

# Comparative Analysis of Educational Systems of Accountability and Quality of Education in Ontario, Canada and Chile: Standardized Testing and its Role in Perpetuation of Educational Inequity

## Análise comparada de sistemas educacionais de responsabilidade e qualidade da educação em Ontário, no Canadá, e no Chile: testes padronizados e seu papel na perpetuação de iniquidades

### Educacionais

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If as children we were taught to fight for ideals  
not qualifications, as adults, we would work for  
dreams rather than per fortnight.

(Anonymous *Facebook* publication)

**Abstract:** This paper examines Ontario, Canada and Chile test-based systems of accountability and compares the concerted actions taken by both nations to achieve *quality of education*. Central to the paper are a reflection on and an analysis of who are the final beneficiaries of these test-based systems of accountability and how specific social groups, primarily racialized and gendered students, are marginalized and oppressed through colorblind and neutral neoliberal policies that perpetuate and further intensify educational inequities under the mantle of “efficiency” and “accountability”. The paper seeks to envision new and alternative possibilities that work towards denaturalizing global trends in education that are presented as scientific truths while suggesting recommendations that can enable envisioning and implementing an education system centered, guided, and accounted for by the needs of students and their surrounding local communities.

**Key words:** Standardized Testing. Quality of Education. EQAO. SIMCE. Test-Based Systems of Accountability. Educational Inequity. Illiteracy. and Marginalization.

**Resumo:** Este trabalho examina sistemas de testes padronizados em Ontário, no Canadá, e no Chile, comparando as ações coordenadas tomadas por ambas as nações para atingir *educação de qualidade*. Centrais para o trabalho são a reflexão e a análise de quem são os beneficiários finais destes sistemas de responsabilidade baseados em testes padronizados e como grupos específicos, primariamente estudantes de raça e gênero não majoritários, oprimidos por políticas neoliberais, supostamente neutras, que perpetuam e intensificam

iniquidades sob o manto de eficiência e responsabilidade. O trabalho pretende visualizar possibilidades novas e alternativas que trabalhem para desnaturalizar tendências globais na educação que, apresentadas como verdades científicas, encaminham recomendações que permitem visualizar e implementar um sistema educacional centralizado, guiado e representativo dos estudantes e das comunidades locais circundantes.

**Palavras Chave:** Testes Padronizados. Qualidade da Educação, EQAO e SIMCE, Sistemas de Responsabilidade Baseados em Testes Padronizados. Iniquidade, Iletramento e Marginalização Educacional.

## Introduction

As a result of current global connections, distant societies are being homogenized in their institutions. Policy and key aspects for social development that should reflect the local dynamics of provincial and national communities are being shaped by external trends. These trends consider very little of local realities when defining priorities, goals and outcomes. This is the case of the realm of education that since three decades ago has, in a more sustained, way blindly adopted educational ideas and policies that have become hegemonic internationally, yet do not reflect specific student, community, local, and national needs.

In this critical analysis, the authors look at Ontario, Canada, and Chile through a comparative analysis which examines how global homogenizing trends materialize in the realm of education. Through examination and comparison of the concerted actions taken by both nations to achieve *quality of education*, we ask who are the final beneficiaries of these test-based systems of accountability and how specific social groups in particular are marginalized and oppressed through colorblind and neutral neoliberal policies shaped by economic, technical and human efforts that seek to achieve learning outcomes globally. Our final goal is to explore and discuss how we can denaturalize trends that are currently presented as scientific truths while envisioning new and alternative possibilities that make education accountable to the people by the people, guided by the needs of students and their surrounding local communities and learning environments.

In order to carry on this reflection and analysis, we first look into the meaning of *quality of education* and then transition to examine actions taken by the Ontario provincial government and the Chilean government to achieve this quality. Therefore, we examine

the dynamics, processes, relations and institutions that are expressed in what has been called systems of accountability. In both cases, Ontario, Canada, and Chile, these systems are accountable, but for the operational definition of *quality in education* that has been globally defined, rather than by local communities, citizens and diverse subjectivities. Within our analysis it is unavoidable to examine systems of evaluation and assessment that both nations have put in place, as they are instruments that have become central to determining if *quality of education* is being achieved and to quantify the extent of student achievement. In the case of Ontario, Canada, we observe the Educational Quality and Accountability Office (EQAQO) system of standardized assessments and in the case of Chile we examine SIMCE<sup>5</sup>, which is also a standardized system of educational assessment. We compare these systems in their history, but moreover in the effects that they have had in policy and consequentially on “disadvantaged (minoritized and racialized)” students, teachers, curriculum, and society in general. As part of this critical analysis, we look at the complex set of actions and policies that manifest under the Chile and Ontario systems of accountability, which we refer to as *test-based accountability system*, defined as all the efforts and investments made to improve *quality of education* measured in its effect and “efficiency” through standardized testing. We also critique the discursive location that equity acquires and symbolizes within the operative definition of *quality of education*, as we believe that it is a form of instrumentalization that has little or nothing to do with keeping the system accountable in relation to students’ or local communities’ needs. Finally, as a way to conclude the paper, we present our final reflections and possible new and alternative directions, in the process inviting readers to think critically about the direction and quality that education should gravitate towards for future generations.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Whenever discussion arises about the *quality of education*, the question of how to achieve that quality and how to verify its achievement also immediately arises. This triad — quality, achievement, and verification — is one of the major issues in education that has been largely discussed at the local and global level by governments, philosophers, scholars, education systems, and society in general. A constitutive part of the problematic

nature of this issue is the difficulty in defining what exactly is meant by “quality” in education. Edwards (1991), points out that *quality in education* is a complex subject to be defined. In fact, a definition of *quality of education* is often not mentioned but reference is consistently made to the components that participate in the charging of education with quality. Edwards (Op Cit., 1991) explains the signifier character of quality in the context of education; an ambiguous concept which is the result of always defining quality through its factors, therefore, not arriving at a unique and final definition. In the area of education, quality factors are linked to a philosophical and sociological paradigm that underpins an educational project. Therefore, factors that define quality depend on the social perspective that informs education, the place from where that educational perspective is enunciated and who enunciates it. Thus, there is not an absolute definition of *quality of education*, as it is discursively shaped by social, political, cultural, economic and historical conditions.

In the current global context, *quality of education*, has adopted a technocratic approach. This approach coincides with the paradigm of social functionalism which views education as scientific, observable, and a measurable phenomenon; a process that is quantifiable. According to this paradigm, the learning process is prompted by a rationale curriculum (TYLER, 1949) structured in learning objectives, observable behaviors, and a system of evaluation. Under this paradigm, which has been widely adopted in Latin America and North America, *quality of education* is attributed to efficiency referring to an educative process resembling the industrial production process. A crucial factor in understanding the value of *quality of education* under this paradigm is the importance of hierarchical centralized control through all phases and over the numerous stakeholders that are directly involved with the educational process. Thus, through the lens of the social functionalism paradigm, education is an efficient means that is quantitatively measured through which citizens can be shaped and molded (EDWARDS, 1991) to fit and respond to the demands that society presents. Under this model, education does not respond to an encyclopedic model but to a technocratic one that requires the development of skills and abilities that are useful for employment and societal growth.

Evaluation and assessment are central to this highly controlling paradigm. An evaluation and assessment system, aligned with the scientific approach to education,

allows the verification of various levels of achievement of specific skills, abilities, behaviors, experiences and values in relation to the objectives presented in the rationale curriculum. Everybody is under scrutiny; administrative personnel, teachers and students are assessed through an intended positivist “objective” system that verifies how unique sets of learning objectives consigned in the rationale curriculum are expressed through certain behaviors. Under this paradigm, *quality of education* is directly associated with the capacity of a pedagogical system to install certain cognitive contents within subjects that participate in the education process.

Under the current hegemonic socio-functionalist paradigm, evaluation and assessment have become the focal point of the educational process in the majority of Western educational institutions all over the world. These systems have culminated in the construction and implementation of a set of standardized tests that give account to the quality of the educational process. Before continuing it is important to examine what we mean by standardized tests and why it plays a significant role in perpetuating the socio-functionalist paradigm as the dominant lens through which *quality of education* is assessed. According to Hamilton, Stecher, and Klein (2002), “The term standardized refers to tests that have standard tasks, administration conditions, and scoring rules. The term does not imply a particular test format, such as multiple choice, or a particular type of score interpretation, such as norm-referenced [but it rather] refers to the normalization of the conditions in which these standardized tests are taken” (p. 4). The emergence of global systems of evaluation such as Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), and Latin American Laboratory for Assessment of the *Quality of Education* (LLECE) allows us to understand how deep the process of productive rationalism has gone and how extensive are its implications worldwide. As an example, PISA has invoked numerous effects on local educational systems of numerous countries where the test is administered. According to the PISA website (2016), “around 510,000 students in 65 economies took part in the PISA 2012 assessment of reading, mathematics and science representing about 28 million 15-year-olds globally”. Such large participation by various countries globally is an indication of the extent to which PISA shapes how participant countries define

their learning objectives, pedagogical strategies, and administrative structures; every country wants to obtain a high score on PISA standardized tests, which is symbolically synonymous of economic and social development achieved through the sophistication of the rationale learning process.

Since its inception, PISA's rankings of countries, based on how students perform on standardized tests has exponentially gained value and a form of currency in the public and political atmosphere. The test results become a constant source of reference by government officials, politicians, and various members of the mass media as representative of high *quality of education*. As Figazzolo (2009) points out, "the general public wants to understand what's going on in education and governments want to demonstrate "progress in education" to their electorates" (p. 4). As a result, PISA has become the ideal platform for outcomes-based politics, where politicians make constant reference to the test results to validate the success of their educational system. In the case that a country performs poorly, PISA helps to emphasize the need for reforms in policies to create a more efficient system that would lead to better performance on standardized tests. Much like the technological race to dominate space in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as part of the Cold-War era, in our current globalized world there is a new educational race where countries try to outperform one another on PISA and other international standardized tests. Thus, PISA becomes a platform for countries to gain global currency and elite status; by doing well on these tests the country is globally proving to the world the value and worth of their labour market and the capacity of their population to compete with the best in the world.

Obsession with performing well on international global assessments has been viralized globally to the extent that government leaders and politicians are blindly committing resources and money to improving student test scores without questioning how such extensive investment on testing and assessment impacts teachers, students, and various other stakeholders in unique contexts and local communities. The allocation of resources is justified by the need of creating a system of accountability — a *test-based accountability system* — that expects all students to perform well on standardized outcomes-based tests regardless of their socio-economic status, ethnicity, culture, geographical location, and access to resources, opportunities, and social support systems.

Thus, with the discourse of what is *quality of education* comes along the discourse of “accountability” and consequentially the discourse of equity in education.

According to Hamilton, Stecher, and Klein (2002) a *test-based accountability system* can be defined as “a set of policies and procedures that provide rewards and/or sanctions as a consequence of scores on large scale achievement tests” (p. 3). The authors also identify interrelated components of a *test-based accountability system*: Goals, Measures, Targets, and Incentives. Building on this definition, we expand that an accountability system is also a set of policies and procedures that seeks to provide the necessary conditions for students, no matter their structural differences, to perform well while their cognitive acquisition is being monitored through large scale standardized achievement tests. Namely, a *test-based accountability system* works as a tandem of resources that expects all students regardless of their structural differences to have the same learning outcomes when exposed to the same education system; an approach that is not suitable to all the stakeholders involved in the education process. This problematic perspective is not new, as Hamilton, Stecher, and Klein (2002) further raised questions about systems of accountability by pointing out that “testing as part of an accountability system raises that difficult issue of “who should be held accountable to whom for what?” (p. 104).

These crucial inquiries act as a navigation chart that can eventually guide us to explore and reveal who are the final beneficiaries of the current accountability discourse and what can be done to transform education to become a realm where liberal democracy and diversity can co-exist. In the following sections, we will present and examine the systems of accountability of Ontario, Canada and Chile and how they measure *quality of education* through local standardized test systems. Both countries have the particularity that they are part of the PISA spectacle. Our starting point is a hypothesis; we think that the need to access economic benefits attached to performing well on global systems of standardized evaluation has permeated local educational systems to the extreme that they have become accountable not for students but for tests. As a result, in the name of accountability, specific social groups, primarily racialized, gendered, minoritized and those from low socio-economic backgrounds, are marginalized and oppressed through colorblind and neutral neoliberal policies that further perpetuates educational inequities.

Examining the trajectory of policy changes in the province of Ontario, Canada and in Chile we delineate some of the characteristics of both systems of accountability and reflect on their effects and implications that arise from adopting a standardized test-based accountability model which disregards unique needs of students that emerge from unique cultural locations, particular geographies and biographies, and societal urgencies.

### **Brief History of Test-Based Accountability Models: SIMCE and EQAO**

Ontario, Canada, and Chile are two very distant places that have a commonality: a test-based accountability education model where *quality of education* is defined and measured through standardized testing. Both countries have put in place a local version of a complex apparatus that seeks to verify the efficiency of the official education system and its curriculum, learning objectives and processes. In the case of Ontario, Canada this system is known as Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) while the system in Chile is known as SIMCE. This commonality has led them to entrench their contact and relationships during the last decade. The high scores accomplished in international standardized tests by Canada have symbolized the country as a high *quality of education* global role model that Chile has chosen to follow. To provide an example, during 2011 the Ministry of Education of Chile developed a plan called Excellence School Principal Training<sup>6</sup> (CAMPOS et al. 2014) that amongst its many components included getting in contact with universities and researching educational institutes of connoted prestige. One of these institutions was the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) located in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. It was arranged so that the school principals from Chile would visit OISE to get in close contact with the Canadian educational system in order to distinguish ideal practices that could be emulated back in Chile in order to improve the *quality of education*.

Ontario, Canada, and Chile have had some similar socio-political reasons that led them to implement standardized testing accountability systems. In the case of Chile, SIMCE is the institutional culmination of various previous evaluative systems that had a national character. Bravo (2011) traced back the origin of SIMCE to the end of the 60's when it was performed as the first national test amongst students at the end of elementary school level<sup>7</sup>.

The aim of the Ministry of Education was to measure the efficiency of the school system through checking students' acquisition of cognitive skills. This practice was implemented and continued until the first half of the 70's through what became known as the National Test to Measure Learning Outcomes amongst Chilean Students (Prueba Nacional para Medir los Logros de Aprendizaje de los Estudiantes Chilenos). This test can be considered as a benchmark; it was the first attempt to put in place a national system of evaluation in the Chilean formal education. Following that period, during the first half of the 80's the Program for the Evaluation of Learning Performance was implemented (Programa de Evaluación del Rendimiento Escolar [PER]) followed shortly in 1985 by the implementation of the System to Evaluate the *Quality of Education* (Sistema de Evaluación de la Calidad de la Educación [SECE]) (BRAVO, 2011; Agencia de Calidad, 2015). During the second half of the 80's, for the first time SIMCE was formalized with the main goal of creating school rankings based on test-performance to inform parents which schools were better for the enrolment of their children. The ranking of schools was an instrument that opened the door for the educational system to transition from being a public rights-based perspective to privatized free-market logic. The test-based accountability model that emerged during the 80's paved the way for the educational process to be addressed through the motto "Freedom of Choice" that later in early 90's manifested itself in the full implementation of the school voucher system. The idea was that through school rankings, developed based on test-scores and the freedom to choose where to enrol students, the *quality of education* would naturally improve through competition for students' enrolment. The emergence of a test-based school rankings in the decade of the 80's coincides with the adoption of Neoliberalism as the underpinning ideology that led the transformation of Chile into a corporative State; a situation that reflects the occupation of the realm of education by the new Neoliberal socio-economic paradigm.

During 1988, when Chile was in the beginning of a political process that would lead the country to leave behind a dictatorship era, the test system was re-formulated in its goals and objectives. SIMCE was presented as an informative tool that would provide a snapshot of the efficiency and deficiencies of the school system; the test would inform the public about the students' performance but its primary focus was not a source of information for the parents but rather for the government to better allocate resources

for the most vulnerable communities. In the 90's, when Chile was already in a post-dictatorship era, the same logic was used as a means of justifying the legitimacy of the test; however, the new “democratic” government implemented important changes. Due to the systematic decreasing of resources injected by the State into the educational system during the 80's, it showed critical indicators regarding *quality of education* and equity in its distribution. As a way of responding to the crisis, the government implemented a complex series of programs and interventions that attempted to improve the quality of the learning process and to compensate for the poor scores obtained by economically disadvantaged schools (OECD 2004; In DONOSO, 2005).

During the 90's, all the changes propelled during the dictatorship era in the field of education were deepened while simultaneously emerged an “equity” narrative around the actions deployed by the post-dictatorship government. A new curriculum process was developed in an attempt to de-centralize education and to improve resource distribution (HIMMEL, 1997; ROMÁN, 1999; Agencia de Calidad, 2015) where actions were monitored through scores on standardized tests. Thus, SIMCE acquired a gravitating role and a legal character within the school realm. Even though it was not until 1992 that the Ministry of Education took complete control of the standardized evaluation system, it was the education law (LOCE)<sup>8</sup> enacted in 1990 that finally institutionalized SIMCE as a means to measure the learning achievement of students at the elementary and secondary level in the Chilean school system. Although, at the beginning of the 90's not all schools had implemented and administered the test, by the middle of the decade SIMCE was part of the majority of schools in Chile (HIMMEL, 1997; Bravo, 2011). Nowadays, the Organization for Economic Corporation and Development (OECD) considers SIMCE as the main source of information that provides feedback for the development of public policies in the area of education in Chile. The information that SIMCE collects seeks to guide the focalization of interventions and decisions regarding *quality of education* at a national level (RUMINOT, 2014). In fact, OECD continually highlights some areas where SIMCE plays a role: educational policies, mass media, teachers and schools, families and market, and academic research. One of the areas that is most impacted by SIMCE is “families and market”. Even though the main purpose of SIMCE radically changed in

the 90's and the focus was not to establish school rankings, the Ministry of Education continued releasing the results to the public. The natural consequence, since then, has been the construction of a school hierarchy based on test results. Not surprisingly, this hierarchy places private schools as superior followed by voucher schools being at the bottom and often located in the most economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods. This situation is a focal point to understanding how education is effected when invaded by free-market ideology. Since in Chile people can freely choose what school to enrol their children, each year families that are able to pay for higher expenses or have the means to access schools outside of their neighbourhood enrol their children in schools that are at the top of the rankings; they believe that through accessing top ranked schools they are exposing their children to an education loaded with *quality* that will provide them later in life with better opportunities within the labour market.

Unlike Chile, in Canada there is not an exclusive legal jurisdiction over educational policies and practices. Educational governance is influenced at three levels; federal, provincial, and at the local level referring to the specific geographics of school boards and their spatial jurisdictions. The formal rules and practices for governance are established at the provincial level and communicated to local schools boards. This multi-faceted approach to governance provides school boards with the power to be flexible in using unique approaches to address local needs of students and the surrounding community. Very surprising is that despite the de-centralized model that characterizes a certain level of flexibility that provinces and local boards have, in the case of the province of Ontario, the efficiency of the learning process, the *quality of education*, is similarly measured and quantified through a test-based accountability model named Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO).

Standardized testing in Ontario has a more recent history compared to Chile. EQAO census style assessment began in the 1996-1997 school year when all grade 3 students in the province wrote the test in domains of reading, writing, and mathematics. The emergence of standardize testing in Ontario, Canada, was a response to the public inquiry directed at finding efficiencies and establishing transparency in the educational system. The education system in Ontario became a prime focus of scrutiny by taxpayers, media outlets, policy-

makers, and parents in the early 1990s; the system was blamed for the compounding provincial government debt and the rising unemployment rate. Schools were accused of not preparing students adequately for the emergence of the knowledge-based, market-driven economy. Public polls indicated that taxpayers and many parents felt that the public education system was failing students by not being responsive to the economical needs of the Canadian society in a manner that would keep Canada competitive during a time where globalization and unemployment were on the rise (RCOL, 1995, p. 59). This placed pressure on government officials to seek solutions and possible reforms to education as a means of restoring public confidence in the education system. The call for educational reform reached its climax when media outlets began emphasizing how Canadian students from Ontario were doing poorly on international standardized tests and in comparison to students from other provinces (GIDNEY, 1999, p. 172; MORGAN, 2006).

In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of how and why drastic education reforms occurred in Ontario in the mid-1990s, it is fundamental to contextualize and dissect the socio-political conditions that pressurized politicians to alter and introduce new educational policies and practices to make education more “efficient” and “accountable” to the public. According to Morgan (2006), in 1986, after 30 years of Conservative rule, and four years of Liberal Government, the New Democratic Party (NDP) assumed the direction of the province in 1990. The NDP government began implementing new ideas to re-structure the education system province wide. This included “appointment of consultants to review potential amalgamations” of various school boards and implementation of “province-wide achievement tests for Grade 9 students in reading and writing and public reporting of the results” (SATTLER, 2012, p. 8; GIDNEY, 1999, p. 223). Also as a means to respond to the public outcry and pressure to improve the education system, in May 1993 the NDP launched the Royal Commission on Learning which “initiated an opening of public opportunity structures that allowed for public input into educational governance” (MORGAN, p. 129). After extensive consultation with the public, The Royal Commission on Learning launched a report that summarized the opinions of “more than 4700 groups and individuals” (SATTLER, p. 9). The report made recommendations for changes in education with the objective of finding “laws, policies,

and procedures necessary and desirable to improve the efficiency, effectiveness, relevance, and accountability of education in Ontario”. The goal was to ensure that “Ontario youth [were] well-prepared for the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (Royal Commission on Learning, 1994, p. vi-vii).

The Royal Commission on Learning utilized a series of guiding questions to examine four key areas in education; a shared vision, program, accountability, and education governance. The Commission released its findings in January 1995 titled *For the Love of Learning* which made 167 recommendations in numerous areas related to curriculum, outcomes learning reports, funding, and addressing the needs of specific student populations such as Indigenous students, students with special needs, and students from minority groups. One of the areas of focus of the recommendations was accountability. Under the sub-section titled “Large-Scale Assessment of Student Achievement and the Effectiveness of School Programs”, the Commission recommended the establishment of the Office of Learning Assessment and Accountability which would be an independent arm’s length testing agency functioning as a “watchdog for system performance” responsible for annual “construction, administration, scoring, and reporting” of standardized tests (RCOL, p. 256).

In 1995, the NDP era came to an end as it was defeated by the progressive conservative government of Mike Harris. The “Common Sense Revolution” was the name that characterized the period of Harris in power. This campaign proclaimed to fix the inadequacies in government and to propel the necessary changes to make government policies and practices relevant to the needs of the increasingly competitive, globalized knowledge-based economy of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Harris’s approach was much more authoritarian and aggressive; it was guided by a philosophy of reducing the cost of education through “cut spending and downsize of school board budgets”. Harris’s plan resulted in an “expenditure reduction of \$400 million from school board budgets” by 1996 and a bigger reduction later that translated into a “dramatic \$1 billion cut from the system” (Sattler, p. 11). This dramatic reduction led to increased tensions between the government, teachers, and the teacher unions, as the reduction in government spending caused the elimination of various social programs and laying off of teachers and support

staffs. The time that Harris was in power became known as the “dark ages in education” in Ontario where education as a whole was drastically changed due to major cuts in funding. Two of the major changes that occurred under the Harris government, which have long-lasting effects until today, were the introduction of Bill 104 titled the *Fewer School Boards Act*, which “reduced the number of school board from 129 to 72 with a corresponding decrease in the number of school trustees from 1900 to 700” (SATTLER, p. 11-12; GIDNEY, 1999), and more controversially the introduction of Bill 160 titled the *Education Quality Improvement Act* that “centralized financial control at the provincial level by removing education funding from the residential property tax eliminating school boards’ local taxing power” (SATTLER, p 11). These changes provided the niche for the implementation of an accountability system centred on outcomes-based results supplemented with the use of fear tactics by the government which made it illegal for school boards to operate on a deficit and obligating school boards to publish annual reports on their finances disclosing their spending (SATTLER, p. 12; GIDNEY, 1999).

The Harris’s government is remembered by its technocratic approach that resulted in the transformation of the education system in Ontario, Canada. In fact, the recommendations from the Royal Commission on Learning report was used as a foundation to institutionalize a test-based accountability model that was established in 1996 as part of the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) lead by a Chief Executive Officer and governed by a board of directors. The directors were responsible for creating criterion-referenced census-style standardized tests that would provide “an independent gauge of children’s learning and achievement” across the province (EQAO, 2012, p. 1). According to EQAO (2013), the main focus was “to monitor students’ achievement at key points in their learning as a way of assuring the public that all students were being assessed in the same way and according to an established set of standards” (p. 5). Since its inception, EQAO as an accountability agency administers standardized tests that measure the quality of the educational process at different levels.

Looking at the particular contexts in which SIMCE and EQAO standardized testing systems were established one could find many similarities. In Ontario, Canada and Chile, the emergence of standardized test systems is part of a wider set of reforms

that responded to a transformation in the definition of the goals and ends of education. In both cases the implementation of standardized tests was done predominantly by Conservative governments that opened the gate for Neoliberal politics to enter into the realm of education. In the case of Chile, SIMCE was propelled in midst of one of the most extreme dictatorships that Latin America has witnessed and in Ontario, Canada during one of the most controversial Conservative governments that fiercely sought to cut public spending advancing the privatization of many areas of the economy. In both cases, we argue that the implementation of standardized tests were the means to justify the efficiency of austerity politics that characterized Conservative neoliberal economic systems. Moreover, these politics had an impact on students learning primarily students from racialized and minoritized groups. These effects will be discussed in the following sections of this paper.

### **A More In-Depth Examination of SIMCE and EQAO Tests**

EQAO seeks to measure how much of the Ontario curriculum has been apprehended by the students. The test is taken in grades 3, 6, 9, and 10 as key points for students to be assessed in various domains through their schooling years. For all the assessments, the questions are linked to the Ontario Curriculum expectations and include a range of multiple choice and open-ended response questions. The following school year, each student who writes the EQAO test receives a personalized report that “describes his or her achievement on the test” in relation to Ontario provincial curriculum expectations ranging from level 1 being below grade expectations to level 4 being above grade expectations (EQAO, 2012, p. 8). As well, each school and school board receives detailed reports about overall achievement of their student population and their school board. In 2010-2011, according to EQAO (2012), there was approximately two million students enrolled in the publicly funded school system in Ontario and the cost of administrating the EQAO was \$32 million dollars. EQAO testing continues to be implemented today in grades 3, 6, 9, and 10 across the province of Ontario.

In the case of SIMCE, the tests also seek to measure how well students have apprehended the main learning goals set in the national curriculum. Each year students

in grade 4 and grade 8 at the elementary level and in grade 11 at the secondary level are tested. SIMCE is a uniform test that is applied to all schools. The tests are taken by external personnel to ensure the transparency of the process. The obtained scores are not disaggregated individually but compiled to provide a class and school snapshot of the apprehension of the learning goals of the curriculum. The format in which information with the scores is delivered allows to compare subjects evaluated including results between current and previous years, results obtained by participating schools, and results obtained between two or more classes in the same grade at the same school. Between 2013 and 2015, it is estimated that SIMCE costs were approximately \$56 million dollars.

If students perform well on these tests, both in Ontario, Canada and Chile, it serves as evidence that the school system delivers an education with quality. Thus, being able to compare the results by schools, regions, cities, and school boards allows authorities to determine the level of equitability and distribution of *quality of education*. The results of standardized testing systems function as a kind of thermometer that measures the social justice that underpins the school system. If results are uniform amongst students with different sociocultural, economic, ethnic, and racial backgrounds, then it signifies an education system that has *quality* and on top of that it is *equitable* in terms of social justice. Unfortunately, if we rely on standardized tests results to indicate how good or bad the education system is, we would have to fail Ontario, Canada and the Chilean system. Each year, the results of the tests show students from marginalized and disadvantaged socio-cultural, economic, ethnic, and racial backgrounds are students who obtain the lowest scores. In response to this situation, both countries have developed complex systems of accountability that seek to address the unique needs of particular student populations in order for those students to perform well on the tests. Looking at the various complex efforts and initiatives that countries invest in to improve testing scores, the key question that arises is whether the system of accountability is designed to make the education system accountable in relation to the needs of students or to the needs of standardized tests?

In the next section we explore the accountability systems that both the governments of Ontario, Canada and Chile have put in place in order to improve students' performance on standardized tests. We compare them in their operative and ethical dimensions and try to

answer the question posed.

### **Systems of Accountability: Intensifying Educational Inequities and the Achievement Gap through Standardized Testing**

How well a system of accountability functions is measured through the results that students achieve on standardized tests. Therefore, a system of accountability takes the shape of a *test-based system of accountability*, as the uniformity of tests results become the most credible and symbolic indicator of the level of equity in the educational processes.

#### **Chile**

Since the beginning of the 90's there has been a concerted effort to close the achievement gap that exists between students who come from advantaged and disadvantaged population sectors; a gap that is visualized through standardized test results. The budgetary cuts implemented and reinforced during the dictatorship of Pinochet are believed to have deepened this achievement gap. As a result, subsequent post-dictatorship governments made various efforts to reduce the differences in terms of learning outcomes in an attempt to make the educational system more equitable. These efforts together form what is called Systems of Accountability as they seek to ensure that the educational system considers the differences students represent when exposed to an official learning process.

In Chile, the *Test-Based System of Accountability* started to take shape in the early 90's. First, the budget was increased and subsequently the government implemented important reforms (COX, 2005, p.59-76) mainly directed towards disadvantaged populations<sup>9</sup>. The new resources introduced went to improve infrastructure of schools in rural areas to bring digital resources to schools in disadvantaged neighbourhoods and to provide schools with textbooks in the most important areas of curriculum; math, language, and the sciences. The new resources were also destined for teacher training in key areas of curriculum and in pedagogical matters related to standardized tests. The government established a link between the schooling system and the public health system to identify health problems that could interfere with the capacity of learning<sup>10</sup>. Other important reforms included introduction of full day schools implemented gradually between 1996

and 2006 (JEC<sup>11</sup>) that started in rural areas and later expanded to urban spaces across the country. As stated by the Ministry of Education, JEC “sought to improve quality and equity of learning outcomes. The underpinning rationale for this transformation was that increasing the number of school hours for more vulnerable disadvantaged students would allow them to develop higher cognitive abilities and to re-codify language into a more formal mode” (OCDE, 2004, p. 32).

Following its effort to create more equity in the education system, the government of Chile in 2004 passed a new bill that extended mandatory education until end of high school. This legal initiative sought to reduce school dropout rates (MIDEPLAN, 2003). Along with the pedagogical, curricular and legal reforms, the government fortified the School Feeding Program (Programa de Alimentación Escolar [PAE]) destined for students in the public school system and in subsidized schools (voucher schools)<sup>12</sup>. As well, a system of scholarship for students from vulnerable populations was created to improve their performance in key areas of mathematics and language.

In addition to these programs and policies, the government developed focused initiatives that since 1990 till now have aimed to help disadvantaged students improve their learning outcomes. One of them is called the 900 Schools Program (P-900)<sup>13</sup> directed first for elementary schools and later expanded to include secondary schools. Specific to high schools, in 2000, the government created two programs *Montegrande* and *Liceo para Todos* (High School for Everybody [our translation]). These programs aimed to improve the experiences of vulnerable, disadvantaged students within the school system; to decrease the dropout rate and to improve learning outcomes (MINEDUC, 1996). Since 2014 a new program called Program for Support and Effective Access (PACE [our translation])<sup>14</sup> was developed and implemented. The goal of PACE is to support vulnerable students to gain access to post-secondary education and to support them in their journey until they graduate. The program provides a stage of levelling for students who have gaps in terms of their cognitive abilities. It also provides academic and vocational orientation and a series of workshops that aim to prepare students for unique challenges associated with university life.

Ethnic minorities have also been incorporated in efforts to make equity a pillar of

the Chilean education system. Thus, since 1996, a program of Intercultural Education has been implemented supported by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) to further the development of indigenous communities. This program provides economic assistance for indigenous students at the elementary, secondary, and post-secondary levels.

Teachers have also been incorporated as part of efforts to improve the *quality* and *equity* in education. Initial teacher education programs have undergone changes since the early 90's; teacher trainings have been developed for specializations in the areas of mathematics, language, and the sciences. As well, international internships have been implemented to expose teachers to foreign successful school systems with Ontario, Canada being one of them. There is also the system of economic rewards called the National System to Evaluate the Performance of Educational Institutions (*Sistema Nacional de Evaluación del Desempeño de los Establecimientos Educacionales (SNED)* [our translation] which evaluates schools based on results; it provides schools with extra economic resources named Subvention for Excellence of Performance (“Subvención por Desempeño de Excelencia” [our translation]). This system of rewards was created in 1995 by the government to engage teachers in improving education. In 2008, it was promulgated the law that created the Preferential School Subvention (SEP) (*Ley de Subvención Escolar Preferencial* [our translation]. This law provides extra public resources to schools, from pre-school to grade 10, that have a major enrolment of vulnerable students also known as priority students<sup>15</sup>. What is sought is that schools in disadvantaged positions, based on their results from standardized tests, implement an Educative Improvement Plan with an emphasis on improving the performance of priority students. Student performance is mainly monitored through individual grades but also through performance of students in different areas as evaluated by SIMCE. In order to receive the Preferential School Subvention, educational institutions are expected to demonstrate their commitment to creating sustainable improvements in SIMCE results.

During 2011, all of these concerted efforts translated into programs, initiatives, and policies combined under a singular umbrella called the System for National Education Quality Assurance (*Ley del Sistema Nacional de Aseguramiento de la Calidad [SNAC]*). Although the emergence of SNAC was mobilized by pressures coming from student

movements that questioned the *equity* and *quality* of the Chilean education system, it is important to acknowledge that the incorporation of Chile as part of international systems of assessments such as PISA, TIMSS and LLECE as well as the integration of Chile as part of the OECD countries in 2010 demanded that the country made extra efforts to improve the poor performance of Chilean students in international tests. Thus, the incorporation of Chile as part of the OECD and the subsequent need of making the country competitive in the global market crystalized the emergence of SNAC.

There are three important aspects that this new accountability system considers that we would like to highlight: responsibility, socio-economic background, and individual dimension. According to the government of Chile, SNAC emphasizes responsibility over punishment providing autonomy to schools, however, that autonomy has a limitation: the results on SIMCE. Hence, schools that consistently perform poorly on SIMCE tests are classified as operating at an “insufficient” level. If such under performance on SIMCE repeats for more than four consecutive years, it would lead to intervention by the Ministry of Education in the case of public schools, and in the case of particular schools financed by the voucher system to have their licenses revoked.

A second aspect that SNAC considers is the emphasis that it puts on the socio-economic background of students and the community in which a specific school is located. Thus, a school is evaluated not just through the results obtained in SIMCE, but it is also taken into consideration the socio-economic challenges that students experience that could influence the achievement of learning outcomes (SNAC law, art. 17). These contextual factors include the characteristics of the households, geographical location (rural isolation), student’s family history and characteristics, and parents’ formal education levels. What is interesting to notice is that despite all the efforts to improve student learning outcomes and the deployment of various actions that emphasize social context as a factor that influences performance, the dominant perspective still remains that all students can be assessed through the same homogenized instrument.

The third innovative aspect that SNAC considers is individual dimension as a key component of the success of a learning process. For decades metrics like SIMCE were the only aspect that was considered when evaluating student performance. The new

accountability system includes in the evaluation of a school the situation of the individual in the educative institution. Thus, aspects such as self-esteem, academic motivation, school's relationships, civic participation, healthy habits, school attendance, gender equality, student retention and technical and professional qualifications are being taken into consideration when school performance is evaluated.

Lastly and more recently, "Alto al SIMCE" (Stop SIMCE [our translation]) is a media campaign initiated by the collective, mainly conformed by education professionals "Perspective". This collective has given shape to the media publication of the same name where issues related to education, society and social justice are addressed. "Stop SIMCE" goes beyond presenting a public complaint against SIMCE, rather it is a campaign that seeks to debate the utility of the test and to counteract its hegemony within the Chilean educational system. "Stop SIMCE" also attempts to stimulate the critical and creative debate about the purpose of the educational SIMCE (*Perspective*, 2013).

In despite of much of the efforts done by the Chilean government, still the achievement gap that is experienced between advantaged and disadvantaged students continues to intensify and deepen. For instance, Indigenous students are often achieving the lowest level of test scores. Even though there is no disaggregated information available by race or ethnicity on the test scores, analyzing the results by regions and demographics, coincidentally those regions that score the lowest are the ones that have the highest Indigenous populations. Palpable examples include the 2014 SIMCE results. The average national score for grade 8 students was 240 points in Language and Communication, 261 points in Mathematics, and 261 points in History, Geography and Social Sciences. The results of SIMCE evaluations for the same grade in the regions with the largest Indigenous populations were mostly under the national average.

### **Ontario, Canada**

In the case of Ontario, Canada, as a means of improving student scores on EQAO standardized tests, each school within the Toronto District School Board has to develop and comply with a Board Improvement Plan for Student Achievement and Well Being (BIPSA) (TDSB, 2015). As part of BIPSA, in September when school

starts, the administrators and staff are responsible for establishing professional learning teams, update evidence of needs for School Improvement Plan (SIP), and deconstruct EQAO data from the previous year. In October, schools continue to develop their School Improvement Plans with specialized focus on numeracy and literacy. EQAO results are a major area of focus as School Improvement Plans are developed with input from various grade teachers and administrators. As a strategy, in early October specific students are identified known as marker students, to be the focus of attention of teachers in order for the specific students to be moved up a level in their EQAO scores by providing them with extra help and support.

Throughout the school year each student's capabilities and abilities are monitored by their teacher(s). If teachers feel that a student is functioning below grade level, he/she can request for them to be placed under an Individual Education Plan (IEP). According to the TDSB Special Education Plan document (2015), an IEP "is a written plan describing the special education program and/or services required by a particular student. It identifies any accommodations and special education services needed to assist the student in achieving his or her learning expectations. An IEP also outlines "learning expectations that are modified from or alternative to the expectations given in the curriculum policy document for the appropriate grade and subject or course"<sup>16</sup> (p. 74).

Although the accountability discourse continues to promote standardized testing in the name of promoting *equity* in education by emphasizing that all students will be receiving the same *quality of education*, in practice this is not the case. As Ricci (2004) points out "standardized testing can have a negative impact on the quality education students are receiving and the effects can be particularly detrimental to children whose race, culture, or first language is not that of the majority" (p. 346). This is the reality within the Toronto District School Board as schools with high dropout rates are those with the highest number of racialized students" (Colour of Poverty, 2011, p. 4). According to statistics from the TDSB (2009) students of African ascendance experience a dropout that goes beyond 40 percent; a similar situation that students from Portuguese, Latin American, and Indigenous populations experience. According to the TDSB, during 2002 the dropout rate among Latino students was of 37.5 percent while for students

with Portuguese ascendance was 38 percent (TDSB, 2009). The situation is worst for Native students that live on reserves who had a dropout rate of 58 percent in 2011. These unsettling situations lead to several initiatives that have emerged within the communities affected and by the Toronto District School Board. For instance, in 2006 “TDSB Grade 9 Cohort Study: A Five Year Analysis 2000- 2005” was published that examined in detail the racial and ethnic characteristics of the students who dropout (See Brown, 2006) Also emerged the idea of an Africentric Alternative School in response to the high dropout rate among Black students in Toronto’s education system (DEI, 2008, p. 47). The idea for an Africentric Alternative School was closely debated and eventually approved; the school began operating in September 2009 with 90 students enrolled into its unique program. It is important to clarify that the Africentric Alternative School is not exclusively restricted to Black students or teachers, but the teachers are predominantly of African descent and the curriculum and its schooling practices operate based on an African paradigm and Seven Principles of the Ngusu Saba which centers around nurturing a strong sense of community and African culture in the students (TDSB, 2016). The Africentric Alternative School continues to operate today and the Africentric curriculum has been expanded as part of grade 9 and 10 courses within 2 high schools.

Although many alternatives program continue to be introduced and implemented by the Toronto District School Board, results from EQAO standardized tests remain a focal point of reference for judging *quality of education* that students receive. Froese-Germain (2011) outlines that standardized testing further intensifies educational inequity through test bias and the misuse of test scores. He identifies three negative consequences of standardized testing particularly for disadvantages racialized students and students from low-income backgrounds; language bias that centers the hegemonic language as the means for testing, content that ignores cultural experiences, perspectives, and knowledge of children from racial and ethnic minorities, low-income families, and inner-city and rural children, and the individual dimension that problem solving has. These different learning styles (not different abilities), often associated with such factors such as race, ethnicity, income level, and gender are not considered in test design, the assumption being that all individuals perceive information and solve problems in the same way (p. 116).

Echoing the same message, Kearns (2013) points out that, “Literacy is not multiple when it is reduced to a written test score and requires a particular cultural capital to pass” (p. 5) and that “EQAO’s findings demonstrate privately and publicly that some youth are inferior to others. For those it names illiterate or inferior or deficient, it confronts them with an unfamiliar burden of having to legitimize their being” (p. 8). Kearns (2011) interviewed sixteen youth who failed the grade 10 Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) administered by EQAO and her findings indicate that “youth who pass the OSSLT are privileged, rewarded, deemed to be good future citizens and active contributors to society, whereas those who fail are named as different, deemed not up to the standard, are considered to be not thriving, and, therefore, must work harder to become good future citizens” (p. 123). More importantly, “the literacy test was alienating for some youth because it undermined some of their positive identity-confirming experiences, and forced them to negotiate a negative label” such as being “illiterate” (p. 124). As Kearns’s (2011) valuable study depicts, it is critical to be aware of how standardized tests inscribe an identity on certain students, often making racialized students and those from low-income socio-economic backgrounds feel “degraded, humiliated, stressed, and shamed” (p. 118), in the process creating doubt in students about their capabilities and potential to succeed.

It is significant to continuously question how does the promotion of standardized testing as a dominant apparatus to assess learning objectives privileges certain social groups while simultaneously marginalizing and oppressing other groups. As Kearns (2013) points out, “Whose interests are served by making some youth feel this way? Who benefits by the (re)production of the illiterate other in the state?” (p. 9). The ideologies of neoliberalism and its promotion for standardization in the name of accountability function as a colonizing tool pressurizing and controlling indigenous and racialized student populations to conform to results-based objectives or risk being perished through streaming into “average and low-track programs” (FROESE-GERMAIN, 2001, p. 113) and exposure to state violence (SMITH, 2005). Canada and its treatment of Aboriginals, who were the founders of the land, can serve as a prime example of how Native identities were (re)appropriated through standardization and language including the forced attendance of Aboriginal students to residential schools to be assimilated into

Canadian culture, the exclusion and dismissal of oral culture and spirituality as “worthy” domains of knowledge within the official curriculum, and the disciplining of Aboriginal students to speak “proper” English as a means of demonstrating their progress towards being civilized and adapting to the “modern” conditions of Canadian society. In essence, the curriculum and the standardized assessments used as part of the education system inscribe the identity of being an “illiterate” on those who do not do well on standardized tests, as it is interpreted that it is them who cannot learn and master the learning objectives of the curriculum. As Ricci (2004) emphasizes, “the curriculum ignores student needs by implementing a standard curriculum that is expected to fit all students” (p. 359). This results in the promotion of a one-size-fits-all curriculum that ignores the unique needs of communities and their local contexts. Standardization promotes competition that directly opposes the indigenous notion of cooperation and collective responsibility. Standardization also promotes rewards and punishment; those who conform and yield good results on standardized tests will be rewarded with access to economical avenues for income whereas those who fail and yield poor results will risk survival by having limited access to economical means to an income. This approach to learning and education opposes the native spirituality and way of life which are land-based and “tied to the land from which they originate” (SMITH, 2005, p. 121).

One of the unique holistic programs that TDSB started in 2005 is called Model Schools for Inner Cities which focuses on closing the achievement gap by addressing the opportunity gap rather than exclusively focusing on how to improve test scores. The program began with selection of three schools based on the Learning Opportunity Index (LOI) and over time has grown to be implemented within 150 schools in TDSB (Brown, 2015). According to the TDSB (2014), “The LOI ranks each school based on measures of external challenges affecting student success. The school with the greatest level of external challenges is ranked number one and is described as highest on the index”. There is a separate list created for elementary and secondary schools. Model Schools for Inner Cities allocates a specific budget ranging from \$10,000 to \$14,000 dollars per school. Schools then have the flexibility to plan, outline, and document how the money will be used in specific areas as well as its impact on providing opportunities for students to succeed. The

five major areas of focus which the budget can be used towards are; Innovative Teaching and Learning Practices, Support Services to Meet the Social, Emotional, and Physical Well-Being of Students, School as the Heart of the Community, Research, Review and Evaluation of Students and Programs, and Commitment to Shared Successful Practices (Model School for Inner Cities, 2014). Specific type of programs offered as part of Model Schools for Inner Cities include hearing and vision screenings, parent engagement initiatives such as workshops, after school recreation programs in partnerships with other agencies, nutrition, snack, and lunch programs, and specialized staff assigned to work with a cluster of schools such as teaching and learning coaches as well as community support workers (People for Education, 2010).

In despite of all these measurements the achievement gap has not been closed. This situation has motivated the emergence of extra formal institutionalism and social movements in Ontario, Canada as well as in Chile that radically contest standardized testing as a signifier of quality. In the case of Ontario, Canada since 2013 the organization “People for Change”<sup>17</sup> has been developing a program called “Measuring What Matters”<sup>18</sup>. This initiative tries to establish a new framework for assessing and measuring success in education. This program includes goals and indicators that are publicly understandable, educationally useful, and that reflect a range of competencies and skills that students will need to live happy, healthy, economically secure and civically engaged lives. The competencies and conditions fall into five domains: Creativity, Citizenship, Health, Social-Emotional Learning and Quality of Learning Environments. The skills and competencies in each domain are connected to the quality of learning experiences and to the supports available in classrooms, within the school, and in school-community partnerships. In this way, the ‘inputs’ or conditions of learning are just as important as the ‘outputs’ or student outcomes. This new measurement model that focuses on broad measures of student success is in the phase of evaluation and testing. In 2017-2018 results are expected to be accessible to the public.

## Quality Education; Reflections from the Past and Present and Directions for the Future

Certainly in Ontario, Canada and in Chile there have been many advances in educational policies and practices; nevertheless, SIMCE and EQAO remain central point of reference whenever *quality of education* is discussed. In the case of Chile, the SNAC law has defined that SIMCE is not a criterion that exclusively by itself represents the *quality of education* that a school imparts. However, based on the different actions taken by the government of Chile to improve access, quality and equity in education in the last 25 years, it is evident that SIMCE plays a key role. A similar trajectory occurs in Ontario, Canada. Despite the fact that many initiatives are being implemented to respond to students' needs rather than to tests needs, the efficiency of the educational system including its plans, programs, resources and technical efforts are still indirectly evaluated predominantly through EQAO test results. An indicator of this is that there is a great deal of effort to rank schools based on EQAO test results as published yearly by the Fraser Institute. EQAO test scores have gained so much currency that property values are effected by performance and ranking of schools according to their EQAO test results. In the case of SIMCE, statistics, graphics, lists and awards are used to inform and engage public opinion in the discussion of *quality of education*. To do well in SIMCE and in EQAO is synonymous of a high *quality of education* within the national and international context, in the process silencing the discourse about how standardized tests further marginalize racialized students and students from lower socio-economic backgrounds by labelling them illiterate and creating self-doubt in them about their potential and capabilities to succeed and do well in school. Thus, if the rationale that situates *quality of education* in direct relation to performance on standardized tests remains intact, we continue to raise critical questions about the extent and authenticity in which various efforts are made to address educational inequities within the educational system. Does such system authentically seek to address the needs of the students and their local communities or simply seek to remain accountable, or a slave, to the apparatus of standardized testing?

In Ontario, Canada, as in Chile, standardized tests have impacted the way that education is defined and the way that people relate to the educational system. Every year

in both places the results of standardized tests are expected with anxiety. In both cases, boards, Ministry of Education, international agencies, and mainly the public wait for scores to be published in order to make decisions regarding pedagogical interventions, resource distribution, and to speculate possible rankings within international standardized tests, and in the case of parents from higher socio-economic status in Ontario, Canada who have the privilege of selecting their choice of neighbourhood to reside within to decide whether or not to purchase expensive houses within the confines of schools that are ranked as top performers.

Examining the history and implementation of EQAO and SIMCE, we begin to see the trajectory of the material effects that the radicalization of global trends has had in education during the last decades. Two distant places offer a similar spectacle in the endless search for the elusive meaning of *quality in education*. An elusive meaning that can be filled by endless possibilities but in despite of the different spatial, cultural, socio historical conditions and subjectivities between Ontario, Canada, and Chile, not surprisingly, is signified or better said reduced to a bunch of metrics that keep education “accountable” for the needs of the market while erasing subjects, communities, and non-hegemonic version of humanities.

Although theoretically from a political perspective, investment in standardization and implementation of standardized testing is an “objective” means to measure how well all students are doing, in practice such approach does not assist in closing the achievement gap between those from higher socio-economic status and those from marginalized and minoritized lower socio-economic backgrounds. Currently, in the name of equity, the gap between the haves and the have-nots is further intensifying. There are several consequences that have arisen in Ontario, Canada and in Chile as a result of *test-based accountability systems* becoming hegemonic and status quo. One of them is the hunger of schools for ranking higher and the fear of being labelled as a “bad” or “poor performing” school. This situation leads to unethical practices such as teaching to the test and over-emphasizing teaching of certain subjects that are the focus of assessments on standardized tests at the expense of the marginalization to other subjects. As McNeil (2000) states, “a technical test-driven curriculum closes out the stories children bring to school. Inherent

in those stories are, their cultures, home languages, perceptions of the world, questions, and special ways of knowing that may reflect a cultural difference or may just be a mark of their own individuality” (p. 248).

The existence of systems of accountability that accounts for tests preclude any possibility of a student-centered and inquiry-based learning and therefore, consequentially any possibility of equity achievement through education. Moreover, the current approach to addressing equity in education serves the unintended consequence of disengaging students from their schooling experience as they do not have a personal connection or interest in the learning content. Consequentially, this can lead to student drop-outs and systemic push-outs. Hence, one of the consequences of adapting the economic, market-driven neoliberal model of education as the norm is that it homogenizes the needs of all students from all countries irrespective of their unique needs, cultural factors, traditional histories, and societal needs.

Although students, both from affluent and poor neighbourhoods, might demonstrate improvements on standardized tests, we must ask what factors contribute to enabling the conditions that lead to improvement in test scores, and just as importantly what other areas of child development are being left out of the discussion. Those in support of standardized testing often claim that standardized testing reinforces holding all students accountable to high expectations, but Kohn (2000) critically raises an important counter-point to the “high expectations” argument when he states,

When someone emphasizes the importance of “higher expectations” for minority children, it is vital that we reply “Higher expectations to do what? Bubble in more ovals correctly on tests- or pursue engaging projects that promote sophisticated thinking?” The movement driven by “tougher standards”, “accountability,” and similar slogans actually lowers meaningful expectations insofar as it relies on standardized testing as the primary measure of achievement. The more that poor children fill in worksheets on command in an effort to raise their test scores, the further they fall behind affluent kids who are more likely to get lessons that help them understand ideas (p. 38).

The neoliberal market-driven education paradigm homogenizes the needs of students and communities by disregarding them as holistic beings and dynamic

communities and instead judges them predominantly by results and performance on standardized tests. As a whole, standardization penetrates all spheres of education, managing education from the lens of a neoliberal business model while paradoxically proclaiming efficiency and accountability. This leads to standardization functioning as a centralized control mechanism to funnel money and resources to pressurize administrators and teachers to narrow teaching and learning to exclusive domains, often those domains that are tested and assessed by standardized tests. This can be problematic because as Nezavdal (2003) points out, “standardized tests seek to assess individuals, young people who bring a different range of experiences to the classroom, through a most peculiar claim: that all students can learn differently and come from inequitable backgrounds but be evaluated in the same way, at the same time, by the same test- designed of course, by those who are the social power-holders” (p. 69). From a top down hierarchical approach, the neoliberal assumption is that through standardization of teaching and learning and fostering of competition between schools, communities, districts and nations, better results will be gained (FROESE-GERMAIN, 2010). Emphasis is placed on outputs referring to results on tests, without consideration for how students enter the sphere of education socially and emotionally including their autobiographical histories, histories of the nation, and the power dynamics that shape the local learning environment such as religion, pedagogy, and access to resources and social support systems. Hence, education becomes a neutral space, a de-politicized and de-historicized space where the assumption is made that all have an equal footing in succeeding. This model reinforces sameness rather than equity (MCNEIL, 2000).

To conclude, if we, as different nations, want to close the achievement gap between different social groups in the education system and to address the systemic educational inequities that are present and persistent, we need to invest in programs and policies that view education as symbiotic with the larger community and other institutions. We cannot address the achievement gap without first addressing the inequality of opportunity that plagues our educational system and further marginalizes our most vulnerable student populations who schools already place at a disadvantage from their initial contact due to a range of differences including their race, culture, ethnicity, and language mastery. As

long as schools continue to operate under the one-size-fits-all mandate and as long as schools located within higher socio-economic status communities continue to get access to better opportunities, resources, and social support systems, the achievement gap will continue to exist and get wider. By investing money in creating equality of opportunity for racialized, gendered, English as second language, and students from lower socio-economic backgrounds through unique and alternative programs, we can work towards building confidence in students and guide them to make a difference in their own lives and in their communities. This kind of difference and alternative approach to improving student achievement goes beyond a test score and has real-life implications for all living within the school-community space. Education alone, and *quality of education*, cannot be judged exclusively through standardized tests and their quantifiable indicators. Students have to be seen as holistic beings with different social, emotional, academic, and psychological needs. More recent programs and policies such as individual dimension of the System for National Education Quality Assurance (SNAC) in Chile and Model Schools for Inner Cities in Ontario, Canada are gravitating towards meeting the needs of students through a holistic paradigm that addresses student needs in spheres outside of academics such as student motivation, health, emotional well-being and external community challenges, because by investing in those avenues achievement will consequentially improve. We will conclude by a quote from Ricci (2004) which states; “A test-driven curriculum that imposes a monoculture of training will limit the biodiversity of ideas, knowledge, culture, and history. By limiting the biodiversity of ideas in schools, the less chance we have of critically challenging the status quo and thinking of creative alternatives to the injustices that need to be challenged within our society. We must fight for the biodiversity of learning and eliminate a test-driven, monocultural training environment” (p. 359). We hope as nations we begin to partake more in the road less travelled so far; by beginning to further invest in new and alternative programs and policies which seek to close the opportunity gap as a means of preparing students for the challenges and the injustices of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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## Notes

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- <sup>4</sup> Ximena Martínez and Carolina Ruminot contributed and wrote the Chile component of the paper while Ardavan Eizadirad wrote the parts regarding the case of Ontario, Canada. All three of the authors contributed to the theoretical introduction, the analysis, and the conclusion.
- <sup>5</sup> Originally SIMCE was the acronym that simplified the National System of Evaluation of Learning Outcomes (our translation). This acronym was maintained but nowadays, after the 2010 educational reform,

it refers to the National System of Educational Assessment (our translation).

- <sup>6</sup> Teacher Principal Training Program was an initiative by the Ministry of Education in Chile between 2011 and 2013 that had as its main goal the training of educational leadership that will lead to a better administration of educational system and to improve learning outcomes in Chile.
- <sup>7</sup> In Chile the school system is structured in two cycles: elementary school and secondary school. Elementary school is from 6 years old (grade 1) to 13 years old (grade 8). The secondary school is from 14 years old (grade 1 at the high school level) to 17 years old (grade 4 at the high school level).
- <sup>8</sup> LOCE is the acronym that designates the organic law of education which was enacted at the beginning of the new democratic regime in 1990 and also coincides with a new global trend on education that looked at aims, means, and social outcomes. For further information see Garcia-Huidobro, J.E. and Cristián Cox (1999).
- <sup>9</sup> See programs such as MECE básica and MECE media. These programs were meant to improve infrastructure, connectivity, digital literacy, teacher training, extend the service of pre-schools, distribute textbooks and pedagogical tools, and to implement school libraries.
- <sup>10</sup> For further details look into [junaeb.cl/servicios-medicos](http://junaeb.cl/servicios-medicos).
- <sup>11</sup> JEC is an acronym that represents the original name of the program “Jornada Escolar Completa”. This school modality changed the school attendance structure. Originally students attended school for six hours either in the morning from 8am to 12, 1, or 2 pm depending on their grade. Older students would stay longer hours in school or in the afternoon from 2 pm to 7 or 8 pm. With the implementation of the new full day school, students were transferred to just one option which was from 8 am to 4 pm. Many reasons were invoked to explain this transformation, but the most salient was that exposing students to more hours of cognitive contents within the school system would supply the lack of cultural capital that students from disadvantaged populations experienced.
- <sup>12</sup> For further details go to [http://www.nutricionistasdechile.cl/rev\\_a2n1\\_10.html](http://www.nutricionistasdechile.cl/rev_a2n1_10.html).
- <sup>13</sup> This program offers special workshops for students with special needs and its focus is to provide students and teachers with technical assistance in language and mathematics. In the area of rural education, teachers that work in a multi-grade modality were trained in curricular and didactic matters
- <sup>14</sup> Programa de Acompañamiento y Acceso Efectivo. For further details go to <http://www.pace.mineduc.cl/>.
- <sup>15</sup> <http://portales.mineduc.cl>
- <sup>16</sup> An IEP includes accommodations such as changes in curriculum delivery to individual students in ways that are appropriate to their identified learning needs. These may be in the form of individualized teaching and assessment strategies, human supports, and/or individualized equipment. Accommodations allow a student to participate in learning without any changes to the knowledge and skills the student is expected to demonstrate. Modification: Changes made in the age-appropriate, grade-level expectations for a subject or course in order to meet a student’s learning needs. Such changes may reflect a decrease in the number or complexity of expectations (TDSB, 2015 p. 74). The School Improvement Plan and Individual Education Plans are continuously monitored throughout the school year as a means of facilitating the processes involved to improve EQAO test scores that symbolize “improvement in learning”. As well, teachers are provided with professional workshops throughout the school year in relation to specific topics to better equip them with resources and handling of challenges related to their specific grades and needs of their students.
- <sup>17</sup> <http://peopleforeducation.ca/measuring-what-matters/about-the-project>.
- <sup>18</sup> This initiative involves a large group of experts; “*Ontario’s Ministry of Education, Health, and Children and Youth Services, a number of Canadian universities, Directions Evidence and Policy Research Group, the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, Ontario’s Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO), Ontario’s Principals’ Councils, Ontario Teachers’ Federation, Alberta Teachers’ Association, other education stakeholders, as well as the broader public. It is also part of a 50-country international initiative—The Learning Metrics Task Force—led by UNESCO and the Brookings Institution, to build consensus about effective assessment systems that support broad goals for education*”.