Social Representations Of Learning Assessment: A View From Complex Thinking

Claudia Ávila Vanegas¹, Audin Aloiso Gamboa Suárez², Raúl Prada Núñez³

¹Doctorando en Educación de la Universidad Santiago de Cali, Orcid: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0797-4302

²Facultad de Educación, Artes y Humanidades, Universidad Francisco de Paula Santander Cúcuta, Colombia, Orcid: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9755-6408

³Facultad de Educación, Artes y Humanidades, Universidad Francisco de Paula Santander Cúcuta, Colombia, https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6145-1786

Abstract

The assessment of learning is made up of theoretical and practical elements from different disciplines and sciences that configure social representations in schools. In order to identify this configuration, we propose a dialogical encounter of the discourses constructed around assessment, its meanings and meanings through international guidelines, regulations, teachers' experiences and the institutionalisation of assessment practices. The methodology is qualitative with an interpretative approach. The method chosen is processual, characterised by the analysis of cultural, symbolic and discursive productions. The techniques and instruments used are semi-structured interviews and a documentary analysis matrix. The analysis of the information is carried out by open and axial coding, to be subsequently interpreted from the logic of complex thinking. The sample consisted of 11 teachers recognised by the Instituto de Desarrollo Pedagógico de Bogotá-Colombia for having carried out significant experiences in learning assessment. The results show a multidimensional configuration of social representations on learning assessment, in which historical memory, biographical traces, the need for change, ethical commitment, emotions and the humanisation of assessment designed for learning all play a role.

Keywords: Learning assessment, social representations, complex thinking.

Introduction

The assessment of learning has been established in schools as a fundamental axis of their curricular dynamics (Avendaño et al., 2021; Gómez, 2020; Gamboa, 2016). Coming from other fields of study such as psychology, economics and management sciences, it needs to be thought and
explained from the pedagogical field. It is initially presented from the logic of evaluative culture and international institutions, endorsed as a device of power in social life, and from there the tensions, concurrences and antagonisms that arise between these discourses, institutional realities and the worldviews of the subjects who materialise them as social representations in the school are raised.

Contradictions that are part of the emergence of an evaluative culture where an important role is attributed to it: the "all-seeing, all-hearing, all-encompassing, all-encompassing, all-subjecting, all-weighing, all-managing device" (Sánchez, 2009, p. 1902); and which bursts into the educational context from the administrative disciplines to rationalise school curricula in favour of management, efficiency, effectiveness and quality: standards of the administrative discourse of modern society and quality. 1902); and that bursts into the educational context, from the administrative disciplines to rationalise school curricula in favour of management, efficiency, effectiveness and quality: standards of the administrative discourse of modern and post-modern society, explained at the time by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) as the need for improvement in the face of the low level of responsibility for the results of school systems. In response, it supports measurement processes with a systemic approach that contribute to the formulation of public policies and the objectives of social justice (Tedesco, 2016).

Therefore, standardisation seems to be the response led by international organisations such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the International Association for Evaluation (IEA), the Latin American Laboratory for the Evaluation of the Quality of Education (LLECE) and UNESCO which, through the application of tests and comparative studies, measure the level of student learning according to international standards, with the PISA programme being one of the most relevant in terms of its impact on public and educational policies; as well as the allocation of resources for Latin America (OECD, 1997), in which multinational companies that regulate the dynamics of production and the globalised economy intervene (Ortiz & Buitrago, 2017).

Looking at learning assessment, its historical and research background and its constitution as a representative phenomenon of the symbolic wealth of the school, is a way of understanding its identity within educational scenarios and its specific configuration in each context (Avendaño et al., 2021). Thinking from the representative phenomena that constitute what is perceived as reality, in the recognition of the social character of thought (Jodelet, 2018) and that configure multiple worldviews, requires linking the notion of social representations (rs) to phenomenological thought, where all understanding is preceded by the sense that the world has for man, "everything that is for me can only and exclusively extract its sense of being from itself, from my sphere of consciousness" (Husserl, 1986, p. 220).
The sociologist Durkheim (1898) called this phenomenon of representation of facts as things or "social mental productions" or "collective representations". For his part, the social psychologist Moscovici (1984) redefined the concept of collective representations, proposing the dialectical interaction between the individual and society, in order to explain and give meaning to the world. Subsequently, Jodelet (1986) defines rs as "modes of practical thinking oriented towards communication, understanding and mastery of the social, material and ideal environment" (p. 474), agreeing with Morin (2004) on the importance of the conditions and context in which representations emerge. In this case, the reality of learning assessment unravelled from the discourse of teachers who dare to practically materialise new visions and conceptions of learning assessment.

In the pedagogical sense, Sacristán and Pérez (1992) understand evaluation as any process of attention to students, teachers, educational environment, among others, in order to analyse, assess their characteristics and conditions according to criteria that are finally translated into judgements. However, he emphasises that these judgements should not be reduced to techniques or grading systems. Taking into account this pedagogical vision, the philosophical orientation of Nietzsche (2004) is taken up again, where beyond what is evaluation, the question can be who is evaluation, and not to refer to a person, but to refer to the forces that are found in relation to this phenomenon. In various investigations, the affirmation of the rupture or tension between the forces produced by the discourses and evaluative practices of teachers is recurrent (Reyes et al., 2020) in the institutional curricular context that structures teleological purposes, generally with a constructivist and humanist approach that, when put into practice, generate profound challenges and tensions (Vanegas et al., 2022).

In order to point out a relevant analysis of learning assessment as an object of study, the qualitative research carried out in 2004 by the University of Antioquia in Colombia on the rs of learning assessment of primary and secondary school teachers (Salinas et al., 2006) was taken up again. In this research, teachers' discourses are studied through semi-structured interviews, from a fundamental relationship of the trinomial: teaching, learning and evaluation, a trinomial that is recurrent in other rs studies that point to the need to rethink the relationship between learning and evaluation in order to provide innovative responses to this study (Hernández-Nodarse, 2017).

Two relevant rs are identified in this group of studies: The rs one identifies assessment referring to measurement, tension and control over students, sustained by teachers’ experiences, attitudes and reiteration and not to clear theoretical principles or concepts, with attitude being the most resistant and primitive element of the representations. In this rs, the characteristics of the traditional model, namely measurement, are configured as the central and peripheral core (Gil, 2019). As social representation two, assessment is referred to understanding and self-regulation, whose central core shows evaluative practices of revision, tracking and monitoring, associated with the
formative function of assessment where error is recognised as part of learning, findings that coincide with the results of other Research (Torres, 2017).

Remolina (2012) in "La evaluación en el contexto escolar de Francia y Portugal. Actors and social representations" has raised the interest in understanding, through a qualitative comparative study in secondary education institutions, the reasons why learning ends up being replaced in importance by assessment. Likewise, the study by Perassi et al. (2013) mentions how the evaluative processes developed in the classroom are not always at the "service" of learning, nor do they necessarily arise as a result of sustained pedagogical reflection. In this regard, the results showed that some conceptions of power, authority and control associated with school management are key factors in the discourses on learning processes and Evaluation (Hernández-Nodarse, 2017; Maldonado-Fuentes, 2021; Reyes García et al., 2020)

Another recurring aspect in the selected studies are the rs on the functions of assessment and its ethical implications, aspects that are important to be analysed in the development of this research. In this regard, Patricia & Cárdenas, (2016) point out the need to support the assessment of learning in theoretical and critical assumptions that shape the formative function, providing openness to ethical thinking and recognition of the human complexity involved (Abma et al., 2020).

The aim of this research is therefore to understand the configuration of social representations (hereinafter SR) of learning assessment in teachers with significant and/or differential assessment practices, interpreted from the perspective of complex thinking based on a systemic vision of social phenomena, weaving and articulating their different dimensions, from a polyocular approach that constructs and deconstructs their meaning.

Method

Participants
The sample is intentional and non-probabilistic, made up of eleven (11) teachers interviewed, equivalent to 55% of a universe of 20 teachers from the public sector, recognised in Bogotá - Colombia by the Institute for Pedagogical Development (IDEP) with significant experiences in learning assessment during the year 2019. Of the sample, seven participants were women, equivalent to 63%, and two were men, representing the remaining 37%. The average age of the participants is in the range of 32 to 48 years.

Design
Within the framework of the interpretative-qualitative paradigm, the design used corresponds to the processual approach of the rs theory (Jodelet, 1986; Banchs, 2000). This study had 7 phases involving theoretical and historical enquiry, instrument design, data collection, categorisation and analysis, and presentation of results.
Instruments
A semi-structured interview protocol was used, composed of four guiding axes corresponding to the dimensions of the rs synthesised by Cuevas (2016) as: production, information, significance and attitudinal. The instrument was validated by three international experts belonging to the International Network of Imaginaries and Social Representations (RIIR). The interviews lasted an average of 110 minutes and were conducted virtually through the TEAMS platform, which has an integrated transcription tool. The documentary analysis, also validated by experts, was structured in a matrix to identify the relevant aspects of the documents referring to the genealogy of learning assessment and the regulations that are relevant to the purpose of this research.

Processing
The information collected in the matrix and in the interviews was analysed, with prior revision of the transcription to avoid errors generated by the TEAMS platform in not recognising some idioms. Categorisation was then carried out through open and axial coding (in initial and emerging categories) to identify discursive recurrences, situations, experiences and emotions associated with the field of representation. The results of the categories are then triangulated for discussion on the basis of two guiding principles of complex thinking: dialogic and recursive.

Results

Learning assessment and the historical footprint
The history of Latin America dates back to an ancestral origin transgressed by the presence of foreigners who, when colonising new lands, imposed customs, traditions and structures that became naturalised over time. During the colonial era, an organisation based on social classification that Ortiz and Buitrago (2017) recognise in two stages: natural and scientific.

Towards the end of the 18th century, the ideas of modern thought aimed at the formation of a new man appeared on the Latin American scene, together with new theoretical and scientific approaches from medicine, psychology, biology and statistics. It questioned the elitist education and absolutism of the ancien régime, while at the same time promoting the development of the secular reason favoured by the impact of the French Revolution.

As a consequence, in the 19th century the education system was organised in the midst of the post-independence war and the establishment of a nationalist society that opened the way to the republican period, where education was fundamental for political and economic advancement. As a guarantee, in school institutions, even those run by the clergy, oral examinations were implemented as a way of evaluating and demonstrating what had been learnt in instruction, mostly of a Lancastrian orientation.
During the first decades of the 20th century, the assessment of learning continued to be assumed as a regulatory mechanism for good conduct and moral principles in the service of a progressive nation. Lafrancesco (1998) mentions that for the period between 1930 and 1950, curricular instructions emphasised comprehensive education, suggesting a change in the memoristic and encyclopaedic evaluations, generating as alternatives: reading circles and laboratories that would guarantee the moral and technical training required for the time.

In the last decade of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century, regulations were established as an explicit regulating agent for learning assessment processes. Decree 1860 (1994), which determined the organisation of study plans and the criteria for student assessment, Resolution 2343 (1996) established the general guidelines for public school curricula and achievement indicators, proposing in Article 19 an assessment of learning as a dynamic and flexible process, centred on the integral development of the dimensions of the human being at a cognitive, practical and evaluative level.

Decree 230 (2002) and Decree 1290 (2009) ratify a continuous and comprehensive evaluation, which assesses the attainment of achievements, knowledge and competences to determine whether or not students are promoted, taking into account that the institution must promote at least 95% of them. In this context of statistical regulation of the efficiency of educational institutions, attributed to promotion percentages, the incursion into the new public management policy is ratified, which also introduced concepts such as human capital and competences, school management and decentralisation.

Given this general overview of the ways in which the assessment of learning has been conceived and regulated in schools, with the intervention of different national and international political, economic and social agents, it is important to make visible the relationship between the assessment of learning and the historical background that influences the discourses and representations that teachers have constructed through what seems legitimate in the processes of teaching, learning and assessment (Castorina, 2016). A warning of the potency of the memory of the past as an intersubjective memory that relies on practices and rituals, as social frames of reference guiding human behaviour (Halbwachs, 1968) according to specific contexts that give identity to the rs materialised in the discourses. Below we present the rs found on the basis of the dimensions that configure the rs (Moscovici, 1984) and the broad complexity that underpins them.

**Senses of evaluation from biographical traces**

This dimension highlights the characteristics that make the subjects particular and their relationship with the object of representation. The participating teachers are linked to public institutions in Bogotá, Colombia, and have been selected for demonstrating significant evaluation practices in the institutions where they work, reporting their projects to the Instituto de Desarrollo Pedagógico de Bogotá (IDEP), their training is in bachelor's degrees and their last level of
schooling is postgraduate, at the master's degree level. Seven of them are secondary school teachers and four are primary school teachers. All of them are linked to networks or research groups in education or evaluation.

Six teachers state that their professional choice was determined by the need to overcome the social and economic conditions of their family.

So I said, my life began. It was in the countryside, it started in the countryside where my mum and dad were with the cows, the dogs and the sugar cane, so they spent their time doing those tasks and we had nothing to do with teachers or school (D09). I am a person from a working class neighbourhood, and life's possibilities have placed me in the right to public education. I am convinced that our economically disadvantaged communities have and can have the right to occupy the first great positions. (D06)

Some of them found in the course of their training the opportunity to develop community work and innovative proposals in their student practices that broadened their perspective in relation to the training processes.

So we set up a training school, and that was my first teaching exercise, not in the formal sphere, but in this community part, and we went a long way with popular education. (D03)

Other teachers who were trained as teacher educators, i.e. who received pedagogical training at the baccalaureate level, stated that they had received rigorous training that influenced their evaluation practices, where rigorousness in the evaluation process began with a traditional vision and later, through postgraduate training, the initiative was generated to transform evaluation, without ignoring the importance of clarity in the method and instruments.

Need for change
This dimension is made up of the teachers' knowledge of the object of representation. They were asked about experiences, sources of information and aspects they considered relevant to the assessment of learning. The experiences are approached from the role of the subject being assessed and the assessor. In the first role, it is constant to evoke experiences that caused them anguish or tension due to their emphasis on memorisation and exclusion.
But one of the terrible things for me was Social Sciences, I mean, I am in Social Sciences as a challenge, because I never really did well in Social Sciences and why? Because of memory (D02). Many hated the teachers, more so at that time, because the forms of memorised evaluation are the same structure of the school, of that punitive school that punishes, is not at all inclusive and also reinforces stereotypes. (D06)
These experiences led to initiatives to transform assessment processes as a way of responding to and resisting the sinbolic image of pressure and exclusion that characterises traditional school assessment. Few teachers associate positive vicarious learning experiences that set a guideline for them to continue similar assessment processes; learning outcomes in their school career were associated with recall and written or oral examination. This later influenced their early practice as evaluators. As an evaluator that looked like a tiger, didn't it? And in homework that was the same as how I was taught. I mean, you didn't bring the assignment, take one out, you didn't do it by the time I asked you to do it, take one out. Unmodifiable, unchangeable (D08).

Postgraduate training and taking advantage of the scenarios for updating and teacher training allowed the interviewees to question themselves and think about changes where assessment is designed for learning from the contextualisation and needs of the students.

Yes, my Master's degree gave me a boost, and once I got out I entered the IDEP competition and won a prize for my research: The school, a factory of questions. As a result of that, I started going to talks, going to these seminars, being active (D01)

**Evaluation for learning from engagement and transformation**
This dimension condenses the meanings attributed to the object of representation, expressed in beliefs, judgements, images and associations of meanings between everyday life and the practical use of the object. The teachers interviewed agree on the representation of learning assessment as a complex exercise that requires deconstruction, openness to new theories and methodologies that recognise the particularities of students, their learning styles and rhythms, as well as an intentionality and planning of the assessment practice.

The assessment exercise for the session has to recognise the individual capacities of the person, because we don't all have the same capacities, we don't all have the same intelligences and we don't all learn in the same way. Yes, and that puts us at different points (D02). We managed to put some assessment strategies, some assessment actions, we managed not to leave it to content, the content should be the pretext, not the centre of learning. The human being must be the centre (D08).

The ethical implications of evaluation give meaning to its representation as an object of transformation, the recognition of the self and the other.

When I talk about evaluating from the pedagogy of love, it is because I see it as something that I am passionate about as an educator, and that is why I do it in such a committed way and with so much affection that allows me to understand the other person and for them to feel understood by me. (D07)
The student as the centre of learning humanises assessment practice and gives meaning to formative intentionality. Thinking about assessment for learning from an ethical, inclusive and fair stance requires time in addition to the established school day of six effective hours of class time. Investing this time in the planning and design of assessment instruments reveals a commitment to the formative and social function of assessment (Camilloni, 1998).

Yes, because the space available is so short that sometimes there are only four hours, but I had to make the time available to be able to train and leave a mark, to do something different in the training of the students (D02). My colleagues are afraid of the time I dedicate to this. Design differentiated instruments for the level of learning development of each group.

The images and words associated with the assessment of learning by this group of teachers to the object of representation denote images related to equity, processual complexity and meaningful learning for life.

That the basic concepts that the student has, find meaning in their life and in their community. I prioritise that, otherwise there is nothing (D04). I hope that my students say to me when they finish, teacher, I put my knowledge into practice (D05). I visualise it as a ladder with a focus at the top, you are going to get many obstacles, but if you overcome them little by little you will reach the goal of knowledge, your knowledge, not the teacher's knowledge (D02)

The evaluation of learning is affirmed in the recognition of someone who checks, makes a judgement, observes (Castrillón & Peñaloza, 2016, p. 81). This group of teachers tries to return the act of learning to the real, experienced, lived object. An evaluation that can be thought beyond homogenisation and control.

What do I do if the system evaluates in the same way, that is, without looking at the learning rhythms without looking at the differences in context, and although they all live in the same neighbourhood, in the same locality, they are totally different and their learning styles are different. I can't do what the system does: massify (D09).

**Postures: meeting of affections, emotions and realities**
In this dimension, evaluations of the object of representation are shared, where favourable or unfavourable positions are expressed, influenced by cognitive, affective, motivational and ethical antecedents.

Because evaluation puts pressure from the system, it puts pressure on all of us, it blurs our pedagogical practice in the classroom. For me it is not ethical (D05).
Carrying out evaluation processes generates tensions, contradictions and the experience of certain emotions. The teachers say that taking positions that are institutionalised in the school means questioning the curriculum, institutional structures and the group dynamics of the teaching teams.

A permanent tension in evaluation is the school itself, in other words, the absurdity of evaluation is that we continue with yesterday's logic. In the end, the same problems. I have 50 children and I don't know what, but they don't take a route to deal with it (D08). My school, it differs a lot from my thinking. Little by little I've been able to get closer to some of them, keep injecting all these ideas because they are necessary (D03).

Positions that question traditional approaches also emerge from emotions and emotions experienced as teacher evaluators.

Evaluation is learning, it is a feeling of emotion. Sometimes of concern, sometimes of reconciliation with the children themselves. And also because they are not always willing, just like you, so when you do certain exercises, they sort of reconsider and you also experience a feeling of reconciliation with them and the process (D03).

When investigating the evaluation of learning, attention tends to focus on the epistemological and methodological components. The impact of affects and emotions in this process contributes to the understanding of its discursive and practical configuration, because it mobilises positions and attitudes towards oneself and the other, within the framework of the symbolic richness that encompasses the school. At the same time, it is recognised that significant experiences in learning assessment emerge from tensions, concerns and a permanent need for change.

Conclusions

The concept of historical memory is fundamental in the study of the discourses that materialise the common sense and practices surrounding the assessment of learning; it gives meaning to the chronology and flow of events that condense the background of a representative phenomenon of the school, related to institutionalised practices of control, surveillance, instruction and examination. From the perspective of complex thinking (Morin, 1990), the reconciliation between the past and the present, the old and the new, makes visible the continuum of the conceptual and pragmatic inheritance of what teachers experience as evaluators and assessors of learning and their experiences, which in a retroactive loop tend to reproduce traditional or instrumental practices lacking in formative meaning. Understanding the dynamics of reproduction not in a linear sense of causes and effects, but in a self-constitutive cycle where international and national educational policies, teachers' experiences and institutional practices influence its organisation, which need to be thought and reflected upon from the contextual characteristics and their social and pedagogical relevance, in the midst of the discourses of the globalised economy and educational quality.
The multidimensionality that shapes the rs of learning assessment in teachers who decide to change or innovate assessment practices at school, raises the possibilities of transformation that emerge in the midst of tensions or adverse situations, which, approached from the paradigm of complexity, interrelate the individual with the institutional, theory and practice, text and context, saying and doing; Boggino and Barés (2016) warn that in order to think from complexity "we will have to include ourselves in the problematic field, ourselves and our circumstances, our beliefs, our values, our history and our biography”.

In this sense, the reflective discourse of the participating teachers evidences a humanising approach to the evaluation of learning, in the recognition of oneself and in the dialogical principle of the recognition of the other (Morin, 1990), based on professional ethics, continuous pedagogical training processes and methodological rigour.

The reasons that lead a teacher to think and rethink the assessment of learning from a different paradigm to the one legitimised for more than a century, position them as antagonistic and disruptive even when the discourses of formative, processual and dialogical assessment circulate in the school. This apparent contradiction shows that significant experiences focus on assessment for learning, with and for the student, the permanent questioning of curricular structures and the relevance of institutional assessment systems. These rs need to be put into circulation within the institutional dynamics, as an opportunity to provoke reflections and dynamise the discourses and practices of other academic peers that promote openness to new epistemological and pedagogical perspectives.

References


