

The construction of the educational problem in Spanish educational legislation: A critical reading of standardised assessments and inequalities

Policy Futures in Education
2025, Vol. 0(0) 1–17
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DOI: 10.1177/14782103251328166
journals.sagepub.com/home/pfe



Lucía Torres-Sales  and Begoña Vigo-Arrazola

Faculty of Education, University of Zaragoza, Zaragoza, Spain

Abstract

This article critically analyzes the representation of standardised assessments in Spanish educational policies, particularly in the current Spanish education law (LOMLOE), in reports on the state of the Spanish educational system (2020–2023), and through the voices of teachers working in schools with special difficulties and their implications for these types of schools. Employing Carol Bacchi's *What is the problem represented to be?* (WPR) approach, the study questions the assumptions underlying these assessments, including claims of neutrality, linear improvement and universal applicability to address inequalities. The results reveal that standardised assessments are presented as indispensable tools for diagnosing and improving equity and quality. However, this representation neglects the systemic challenges faced by vulnerable schools. Furthermore, the study highlights a mismatch between diagnostic objectives and the capacity of disadvantaged schools to implement the recommended changes. It criticises how these policies risk perpetuating inequality by imposing rigid frameworks ill-suited to local realities and reinforcing deficit narratives about marginalised schools. It concludes by advocating for reconfiguring standardised assessments to emphasise contextualised and inclusive approaches that address the specific needs of schools in vulnerable contexts. This research contributes to global debates about equity, accountability and the broader implications of standardised assessments for education policy.

Keywords

Education policies, standardised assessments, disadvantaged schools, WPR approach, accountability

Corresponding author:

Lucía Torres-Sales, Faculty of Education, University of Zaragoza, Pedro Cerbuna, Zaragoza 50009, Spain.
Email: l.torres@unizar.es

Introduction

In recent decades, external standardised assessments have become established as a key player in educational policies at the global and national levels (Ball et al., 2017; Niemann and Martens, 2018; Verger et al., 2019). International agencies such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), through the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), have promoted the implementation of these assessments in a wide variety of educational systems. Their objective has been to evaluate student performance and establish rankings that serve as a basis for different educational reforms (Díez-Gutiérrez, 2020; Lingard et al., 2017). At the national level, countries such as Spain have adopted these mechanisms in their evaluation systems, experiencing a growing pressure to improve educational quality through the quantification of academic performance (Rodríguez-Martínez, 2019; Verger and Normand, 2015).

The rise of these standardised assessments is part of a broader process of public policy transformation, in which education has increasingly come to be seen as a market good (Robertson et al., 2012; Whitty and Power, 2000). This change in education appears to be directly associated with the context of globalisation and the adoption of neoliberal policies (Harvey, 2007) that promote efficiency, competitiveness and accountability through homogeneous metrics and standards for all countries regardless of their context. In this sense, public education, historically conceived as a universal right and a public good, has been progressively subjected to processes of commodification, where schools and students are forced to compete for results and resources, similar to actors in an economic market (Gorur, 2017; Torres Santomé, 2009; Verger et al., 2016, 2019).

In the case of Spain, since 2001, education policy has been marked by the introduction and modification of laws that seek to adapt the education system to the challenges of the 21st century, framed by global competitiveness and a growing pressure to improve results in these international evaluations. Successive reforms, namely, Organic Law 10/2002, of December 23, 2002, on the Quality of Education (LOCE), Organic Law 2/2006, of May 3, 2006, on Education (LOE), Organic Law 8/2013, of December 9, 2013, for the improvement of educational quality (LOMCE) and more recently Organic Law 3/2020, of December 29, amending Organic Law 2/2006, of May 3, on Education (LOMLOE) have established standardised assessment systems that have challenged teachers in all types of schools across the country. More specifically, these challenges are greater for teachers in schools whose students are socially, culturally and economically disadvantaged (Bonal et al., 2023; Quilabert et al., 2024).

The purpose of this article is to explore the representations, underlying assumptions and invisible effects of standardised assessment policies, with a specific focus on how they affect schools with special difficulties or complexities (Poveda Bicknell et al., 2023) within the framework of the LOMLOE. In this sense, the objectives are, firstly, to identify how the problems related to standardised assessments are represented in the LOMLOE and their implications for schools of special difficulty or complexity and, secondly, to understand the underlying assumptions and ascertain the effects of this representation and other invisible alternatives. To this end, different reports on the state of the Spanish education system (2020–2023) are analysed within the framework of the current education law (LOMLOE) and the voices of teachers from four discussion groups carried out within the framework of a broader project on creative and inclusive educational discourses and practices with digital media in schools of special complexity,¹ taking as a reference Carol Bacchi's *What's the problem represented to be?* (WPR) model (2009).

In the following sections, we will first explore the implications of neoliberalism and global governance in education. Next, we will address the scientific literature on the implications of these standardised assessments in education, and more specifically in particularly complex environments,

as well as their influence on teacher autonomy. For this purpose, this study is conducted using a research methodology based on the WPR approach. Finally, the results are analysed in relation to the themes identified in the document analysis (LOMLOE and reports on the state of the education system) and empirical data based on the implementation of four discussion groups with teachers from schools with special difficulties. The results reveal that standardised assessments are presented as indispensable tools for diagnosing and improving equity and quality. However, this representation ignores the systemic challenges faced by vulnerable schools.

Neoliberalism and the new public management

Neoliberalism and the implementation of educational policies based on accountability, privatisation and standardised evaluations have been widely debated in the literature. Different studies analyse the effects of neoliberalism and global governance on education from different approaches and theoretical frameworks, highlighting their impact on equity and social justice.

Neoliberalism, as an ideology and economic practice, has redefined the role of the state in education, promoting an approach that favours efficiency and performance (Giroux, 2023; Harvey, 2007; Torres Santomé, 2009). In this sense, education systems around the world have ceased to be a space for the construction of democratic values and have become an instrument to meet the demands of the labour market (Ball and Youdell, 2007; Illich, 2020; Klees, 2020). These policies, based on efficiency and performance, tend to prioritise individual success without considering the structural and contextual factors that affect learning, which reinforces pre-existing inequalities in the educational system (Lingard et al., 2017; Pagès, 2021; Rodríguez-Martínez, 2019).

Ball (2016) describes neoliberalism as a ‘slow-moving beast’ that erodes the basic principles of public education, fostering competition and bureaucratic control. Educational institutions and faculty increasingly operate under a logic of ‘performativity’ that forces them to produce measurable results, transforming education into a series of products that must meet imposed standards. This performativity is seen as a process of dehumanisation of education, which prioritises a technocratic and homogeneous approach and limits the space for a contextualised and inclusive pedagogy (Martín-Alonso et al., 2024; Parcerisa and Verger, 2022; Parcerisa et al., 2022; Verger and Parcerisa, 2017).

This process of performativity of education is supported by the so-called *new public management* (NPM), or *global governance*, as a public sector reform programme or model to incorporate tools and knowledge of business management and related disciplines into public education (Verger and Normand, 2015). According to Hood (1991), at the educational level, the fundamental principles underpinning NPM are based on the establishment of explicit standards and performance measures, greater emphasis on the control of results, and a greater emphasis on discipline and restraint in the use of resources.

For this reason, standardised assessments are among the policies promoted by NPM as a form of accountability. A critical approach is required to explain why standardised assessments form part of this NPM, providing insights into how standardised assessments are not only technical tools but also devices that reflect and reproduce power dynamics (Foucault, 2009). From this perspective, these policies can be interpreted as part of a broader process of commodification and control of the education system framed within the logic of NPM. From a theoretical point of view, numerous authors have questioned the impact of these assessments, relating them to the processes of social reproduction, social construction of reality and symbolic domination.

Firstly, we present how these evaluations operate within a technical-instrumental framework that legitimises existing power relations (Habermas, 2003). This perspective regards evaluations as tools

designed by institutions of power to impose coercive patterns with the aim of promoting technical culture. Almost four decades ago, Barry Franklin (1986) pointed out that schools were the main agents used constantly to define and control meanings as such educational institutions legitimised the knowledge of hegemonic groups and culturally reproduced class relations.

Other theoretical approaches that follow similar lines include Berger and Luckmann's (1966) theory on the social construction of reality, where standardisation is seen as a process of institutionalisation in which practices, norms and standards are socially constructed and maintained by society. In the field of education, the standards established in a curriculum or assessment tests are the products of a social process in which high importance or validity is placed on socially constructed elements. Similarly, Bourdieu's theory of symbolic capital refers to a form of power that is socially legitimised and accumulated through practices and values recognised by a community (Bourdieu, 1996). In education systems, symbolic capital is reflected in the legitimacy that schools and students obtain based on their academic performance.

In line with the above, standardised tests have become a political tool that drives a global agenda of educational standards by promoting a homogeneous vision of what educational success means (Gorur, 2017; Pagès, 2021; Parcerisa and Verger, 2022). These tests represent a reductionist view of education that undermines the dignity of students and teachers by imposing uniform metrics that do not consider individual and contextual differences (Roth et al., 2020) and, by contrast, perpetuates a logic of competition that particularly affects developing countries and population groups in situations of social, cultural and economic disadvantage (Klein, 2017; Sjöberg and Jenkins, 2022). As mentioned previously, many countries use PISA results to justify educational reforms, such as adapting the curricula of their education systems, in an attempt to obtain good results in PISA tests and other international exams (Chandir and Blackmore, 2024). An example of how PISA data has been politicised in Europe can be observed in Spain through the LOMLOE (2020). This type of test is used by the OECD and other international organisations to exercise control over national governments from a distance (Niemann and Martens, 2018).

In short, global governance has generated changes in the field of education, such as the development of tests applied to specific contexts without taking into account the significance of these tests for their own culture and context, competition between transnational education systems, generating a stratification of education systems, the exploitation and homogenisation of the curriculum and the technical proletarianisation of teachers, restricting their professional autonomy.

Global governance and its consequences for education

Global governance has profoundly transformed education policies, influencing the way in which national systems adapt to international demands. We explore a number of empirical studies on the impact of such tests with a view to understanding how standardised assessments affect teaching practice.

Although standardised assessments seek to establish a common framework for measuring student performance, they *ignore structural inequalities and differences in context* (Bonal et al., 2023; Quilabert et al., 2024). Previous studies indicate that these tests reinforce *educational stratification* by incentivising competition between schools and conditioning teaching to obtain better results (Camphuijsen et al., 2020; Klees, 2020; Klein, 2017).

For this reason, teachers in schools that serve particularly vulnerable communities face challenges that often lead them to neglect other critical aspects of educational development that arise specifically in these contexts by focussing exclusively on the measurable aspects of teaching (Dizon-Ross, 2020; Parcerisa and Verger, 2022). One example is the study carried out in Denmark

and England by Kelly et al. (2017), who, after analysing how educational governance policies affect schools that serve vulnerable groups, point out that the imposition of standardised assessments in these contexts produces a *homogenisation of teaching*. This effect is also reproduced through a curriculum that is reduced to the teaching of hegemonic knowledge (i.e. mathematics, language and science) to the detriment of other social and contextual aspects that are not evaluated in standardised tests, thereby limiting the comprehensive training of students and the social function of education (Griffith and Scharmann, 2008; Lingard et al., 2017).

This homogenising effect has been reinforced by the pressures placed on teachers, *restricting their professional autonomy* (Calvo-García et al., 2024), as these tests are often viewed as an evaluation of a teacher's own teaching practice (Camphuijsen et al., 2020). In this way, what constitutes 'good' and 'bad' teaching has been determined based on the results obtained in these tests. As a result, teachers are under constant pressure to improve their students' test results (Ball, 2016; Dizon-Ross, 2020), which has led to teachers adopting a strategy of teaching to the test (Cramer et al., 2018). For decades, different authors (e.g. Derber, 1983) have referred to this process as *ideological proletarianisation* or *ideological disempowerment*, namely, the loss of the capacity to make decisions about the ultimate goals of the educational process and its impact on the community and, ultimately, society.

This approach delegitimises the ability of teachers to make decisions during the teaching-learning process (Apple, 1989; Contreras, 1997) and, ultimately, results in the perpetuation of a system that fosters inequalities and the success or failure of students who end up leaving school prematurely. This is closely related to an implicit ethical and moral sense of education, which entails considering what kind of citizens we want to educate for what kind of society.

Along these lines, teachers also perceive that there is an *excess of regulations* that reduce their responsibility and decision-making. Their teaching role focuses exclusively on compliance with regulations that, on occasions, contradict each other or are not easily applicable due to the realities of certain educational centres (Ball et al., 2017; Calvo-García et al., 2024).

Likewise, other studies on how accountability policies have contributed to shaping the subjectivity of teachers determine the so-called '*bonsai teacher*' (Acuña, 2023), namely, a teacher limited by the demands of evaluation and bureaucracy, who sees their capacity for innovation and collaboration with other colleagues restricted. In this regard, Gould et al. (2023) indicate that in complex socio-political contexts, such as New Zealand, relationships between teachers can become inequitable and divisive, which also limits the potential for solidarity and collective action among them. This fragmentation, fuelled by external pressures, contributes to a culture of exclusion that prevents teachers from engaging in innovative or transformative practices together, affecting not only their well-being but also that of students and their communities.

An approach focused on efficiency, competition and quantifiable performance has transformed the education systems of many countries into a space that prioritises homogenisation over inclusion and equity (Camphuijsen et al., 2020; Cramer et al., 2018; Kelly et al., 2017). This approach limits the system's capacity to respond to the real interests and contexts of students and undermines the role of teachers as agents of change, shaping an education system that, instead of closing the gaps of inequality, reinforces and amplifies them. At the same time, it ignores the consideration of education as a public good and an opportunity to promote social justice (Biesta et al., 2021). By prioritising competitiveness over cooperation and inclusion, this approach not only fails to address the needs of students but also perpetuates structural inequalities by failing to recognise the diversity of contexts and perspectives that must be integrated in order to truly transform the education system.

However, in recent years, there has been a shift in certain countries towards more formative and contextualised approaches that seek to capture the complexities of learning. For example, in

Finland, continuous assessment and self-assessment enable students to reflect on their own learning process rather than focussing on standardised tests (Sahlberg, 2011). A study carried out in Finland during the pandemic revealed how the focus on teacher autonomy and trust in education professionals allowed for flexible adaptation to remote learning, prioritising both student well-being and formative assessment. This model favoured the continuity of learning through strategies focused on active participation and emotional support (Sahlberg, 2021). Meanwhile, in New Zealand, the assessment system has increasingly been based on contextual competencies that promote the inclusion of students with diverse needs, favouring greater adaptability to the specific contexts of each educational community. However, primary school principals have faced structural and political pressures that have made it difficult to fully implement these inclusive approaches (Thrupp, 2024). These models illustrate that assessment can be used as a tool to support learning and how the mobilisation of teachers in the face of external pressures can pave the way for the implementation of equitable practices.

Therefore, inclusive and contextualised education requires a review of accountability policies in the Spanish context to include qualitative indicators that assess aspects such as well-being and contextual aspects, which are essential, in particular, for schools with special difficulties (Bonal et al., 2023; Klein, 2017; Quilabert et al., 2024), at a time when the Spanish curriculum and educational standards are proposed through the lens of white, middle-class culture (Fitz and Nikolaidis, 2020; Gleeson et al., 2020; Sireci, 2020). Accordingly, this article aims to explore how standardised assessments are represented through the most recent regulations, reports on the state of the Spanish education system and the voices of teachers from schools with special difficulties, as well as what the underlying assumptions are in the context of these schools.

Methodology

We employ the *What's the problem represented to be* (WPR) approach and listen to the voices of teachers in order to clarify the justification for the implementation of standardised assessments in the most recent regulations of the Spanish education system. This approach allows us to analyse how educational policies construct and represent the 'problem' they aim to address, which is fundamental to understanding the implications of standardised assessments in the context of schools with special difficulties. Through WPR, it is possible to identify how these policies define and limit the terms of the educational debate, prioritising certain solutions and marginalising others.

Bacchi's WPR approach is inspired by Michel Foucault's (1978) theory of power, which posits that power is not a hierarchical structure exercised from the top down but rather is found in diffuse power relations and manifests itself through discourses and practices that shape reality. Foucault (2009) argues that power is not only imposed through coercion but is also produced and reproduced through the norms, institutions and discourses that shape the behaviour and thinking of individuals.

Thus, WPR allows us to deconstruct these problematic representations and analyse how power operates through them, legitimising certain perspectives and excluding others (Bacchi, 2009). In the case of standardised assessments, this approach helps to examine how these policies shape educational reality.

The WPR approach focuses on six key questions that guide the analysis of public policies, facilitating the identification of the underlying assumptions, effects and alternatives omitted in the policies (Bacchi and Goodwin, 2016):

1. What is the 'problem' represented in this specific policy?
2. What assumptions or suppositions underlie this representation of the 'problem'?

3. How has this representation of the ‘problem’ come about?
4. What remains unproblematic in this representation of the problem? Where are the silences? Can the ‘problem’ be thought of in another way?
5. What effects does this representation of the ‘problem’ produce?
6. How and where has this representation of the problem been produced and defended? How could it be questioned and replaced?

In order to understand the implications of standardised assessments through LOMLOE and the voices of teachers, this study applies questions one, two and five to explore the discursive and structural implications of assessment policies in schools with special difficulties, providing a detailed analysis of how these policies affect conditions of inequality in the educational context. Question six is used to analyse possible alternatives omitted in the policies.

Analysis and discussion

The steps outlined by [Braun and Clarke \(2021\)](#) were followed for this discursive textual analysis, enabling us to identify the representations of the educational problem and evaluate how these reinforce or challenge the underlying assumptions of commodification and accountability in the Spanish education system. This deductive thematic analysis was carried out based on the texts of the [LOMLOE \(2020\)](#), the most recent reports on the state of the Spanish education system (2020–2023) and the voices of teachers from seven schools with special difficulties through four discussion groups.

The results of this study show that the LOMLOE, the reports on the state of the Spanish education system and the voices of teachers frame the educational ‘problem’ in terms of academic performance and efficiency, which reinforces a logic of commercialisation and competition in the Spanish education system. By focussing on standardisation and quantification, these policies appear to have significant effects on schools with particular difficulties, where the demands for performance and standardisation reinforce inequalities and limit the effectiveness of contextualised pedagogical practices. The following section provides further details on the representations of the problem derived from an analysis of the regulations and the voices of the teaching staff, the underlying assumptions, the effects of the representations of the problem and the invisible alternatives.

Problem representation: quality in terms of performance as a metric of success

The representation of the educational problem in Spanish public policies has been marked by a conception of quality centred on academic performance, measured through standardised indicators. This is reflected in the provision of the LOMLOE, which states that:

Diagnostic evaluations [...] will have an informative, formative and orienting character for the centres, for the students and their families and for the educational community as a whole ([LOMLOE, 2020](#): Title VI).

Here, the problem is represented as a need to measure and diagnose educational performance to guarantee the quality of education and detect areas for improvement. The law emphasises the non-punitive nature of evaluations, differentiating them from more competitive approaches implemented by previous legislation.

However, the conception appears to persist that educational quality can be effectively measured through standardised indicators such as national and international test scores, dropout rates and repetition rates. This suggests that, although direct competitive pressures have been reduced,

performance metrics continue to occupy a central position in the evaluation of the Spanish education system (Ministerio de Educación, 2023: 453, 536, 563).

Under the LOMLOE (2020), assessments are designed to measure the acquisition of key competencies such as linguistic communication, mathematical and digital competence. According to Article 143 of this law, these assessments are derived from taking samples at specific education levels from schools across the country, such as the 6th year of Primary Education and the 4th year of Compulsory Secondary Education, with the purpose of obtaining comparable data between communities and thus identifying areas for improvement within the educational system. However, as already underlined in the preamble of the same law, the application of these tests is carried out with the aim of creating a ‘common evaluation framework that serves as a reference’ (LOMLOE, 2020: 122879, 122928) for the improvement of the system, which reflects a tendency towards the homogenisation of quality criteria. This vision assumes that measurable academic performance is the main indicator for evaluating educational success and, therefore, educational quality. According to Verger and Parcerisa (2017), this conceptualisation of educational quality in terms of performance metrics is a central element in the dissemination of NPM policies in education, which promote competition between educational centres to improve results.

In the same sense, the consideration of international evaluations, such as PISA, is presented to highlight the need to adapt the educational system to international standards. It is argued that Spain faces a problem of ‘educational competitiveness’ in the international scenario, which seems to justify the adoption of practices and policies aligned with these global frameworks. It is assumed that Spanish education should focus on developing competencies that enable its students to compete in a globalised labour market. This is reflected in the Spain 2050 Project, whose challenges include ‘being more productive for better growth’ and ‘solving the deficiencies of our labour market and adapting it to new social, economic and technological realities’ (Ministry of Education, 2023: 24). This focus on the globalisation of accountability in education has favoured a technocratic approach, where standardised assessments are seen as neutral instruments to improve quality (Verger and Parcerisa, 2017). However, this perspective detracts from broader dimensions of learning that are essential in vulnerable contexts. An example of this perspective is conveyed in the following quote from a teacher during a discussion group regarding the need to individualise student evaluations:

In schools, there should usually be coordination so that all classes have the same opportunities [...] so you have to follow what management says. That doesn’t mean they force me, but there is a kind of pressure at the school level to do what they say and that implies evaluating in the same way [...] (AR_GD_2_Teacher2).

This viewpoint upholds the idea that homogenisation in teaching restricts opportunities to adapt to the diversity of students and their needs. The persistence of this quantifying model in Spanish education policies suggests that academic performance has been adopted as the main indicator of educational success and quality, ignoring other relevant educational factors, such as the integral development of students, the contextualisation of teaching (Martín-Alonso et al., 2024; Rodríguez-Martínez, 2019; Verger et al., 2019) and, in short, the dignity of students and teachers (Roth et al., 2020).

Underlying assumptions: technical neutrality, linear improvement and universality assumption

The implicit assumptions and presuppositions underlying the representation of the problem in reports of the Spanish education system and education law reveal the underlying beliefs and values that shape educational policies.

Assumption of technical neutrality. Spanish education (LOMLOE, 2020) assumes that standardised assessments are objective and neutral tools that accurately reflect educational quality and student learning. However, this assumption overlooks criticisms that these tests can reinforce structural inequalities, especially in vulnerable contexts.

This is evidenced by the State System of Education Indicators, which uses metrics such as schooling, educational environment, educational financing and academic results to assess the state of the education system (Ministry of Education, 2023: 537). However, at the same time, it states that:

[...] the educational system will be oriented towards the achievement [...] of training for peace, respect for human rights, social cohesion and cooperation (LOMLOE, 2020: 46-47).

In practice, these apparently broad and qualitative goals are often reduced to measurable results in standardised tests. As authors such as Gorur (2017), Pagès (2021) and Parcerisa and Verger (2022) point out, this technocratic approach prioritises quantifiable academic results, limiting the capacity of the education system to address more comprehensive dimensions of learning and equity and harness the opportunity to promote social justice (Biesta et al., 2021). This idea is reflected in a teacher's comment on the weight of certain curricular contents:

There is a curriculum overloaded with so much content that you don't get to everything, and, on top of that, you overlook other issues or problems that arise in the classroom and are equally important (AR_GD_2_Teacher1).

The notion that more content equates to better education is aligned with the assumption that academic improvement is linear and cumulative, without considering the diverse effects that arise in highly complex contexts.

Assumption of linear improvement. Spanish education (LOMLOE, 2020) suggests that the implementation of assessments and the analysis of their results will automatically lead to improvements in the quality and equity of the education system:

Based on the analysis of the results of such evaluation, educational administrations will promote that educational centres develop action plans and adopt measures to improve the quality and equity of education (LOMLOE, 2020: Title VI).

It also places a strong emphasis on the equal distribution of resources and access to support programmes in the different Spanish autonomous communities as one of the main ways to achieve educational equity (Ministry of Education, 2023: 287). However, this way of understanding equity tends to simplify the complexity of the factors that affect academic achievement, omitting key elements such as cultural diversity, structural inequalities and the specific challenges faced by schools in contexts of special difficulty.

Assumption of universality. These underlying assumptions to ensure equity overlook the heterogeneous realities of schools facing unique challenges, such as social exclusion, early school dropout and limited access to community support networks. Accordingly, this homogenising model fails to adequately address the specific needs of the most vulnerable schools, leading to persistent inequalities in terms of educational outcomes. It is assumed that the same evaluation criteria and

methods can be applied equally to all school contexts without sufficiently adjusting for the particularities of schools with special difficulties.

In this context, many schools are forced to compete for resources and recognition, promoting a market environment in which schools are in competition to attain symbolic capital and prestige (Ball, 2014, 2016; Verger et al., 2019). Moreover, the structure of diagnostic evaluation, presented in the LOMLOE (2020) as a tool to ‘guide decision-making’ (Article 143), also reinforces this competitive logic, as results tend to be used as an indicator of perceived quality, incentivising school stratification.

This dynamic can disproportionately affect schools with particular difficulties that face greater barriers to meeting the expectations imposed by these policies (Bonal et al., 2023; Klein, 2017; Klees, 2020; Quilabert et al., 2024; Verger and Parcerisa, 2017). Thus, although the distribution of resources is a necessary component, it is insufficient to address the systemic inequalities encountered across the Spanish education system.

Along these lines, it has been determined that the Spanish education system must be competitive and adapt to global standards to ensure the labour market insertion and economic success of its student body. Once again, the numerous references in the reports to international assessments and programmes that seek to align the Spanish education system with international frameworks reinforce this view (Ministry of Education, 2023: 539–574). However, this assumption takes for granted that global standards of competitiveness are the correct and desirable parameters for evaluating educational success without questioning whether these standards are applicable or beneficial for all local contexts. The assumption that global competitiveness is a legitimate goal ignores the potential disadvantages of standardising educational goals, especially in those contexts shaped by structural problems (Ball, 2014, 2016; Klein, 2017). In this regard, the 2023 report mentions how the diagnostic assessment tests and the structure of Basic Vocational Training are oriented towards adapting the competencies of the student body to the needs of the labour market, ‘prioritising educational profitability and preparing students to integrate into the knowledge economy’ (Ministry of Education, 2023: 564).

Specific programmes, such as the Programme for Guidance, Advancement and Educational Enrichment (PROA + for its acronym in Spanish) aimed at schools in disadvantaged contexts, imply the assumption that additional support and intervention/compensation programs can close existing educational gaps (Ministry of Education, 2023: 106–108). The reports posit that structural inequalities can be overcome through interventions aimed at improving outcomes for this student body.

These assumptions simplify the reality of schools with special difficulties, as they do not consider the impact of broader structural factors such as social inequalities, poverty and unemployment, which indirectly affect academic performance (Bonal et al., 2023; Klein, 2017; Pagès, 2021; Quilabert et al., 2024). In essence, it is assumed that these inequalities can be compensated by specific programmes without necessarily addressing the root causes.

Effects of the representation of the problem: Inequality and technocratisation of education

The analysis conducted reveals different effects derived from the representation of the problem.

Technocratisation of education. This quantifying model of educational success limits the autonomy of teachers to adapt their pedagogical practices to the specific needs and characteristics of their students’ contexts (Dizon-Ross, 2020; Kelly et al., 2017). This situation is accentuated when

teaching is subordinated to the fulfilment of measurable performance objectives, relegating fundamental aspects of education that are not reflected in quantitative results, such as the development of critical thinking, creativity and the personal interests of the student body. This dynamic contributes to the devaluation of these elements, as educational policies focus on standardised results that are visible in graphs and indicators (Bonal et al., 2023).

As a result, the education system is becoming increasingly technocratic (Parcerisa and Verger, 2022), where the effectiveness of teaching practices is measured exclusively in terms of the results obtained in standardised tests, ignoring the diversity of educational goals. According to (Calvo-García et al., 2024), this technocratic approach encourages the ‘technical proletarianisation’ of teachers, particularly in vulnerable contexts, where performance demands are especially difficult to achieve due to socioeconomic and cultural factors. Furthermore, teachers are subject to the pressure generated by the consequences associated with performance in these evaluations, which intensifies the burden on teaching staff. The inequality and technocratisation of education are illustrated in the following comment made by a teacher regarding the focus placed on bureaucracy and technical planning (Martín-Alonso et al., 2024) and, ultimately, on measurable results.

For the [education] inspectorate, the methodology—the one you carry out in the classroom—is of no importance to the inspectorate. The administration only wants results, evidence that you are doing well and that everything is working (AR_GD_2_Teacher8).

Another teacher points out how the technocratisation of education translates into curricular rigidity and dependence on prestructured materials such as textbooks, which limits the possibility of adaptation and reinforces structural inequalities (Lingard et al., 2017), as well as tension among teachers (Gould et al., 2023).

This year, I haven’t been able to get rid of a damn book. I mean, I tried every which way at all the meetings (with the teaching staff), but nothing. My colleagues would say to me: look, it says it all very well in the books, it’s all very well organised, and it facilitates educational practice. As we already have everything written down, we just have to follow it (AR_GD_2_Teacher4).

Furthermore, this logic of standardisation has an impact on the adaptability of pedagogical approaches, promoting a homogenisation of the curriculum (Fitz and Nikolaidis, 2020; Gleeson et al., 2020; Sireci, 2020). Within this framework, education runs the risk of being reduced to an instrument for the production of human capital geared towards the global market, displacing other educational objectives of social, cultural and ethical relevance. Diversity, social justice and the comprehensive training of students are relegated to an inferior position in a system that prioritises performance metrics over the richness of meaningful experiences and learning.

Educational inequality. As noted, the construction of the problem around concepts such as ‘quality’ and ‘efficiency’ reinforces a logic of competition between educational centres, generating constant pressure to improve results in standardised tests. For example, the 2023 report shows that schools located in disadvantaged contexts obtain lower results in these evaluations, often interpreted as a deficit in educational quality (Ministry of Education, 2023: 67). However, these results reflect, to a large extent, external factors such as poverty and social exclusion, which are beyond the control of schools. The implementation of evaluations at specific times, such as in the second and fourth years of secondary school, institutionalises a standard measurement system that becomes a reference for designing educational policies.

This prioritisation of quantitative performance fosters a culture of competition to the detriment of collaboration between schools, which could be more beneficial for the educational community. According to Verger et al. (2019), global evaluation instruments impose a competitive system that privileges institutions with greater resources that are capable of meeting the imposed standards over schools facing significant socioeconomic challenges. This effect is particularly harmful for schools with special difficulties, which cannot compete on equal terms due to persistent structural barriers.

The market logic that underpins these policies positions schools as ‘providers’ of quantifiable results and families and students as ‘consumers’ who choose schools based on performance metrics. As a result, schools in disadvantaged contexts can be labelled as ‘problematic’ if their results remain consistently low, which, in turn, can have an impact on public perception and resource allocation. Such an attitude challenges and detracts from the character of education as a universal social right. In this sense, Ball (2016) and Zancajo et al. (2023) warn that this approach not only turns education into a product subject to competitive dynamics but also reinforces school segregation, creating a system of winners and losers based on measurable performance criteria. This model perpetuates pre-existing inequalities and limits the possibilities of building an inclusive and equitable education.

How could the problem be represented differently? Alternative assessment models

Although the LOMLOE recognises the importance of educational inclusion, its emphasis on competencies and diagnostic evaluations limits the implementation of a comprehensive approach. This perpetuates a technocratic framework that restricts the development of pedagogical approaches adapted to local realities. The analysis of alternative approaches as a possibility to challenge the dominant representation of the educational problem highlights the need to prioritise equity and integral development in education.

Quality as equity for the holistic development of students. The representation of the problem requires a re-evaluation of the role of teachers in the education system. A key alternative would be to grant teachers greater pedagogical autonomy, freeing them from bureaucratic restrictions and the pressure to adhere to uniform standards. This autonomy would allow teachers to adapt their methods to the interests of the students and the specificities of each educational context. An inclusive and equitable approach must address the cultural and socioeconomic dynamics of each school, especially when the student body comprises vulnerable populations totally or partially. Alternative models, such as those employed in Finland and New Zealand, show that assessment can be used as a tool to support learning and that the mobilisation of teachers in the face of external pressures creates opportunities for implementing equitable practices (Sahlberg, 2021; Thrupp, 2024).

For schools with particular difficulties, the omission of aspects such as equity and holistic development perpetuates structural inequalities by failing to provide schools with tools that respond to the complex needs of their students. By prioritising measurable performance, the system neglects the diverse and complex educational contexts that require individualised pedagogical models that are sensitive to the environment (Dizon-Ross, 2020; Kelly et al., 2017; Klein, 2017). In this sense, the implementation of more flexible evaluation models could contribute to reducing inequality gaps and promoting a more equitable education.

Numerous studies conducted over several decades have demonstrated the suitability of participatory assessment and co-assessment as effective tools for promoting meaningful and collaborative learning (Black and Wiliam, 1998). These approaches allow both students and teachers to be actively involved in the assessment process, generating a greater commitment to learning.

The invisibility of these perspectives limits the possibility of developing inclusive and contextualised educational policies. By failing to consider diversity and the local context, the system perpetuates a homogeneous vision of education that is incompatible with the complexities of school realities (Quilabert et al., 2024). Rethinking these policies is not only a necessity but also an opportunity to build a more just and transformative educational model. The adoption of participatory and contextual assessment models based on qualitative methodologies and continuous assessment could be a fundamental step towards a more equitable education system focused on the holistic development of students.

Conclusions

This research analyzes how standardised assessments are represented in Spanish education policies within the framework of the LOMLOE, reports on the education system and the voices of teachers in vulnerable contexts. There is evidence of a disjunction between the objectives of equity and quality that appear in education policies and their real implications for these schools.

Although evaluations are presented as neutral and essential tools, they do not consider the structural challenges of disadvantaged schools, reinforcing deficit narratives and perpetuating inequalities. Furthermore, their usefulness is limited, as many schools lack the resources to implement the prescribed interventions, which calls into question their effectiveness in promoting equity.

The study calls for a reconfiguration of assessment frameworks to include contextual and inclusive approaches that address local needs. It also highlights the importance of continuing to explore how teachers in particularly difficult contexts resist or adapt to these assessments and the market-driven logic they impose, exploring their agency and capacity to influence policy implementation.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Grant I+D+i / PID2020-112880RB-I00/ funded by MCIN/AEI/10.13039/501100011033.

Ethical statement

Ethical approval

This article does not contain any studies with human or animal participants.

ORCID iD

Lucía Torres-Sales  <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-2219-9225>

Note

1. Grant I+D+i / PID2020-112880RB-I00/ funded by MCIN/AEI/ 10.13039/501100011033.

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Lucía Torres-Sales is contracted under the ‘Investigo Program’, in the framework of the Recovery, Transformation and Resilience Plan, funded by the European Union - Next Generation EU of the

University of Zaragoza. She is a member of the research group 'Education and Diversity'. Her interests are focused on education policy, inclusive education and ethnography.

Begoña Vigo-Arrazola is Associate Professor at the University of Zaragoza (Spain). PI of the research groups 'Education and Diversity' S49_23R of the Government of Aragon and 'Educational Inclusion in Rural, Periurban and Urban Areas' belonging to the Campus Ibero consortium of universities. She has led different education projects at regional, national and international levels. She has published different articles and chapters in national and international journals and editorials of recognised prestige. Her lines of research are complex schools, rural schools, inclusive schools, teacher education and ethnography.