like a change aimed at distributing decision power from the centre to the periphery, ends up being a reinforcement of the central steering system (ibid., p. 114).

The Argentinean assessment system is a case that lends support to these latter theoretical developments. The following sections present the context of the Argentinean assessment system's emergence and analyse how it was and is used by the central government.

4.   The education reform of the 1990s and the establishment of an assessment system

The 1990s in Argentina were characterised by a substantial reform of the State and privatisations affecting, amongst others, fiscal policies, health care, and the pension system. The education system also underwent a far-reaching reform. In this context, a program for assessing the quality of education was implemented for the first time. The reform was driven by two laws: the Transference Law of 1991 (N° 24.049) and the Federal Law of Education dating 1993 (N° 24.195). The former completed the process that had begun in 1978 of transferring the school government and financing from the national to the provincial state level.[5] The latter implied, first, a redefinition of the national and provincial responsibilities in educational matters, second, the redesign of the structure of the education system, and third, the formulation of new curricular contents. Henceforward, the National Ministry of Education was responsible for the technical-pedagogical orientation of the education system, the production of information, and the compensation for educational inequalities. In that way, the Ministry adopted a new form of steering the system: it went from a direct intervention in schools to acting as warrantor and articulator of educational policies (Tedesco & Tenti Fanfani, 2001).

As Tedesco and Tenti Fanfani (2001) explain, this accelerated process of structural transformation occurred in a political scenario marked by low levels of social confidence and predictability about the future course of policies. Accordingly, the initiated transformation generated conflicts among different sectors of society and administra-

tive bodies. Provincial ministries across the country, for instance, complained that they had diverse levels of capability and uneven amounts of financial resources to assume the new responsibilities. The teachers, in turn, resented their lack of participation in different instances of decision making processes related to the reform, a fact denounced by the main teachers' unions (Andrada, Narodowski & Nores, 2002).

In the context of this intensively promoted – and at the same time contested – large-scale education reform, in 1993 a national assessment system (abbreviated as SINEC) was launched as a strategic function of the National Ministry of Education. It depended first on the National Office of Assessment (*Dirección Nacional de Evaluación*), which was part of the Sub-Secretary of Assessment of Education Quality (*Subsecretaría de Evaluación de la Calidad Educativa*), itself a dependency of the Secretary of Educational Planning and Assessment (*Secretaría de Programación y Evaluación Educativa*). After national administration changes and ongoing structural reforms in the National Ministry of Education, the planning and coordination of the national assessment system moved to the National Office of Information and Assessment of Education Quality (*Dirección Nacional de Información y Evaluación de la Calidad Educativa,* DiNIECE), within the Sub-Secretary of Educational Planning (*Subsecretaría de Planeamiento Educativo*).

Since the beginning, the stated aim of the assessment system was "to provide valid and reliable information about how much pupils learn and what they learn during their path through the education system". This information was seen as fundamental "for decision making regarding the formulation of education policies for improving its quality" (Ministerio de Cultura y Educación, no date a, p. 2) as well as a "valuable element for improving institutional management, teaching practices, and pupils' learning" (see website DiNIECE).[6]

Between 1993 and 2000, the National Ministry of Education annually conducted National Assessments (*Operativos Nacionales de Evaluación*, ONE). Afterwards, assessments were conducted in 2003, 2005 and 2007. They consisted of knowledge tests and supplementary context questionnaires. The knowledge tests aimed at measuring the level of academic achievement of pupils. The supplementary questionnaires for pupils, teachers, and school principals gathered contextual information such as socio-economic background of pupils, teacher training, or material resources of schools. This information helps to explain the varying levels of academic achievement.

From 1993 to 1999, the scope of the assessment grew gradually. In 1993, the assessment consisted of a sample of courses of the last year of the primary school and the last year of the secondary school in the subjects Spanish and Maths. By 1999, it consisted of a sample of courses of the third, sixth, seventh and ninth year of the newly defined basic education as well as of a census of the last year of secondary school. In addition to Spanish and Maths, Social and Natural Sciences were tested. After that, the

assessment was reduced in scope of school years and subjects tested and it was once again only sample-based.

5. Political uses of the assessment system in the context of the 1990s education reform

Table 3 gives an overview of the years in which assessment was implemented and of the actions pursuant to each assessment round during the 1990s. These actions inform the analysis below.

Table 3:   Assessment and actions after each assessment round by year of implementation, 1993–1999

Assessment and actions after each assessment round	Year of implementation						
	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
Assessment	�	▪	▪	▪	▪	▪	▪
Dissemination of achievement results		▪	▪	▪	▪	▪	▪
Methodological recommendations for teachers		▪			▪	▪	▪
Mention in the press and rewards for the 'best' schools					▪	▪	▪
Training in the use of information for principals and school inspectors					▪	▪	
Studies about factors associated with results (without dissemination)			▪	▪	▪		▪
Distribution of assessment instruments					▪		

5.1 Preparing the grounds for a contested reform

During the first years of the education reform the national assessment system fulfilled at first glance primarily an illuminative or diagnostic function, as officially proclaimed. After each assessment, the Ministry of Education disseminated the achievement results of the pupils through general reports (Ministerio de Cultura y Educación, no date c, d), reports for schools and through the press to authorities in the education system, principals, teachers, and to the general public. The Ministry also issued and distributed among teachers the Methodological Recommendations for Teaching (*Recomendaciones metodológicas para la enseñanza*). These emphasised the main difficulties identified in the tests and gave teachers some recommendations as to how to overcome them (Ministerio de Cultura y Educación, 1994a, b, c).

However, the type of information and materials that the government chose to distribute (or likewise not to distribute) suggests that during these first years the national assessment system was not just used as a diagnostic tool but also as a strategic political tool *to prepare the grounds for the reform*. Given that the reform of the education system was much contested both by some provincial governments and by teachers, it seems reasonable to assume that the central government sought legitimisation and support. In this context, paraphrasing House (1994), the actions taken by the Ministry after assessment seem to have been directed to define "objectively" the critical situation of education (p. 20) and, in doing so, to contribute to 'window dressing' (Weiss, 1998), so that the initiated education reform appeared to be necessary.

In fact, when reporting results, the Ministry concentrated on the low level of pupils' achievement and accompanied these results with recommendations for teachers regarding didactic intervention. On the contrary, collected data about contextual factors explaining that this low level of achievement did not only depend on strictly educative factors but also on, for example, socioeconomic factors, was analysed but not disseminated.[7] As an interviewed officer reported, the omission of information about factors associated with pupils' achievement was an explicit ministerial directive at that time based on political motivations. Similarly, another interviewed officer explained:

> For a long time, the information provided by the supplementary questionnaires was not considered at all. … Why not? Some of us believed that these supplementary questionnaires provided some indicators, the dissemination of which was politically inconvenient.

Political scientists maintain that the definition of problems determines entirely the subsequent design of a policy: its aims, the options and the instruments to fulfil them (Tamayo Sáez, 1997).[8] In that sense, they assume a "conceptual interdependency between the problem and the solution" (Aguilar Villanueva, 1993, p. 59). Aware of that, politicians and officers at policy level usually define problems in a way that they can be solved. Moreover, they frequently have a policy in mind and in order to legitimise its implementation, they just need to construct the problem appropriately. From this perspective, omitting information about the contextual factors associated to achievement levels and emphasising didactic intervention would help to construct an image that the problem causing the low test results is just pedagogical – and not, for example, related to the insufficient infrastructure of schools or malnutrition of students. This could contribute to the legitimisation of the educational reform already under way as the solution – instead of, for instance, recommending socioeconomic policies.

5.2 Putting pressure on the system's actors to implement the reform

Even a few years after the education reform had begun many provincial and local authorities as well as school authorities and teachers remained sceptical. Some provinces refused to implement the reform altogether. Benveniste (2004) argues that:

> Evaluating is not a sufficient condition to get schools or regions aligned with the directives of the central state. The central government has to link its evaluative practices to schemes that lead education actors to accept and implement governmental directives (p. 465).

In line with Benveniste's hypothesis, against the background of the central government's decision to advance with the reform and given that in the federal system provincial administrations could reject an important part of national directives without fearing legal sanctions, the changes in the type and distribution of information in the late 1990s identified in this study suggest that *putting pressure on those actors* became an additional strategy. The Argentinean assessment system seemed now to put pressure on provincial administrations and schools not in the first place by applying sanctions that had a *direct* impact on them but by making them publicly *accountable* for their results. This could implicate *political* consequences, such as a decrease of legitimacy.

From 1997, governmental reporting of results was characterised as follows. First, the results presented were no longer only at the national level but the assessment reports included a ranking with the average results of each province, listing them in descending order.[9] At the same time, these results were compared with the results of the previous year, showing academic improvement or decline for each province over time. Second, the press disseminated not only national achievement levels but also the figures of those provinces with the lowest achievement levels provided by the Ministry.[10] Third, also through the press, the names of the schools with the highest results were published and at the same time a reward system for these schools was applied – although it was only transitory.[11] Fourth, the Ministry published on its website a ranking of *all* high schools based on the knowledge tests for the last high school year – from 1997, the tests for last school year were census-based. The schools were sorted by province and by their average test results in descending order. Fifth, the collected and analysed information about contextual factors associated with school achievement was still omitted, just as it had been during the first years.[12] Pressure on the system's actors thus tended to be reinforced, since pupils' achievements were presented as being only associated with the good or bad educational practices of those actors.

Notably, some of the measures taken regarding accountability, like the rewards system for schools, were technically incorrect – which supports the hypothesis of the pre-eminence of political interests guiding decision making. Why technically incorrect? Any incentive system can by definition only be based on census results; that means on the assessment of all students of the level which is being tested in the whole country (Ravela, 2001). Instead, the central government identified 'the better schools' and awarded them a prize based on the results of the national assessment, which was not based on a census, but only a sample. Aware of this problem, an interviewed officer explained:

The prize was honorary or didactic material. This was published in the newspapers' headlines. But it was humbug. Not because the data were wrong, but because you cannot claim that the primary school of Las Pirquitas in Catamarca is the best school in the country when [the assessment] had a sampling character; when [the school] may have had four seventh grades, but only one was tested. Anyway, the principal was there and [President] Menem handed a prize.

5.3 Steering teaching according to the new curriculum

Since the inception of the assessment system in 1993 until 1999, besides disseminating the test results, the Ministry of Education issued the Methodological Recommendations for Teaching (*Recomendaciones metodológicas para la enseñanza*) which reached teachers in every school (e.g. Ministerio de Cultura y Educación, 1997 a, b, 1998a, b, c). These were recommendations without compulsory character, since schools are governed by the provinces and not by the National Ministry distributing these documents. Nonetheless, these materials pursued two main goals. First, they were presented with an instrumental purpose as a tool for teachers to improve their teaching practice. As the recommendations of 1994 state:

> This document attempts to be a specific tool that allows [teachers] to reflect on their own pedagogical practice and, if necessary, to undertake changes and adjustments in their educative task tending towards better teaching (Ministerio de Cultura y Educación, 1994a, p. 2).

For this purpose, the documents presented an analysis of the results and hypotheses about the causes of the low levels of achievement. They also referred more generally to the teaching and learning of given topics as well as to conceptual developments of the disciplines treated and suggested classroom activities for overcoming the detected difficulties. Second, these documents were conceived not just with the aim of enhancing teaching but also of fostering at school level the implementation of the new curricular guidelines that were part of the education reform. As the 1999 recommendations state, they did not just offer teaching alternatives to overcome the difficulties identified in learning but also suggested ways of working in line with the newly defined curricular contents – which were also subject to assessment:

> This document attempts to provide alternatives of working on the contents which showed the lowest levels of acquisition. At the same time, it aims to present language teaching at school, following the changes introduced by the [new] Basic Curricular Contents (Ministerio de Cultura y Educación, 1999f, p. 43).

Along the same lines, the documents often included a list of the agreed contents of different tests as well as some mock test exercises based on the new curriculum, including templates for marking them. As the recommendations of 1994 explain:

> We provide this material to teachers … aiming to assist them in directing activities in each area and level. It constitutes a guide of important and substantive contents for developing their pedagogical activities. (Ministerio de Cultura y Educación, 1994a, p. 17).

In addition, in 1997 the Ministry distributed a document including past tests for the last grade of high school (Ministerio de Cultura y Educación, no date f). Officially, they were distributed in order that they could be "known, analysed and utilised by the teachers and, in that way, that each institution can compare national and provincial results with the results achieved by their own courses" (Ministerio de Cultura y Educación, no date b, p. 5). However, an interviewed officer also pointed out that the purpose of distributing the tests was to tell teachers with concrete examples what should be taught and how, following the new curriculum:

> When we distributed an assessment instrument, we were giving a guideline. … the assessment instruments for high school are very well done. Both the language and the math tests have been designed as competence-based. In that way, you are giving the system a sign about what it has to do. … We had to give a clear sign to the system about the didactic-pedagogical line that should be followed.

As in the case of the prizes for the supposedly best schools, this action supports the hypothesis of the pre-eminence of political intentions, given that an important technical problem was ignored. These tests contain items that are repeated year after year in order to enable longitudinal comparison by reducing the variability of the difficulty of tests along time (Lord, 1980). These items can only fulfil their function if they are kept confidential: once they are published, the validity of future tests is affected.

6.   The assessment system after the 1990s education reform to the present

The year 2000 represents a turning point in the Argentinean assessment system. Since then, there have been significant changes in the education policy in general and in the assessment policy in particular. Regarding education policy, the new government suspended the law of 1993 that instructed the education reform.[13] In 2006 it was eventually abolished and replaced by a new national law (N° 26.206). This new law departed substantially from the old one. Nonetheless, the assessment system was retained. However, the time span between each assessment expanded and the government made different use from the assessments than it had done in previous years. Table 4 offers an overview of the years in which assessment was implemented and of the subsequent actions.

Table 4: Assessment and actions after each assessment round by year of implementation, 2000–2010

Assessment and actions after each assessment round	Year of implementation										
	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Assessment	■			■		■		■			■
Dissemination of achievement results*	■	■		■		■		■			
Methodological recommendations for teachers		■							■		■
Dissemination of information about associated factors		■							■		

* The disseminated results as well as the other implemented actions do not correspond to the assessment implemented the same year but the years before, as explained in this article. Note, as also explained in the article, that the reached audience is very probably smaller than in the period before: apart from the dissemination of the main results through the press, most of the produced documents are only published on the Ministry's website and not printed and sent out like in previous years.

After conducting annual assessments between 1993 and 2000, the national assessment was applied again in 2003, 2005, and 2007 – the next round is planned for 2010 and thereafter every three years. With regard to the uses of assessment, the new ways of reporting and dissemination suggest a clear rupture with the strategy of putting political pressure on different actors in the education system and steering the system according to the law of 1993. These new ways of reporting and dissemination have the following characteristics:

1) From 2000, the disaggregated data of the evaluated areas by province, school, and pupil were no longer broadly disseminated by the National Ministry itself, but in 2001 the National Ministry gave this data to provincial education authorities, letting them decide for themselves how to use it.

2) The Ministry continued to inform the press about the results but in a significantly more aggregated form, avoiding making the provinces or schools openly responsible for their results. For instance, in 2001 the Ministry published through the press the results only by geographical (i.e. not political) region and for the first time disclosed socioeconomic factors relating them to pupils' achievement.[14] These measures represent two ways of downplaying the political responsibility of provinces for their achievement. Similar trends can be observed in the Ministry's assessment reports.[15] At the same time, Ministry authorities took distance from previous accountability mechanisms. Both in 2003 and 2007, they emphasised through the press that the priority was no longer "to rank" provinces or schools "hierarchically", but to "evaluate what pupils know and what they do not know, in order to work on that" (Ministry of Education Daniel Filmus in Clarín, 2003).[16]

3) The Ministry continued to formulate documents with methodological recommendations as well as reflections for teachers based on assessment results. However, the intention of reaching teachers with didactic guidelines through the assessment seemed to have decreased. Firstly, the Ministry did not issue recommendations after the 2003 assessment. Secondly, the recommendations and reflections for the 2000 and 2005 assessment results were not printed, but only uploaded onto the Ministry's website in 2001 and 2008 respectively (see DiNIECE, 2008a, b). Thirdly, based on the results of 2007, in 2010 the Ministry issued hardcopies of its recommendations though only for high school teachers.

However, the question is not only what intentions the political administrations abandoned after 2000, along with the progressive abandonment of the 1993 education law, but also what functions assessment now actually fulfils. Assessment is still declared to be an important tool for both diagnosing the state of education and informing the design of policies. Nonetheless, the action lines of the Ministry of Education regarding assessment described above and others that are described below suggest that the new orientation of assessment policy is characterised more by an *abandonment of what was done before* than by a well-thought new strategy. Assessment seems to be limited to a *symbolic function* (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), given that even without a clear purpose, the Ministry of Education continues evaluating, as if by acting (at least formally), according to current prevalent international standards, which include the application of assessment, it could safeguard its legitimacy. The following additional aspects of the assessment policy support this observation:

1) Since the assessment of 2003, results have been published with a considerable time lag. For instance, in August 2007, the available reports on the Ministry's website corresponded to the 1997 and 2000 assessments, while the reports of the 2003 and 2005 assessments had not been uploaded yet. In addition, reports are no longer printed and broadly distributed as they were in the 1990s, but only published on the Ministry's website. As in the case of the didactic recommendations this may considerably reduce the audience they reach. Similarly, the press conferences to report about results took place two years after the concerned assessment.[17] These long delays may reduce public and professional interest, and in that way, the potential impact of assessment results. Furthermore, they call into question the priority given to assessment as a policy instrument by the education authorities.
2) Similar observations hold for the didactic recommendations for teachers. These recommendations are a way of using results instrumentally, in the sense that they aim at improving teaching practices, based on the analysis of assessment results. However, as seen above, these recommendations were not always produced; the formulated recommendations were in most cases just published online; and as the reports of results, they were published between two and three years after the actual assessment.

7. Summary

As stated in the introduction, assessment systems have become a key instrument of education policy worldwide. Against the background of a new paradigm of governing education systems marked amongst others by decentralisation and increasing local autonomy, assessment systems embody a strategic steering mechanism whereby central governments can control the outputs of education. In spite of this relevance, the way in which assessment systems are intertwined with local political tensions and interests in different countries has received only little attention by the research community.

This article took up part of this desideratum. It highlighted the political dimension of assessment systems, using Argentina as its case study. Argentina in the 1990s offered a particularly fruitful period in this respect. At the time, a large-scale education reform was initiated, marked by heated debates and political conflicts, and the uses of assessment by the Ministry of Education appear as closely linked to them. As argued in this article, rather than pursuing the declared long term aims of education improvement, assessment was used first *to prepare the grounds for a reform* that had already started: that is to construct a critical diagnosis of education as a way of legitimising a reform that was highly contested. Second, the Ministry used the assessment results for *putting pressure on actors* at different levels of the education system in order to get their support for the reform. And third, against the background of a new and partially decentralised curriculum, with the assessment the Ministry, which had officially no more direct intervention in schools, also intended *to steer the pedagogical practices* at the classroom level following the guidelines of the promoted reform.

Since the turning point of 2000 when the reform was relinquished, the use of assessment has been very limited. It is characterised by an *abandonment of old strategies* rather than by a new one, fulfilling primarily just a *symbolic function*. While in this case the Ministry seems to be using assessment less to pursue 'other', non-declared aims than in the past, it is unclear to what extent the modest and slow implementation of actions after each assessment round since 2000 can contribute to improving education quality and equity. Table 5 summarises the postulated uses over time.

Table 5: Political uses of the Argentine assessment system by period, 1994–2010

Period	Political uses of the Argentine Assessment System	
1994–1996	To prepare the grounds for the contested reform	To steer teaching according to the new curriculum
1997–1999	To put pressure on the system's actors to implement the reform	
2000–2010	Disconnection of the assessment from the reform and predominance of a symbolic function of it	

With these findings and questions, this study does not aim at discrediting assessment systems as a steering instrument of educational processes. Rather, it emphasises their political dimension – how their possible uses and impact are entangled with and conditioned by political trends, conflicts, or priorities –, assuming that more awareness of these aspects can contribute to increased transparency and effectiveness of assessment policies.

Notes

1. I would like to thank Cristina Alarcón (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Germany) for her comments in a previous version of this article, Silvina Larripa (Universidad de San Andrés, Argentina) for sharing with me important information, and Andrea Oelsner (University of Aberdeen, Scotland) for editing the language of this article.
2. However, many of them have then been vulnerable to the political will of successive governments (Ferrer, 2006, p. 16). Cuba and Chile implemented their assessment systems earlier, in 1975 and 1988 respectively (Arancibia, 1996).
3. These nineteen countries are Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela.
4. These three actors were chosen as interview partners because they were in charge of areas of the assessment system that were especially relevant for this study. More information about these officers would risk the preservation of their anonymity.
5. In 1978, under a military regime, financial responsibility for the ca. 6,700 primary schools was passed from the central government to the provinces. The Transference Law of 1991 completed this process by transferring to the provinces responsibility for the remaining 3,578 secondary schools (Hanson, 1997).
6. All translations from Spanish into English are mine.
7. Examples of the analyses done in 1995 are the documents *El alumno trabajador* (preliminary version) and *La Repetición Escolar y el Alumno Remitente*, elaborated by the Ministry of Education (Ministerio de Cultura y Educación, 1995a, b).
8. For political scientists the identification and definition of a problem represents the first stage of the 'construction process' or 'construction cycle of public policies'. The stages that follow are the formulation of alternative solutions, the adoption of one alternative, its implementation, and the evaluation of its results (Tamayo Sáez, 1997).
9. See as an example the ministerial report *Operativo Nacional de Evaluación 1997* (Ministerio de Cultura y Educación, no date e).
10. See the newspaper article 'La Capital, el mejor rendimiento' (Clarín, 1999a). This practice certainly caused anger to the governors of the provinces with the lowest results. In an interview for this study an officer declared that one year, due to the anger of some governors, minutes before reporting the results to the press, national authorities had to remove pages from the report containing results that were considered inconvenient for some provinces.
11. See, for instance, the following press articles: Clarín 1998a, b, c, d, 1999b, c, d, e; La Nación, 1998, 1999a, b.
12. See as example of these not disseminated analyses the documents printed by the Ministry of Education in 1999 (Ministerio de Cultura y Educación, 1999a, b, c, d, e).
13. The decree 3/00 from 4th January, 2000 modified a previous decree, postponing the established deadline for provinces to complete the implementation of the education law of 1993.

14. See the newspaper articles Clarín, 2001; La Nación, 2001.
15. See especially the reports of the assessments taken in 2000 and 2003, respectively uploaded in 2001 and 2005 to the Ministry's website: www.me.gov.ar/diniece/.
16. See similar statement Clarín, 2007a, b.
17. See as an example the article in Clarín, 2007a, which informs about the tests taken in 2005.

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