

Educational assessment: back to its origins - the process, not the moment

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Abstract

This paper arose from a critical exercise about the role of evaluation in Colombia in the “new normality” after education was affected by the Covid-19 pandemic due to the losses that families experienced and the clashes with security forces in which the country was immersed. Faced with this reality to which teachers were not oblivious, this essay aims to unveil the original meaning of educational evaluation, highlighting the fact that it transcends all types of measurement or classification and rather welcomes the Other in his/her ongoing improvement. For this purpose, we carried out a hermeneutic exercise on evaluation from the perspective of an experience lived in the virtual classroom after the pandemic. Elements to be considered emerge from this, such as trust in the other, reflection on classroom management itself, analysis of the context and a full relinquishment of control. We concluded that educational evaluation requires an effort not to repeat behaviors that repress and harm our students. Given the reality of our territories and historical period, evaluation must go back to the learning process and not to the moment in which an outcome is shown.

Key Words: Educational evaluation – learning process – formative evaluation – teacher responsibility – teaching.

Introduction

The act of evaluating is inherent to the human being. It is part of our daily life: we evaluate how we achieve our goals, the results of our decisions, our personal-work performance, our body and our abilities. And not only that, we also evaluate others. Evaluation is also present in the educational environment, but here it is performed in a systematic, intentional, and controlled fashion. This has turned evaluation into a means of demonstrating learning. However, its original function does not end in the demonstration of results. For this reason, during the Covid-19 pandemic we had to modify not only our role in the classroom but also the way we conceive

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and apply evaluation. In fact, now that we are returning to a “new normality” it has become essential to pick up on what we learned during the lockdown in order to recover the actual meaning of evaluation in education so that we may better conduct our work with our students.

Evaluation is an inherent part of the pedagogical process, and is immersed in the whole educational cycle from its planning to its implementation and its appraisal (Casarini, 2019). However, the place of privilege it occupies in this text is due to the fact that there is no way to achieve transformation unless we modify evaluation practices that tend to force learning into parameters in a diverse, technological, and plural world. A comprehensive formation of students with standards and grades cannot always be achieved, and much less when the reality of countries – especially in Latin America – feature all kinds of inequalities. A salient example is education in Colombia, where these proposals represent an additional challenge when we factor in a resurgence of violence.¹ For this reason, limiting evaluation to the verification of the achievement of goals would be a serious mistake; it is rather a follow-up to another process, namely learning, which like any other process has an intentionality. Without the latter it would not be possible to create pedagogical plans, design curricula, conduct classroom projects, or establish curricular maps that fit the regional and historic contexts (Calvo, 2018). From this standpoint, educational evaluation invites us to go back to its origins; that is, a continuous and permanent accompaniment rather than a momentary verification.

In evaluation “appraisals are conducted, judgements are made, opinions are given, concepts are expressed” (Estévez, 2017:17), which invite questions, assessments and analyses of the events or facts surrounding daily life. In education, evaluations provide information on the achievement and growth of students, which results in rewards and promotions but also in punishment and threats (López, 2019). In Colombia before the pandemic, evaluation processes in formal education were ruled by the Institutional System of Student Evaluation (SIEE, Sistema Institucional de Evaluación de los Estudiantes) under Decree 1290 of 2009, in which the National Government grants schools the freedom to define evaluations based on their own mission, aims, pedagogical model or approach, and Institutional Educational Project (PEI)² (National Education Ministry, 2023). This allowed schools in Colombia to have their teaching approach correspond to their evaluation approach. As for higher education, within quality assurance standards, Decree 1330 of 2019 stipulates that higher education institutions must comply with student evaluation mechanisms under their student regulations, or their equivalent, that establish precise and transparent criteria for “enrollment, admission, entry, tuition, rights and obligations, distinctions and incentives, discipline, and other academic aspects that enable stu-

1 A cycle of hope began in Colombia on September 26 2016 after the signing of the Peace Agreement during Juan Manuel Santos's presidential term (Cancillería de Colombia, 2016). With the change of administration in 2018 to president Iván Duque Márquez the agreements signed were suspended and the outlawed groups began to demonstrate again with violent actions against the civil society.

2 Proyecto Educativo Institucional.

dents to graduate under quality conditions, which must be coherent and consistent with their juridical nature, typology, identity and institutional mission" (Article 2.5.3.2.3.1.2).

During the pandemic, evaluation could hardly carry out this continuity and recurrence formative tasks, since a great number of students live in rural areas where connectivity is limited. In this respect, in August 2020 the ICT Ministry projected the need to develop rural connectivity in order to continue the education of children and youths in 14,745 public schools located in the farthest areas of the country (Information and Communication Technology Ministry, 2021). This represented an incentive for families and schools, since there would be a Digital Center that offered external wireless service within a coverage radius of 7,800 m². This meant guaranteeing "free access to WiFi for up to 10,000 rural communities operating long-term and without interruptions" (Bohórquez, 2021: 1). Unfortunately, this Project did not achieve its goal due to acts of corruption involving \$70'000,000 Colombian pesos (\$15,400 US approximately) that were adjudicated to contractors using false bank guarantees. Until June 2021 the work stipulated in the project had not been started, and to this date no sanctions have been enforced.

Faced with this reality, teachers found ourselves confronted with a number of hard choices and difficulties that, besides being outrageous, made us rethink the meaning of education and evaluation. When students have trouble communicating online, how can we achieve equality in evaluation? How can we grade the quality of their papers? What kind of appraisal can we offer? Teachers who worked outside the cities relied on their cellphones and WhatsApp as their only means of contacting families and thus send study guides (Espitia, Fernández, 2023) to their students, but there were other families who did not have this service due to their poverty. Added to that, during the pandemic violent events took place in the country which made it impossible to continue educational work.

Thus, the pandemic showed clearly that the school is not egalitarian and that families do not have a cultural capital, let alone the resources to educate their children. In fact, it made school segregation in Colombia even more noticeable, since private schools had digital educational access for their teachers and students while public schools did not. If we add to that the ineffectiveness of the State to oversee and control the actions of the ICT Ministry that threatened rural education, the panorama becomes even more devastating. Amidst such precariousness, it became more difficult to evaluate student performance objectively nationwide during the 2020 and 2021 school years. It was even more difficult to grade or promote students who did not have the resources for studying from their homes.

What is more important in a situation like this? To evaluate students following the same parameters in the midst of the health emergency, in order to meet the standards still required by the Ministry of Education and international organizations? Would it be better to do without evaluation, since students do not have the means or the resources to continue their education from their homes? Classroom management during the lockdown showed us that what is im-

portant in evaluation is not the results, grades, scores, or quantitative measurements, but rather the educational process students go through to achieve their learning, even if they do not have the cultural support of their family, the technological means to carry out pedagogical activities, ways of access to school or to their teachers' homes to pick up study guides, or even safe conditions to leave home. Despite these shortcomings, evaluation made us rethink the importance of going back to the basics or the organic, in short, the essential: evaluation as a process and not as a moment. We will now present a classroom experience that helps to illustrate this thesis.

Effects that deconstruct evaluation in education

In the first semester of 2022, around the month of May, Colombia began to return to normal daily life after two years in lockdown, but one could feel in the air a concealed collective anxiety due to political factors, the approaching elections, the non-compliance of the Peace Agreement signed by the previous government, conflicts over land ownership between landowners and peasants, and the ineffectiveness of the State after the murders of social leaders that continued during the pandemic. The climate nationwide was tense, and was worsened by the armed uprising of the outlawed group known as Clan del Golfo after their leader "Otoniel" was extradited (Mercado, Higuera, 2022). In retaliation, the group took the departments of Sucre, Bolívar, Córdoba, Cesar, and Antioquia, in the north of the country, forcing their communities into lockdown, burning vehicles, marking houses and schools, and later murdering civilians and members of the security forces (Granados, 2022). Thus, from May 4 to May 9 178 municipalities in 11 of the 23 departments of the country were constrained in their mobility and commerce, which led to food shortages and anxiety (Serrano, 2022).

For those who taught online in the larger cities, hearing about this made us feel sad, impotent, and angry. But it was not as bad as when we learned directly from our students what they had been going through.

I was going over the online classroom of my Master's in Education as I usually do. I saw the weekly planner, the papers I had to grade, the fora, the emails I had to answer, and the private messages. I noticed that a student wrote a rather long one, so long that I decided to read all the others and give it the time required to read it as thoroughly as it deserved to be read. It seemed the student had some kind of problem. I read it and I remember it went something like this:

Professor Tany Giselle, I'm writing to ask you to be excused for the two previous activities I have not been able to hand in. It is no secret that we are in an armed takeover; it has actually been in the news. I am in the Sucre department and I had to flee the municipality where I work as a middle school³ teacher due to the death threats I have received. Classes at the school where I teach were suspended because the chil-

³ That is, the last two years of formal studies before entering higher education, Levels 10 and 11.

dren and their families cannot move from one place to another. I don't have a computer. I had to leave everything behind in the apartment where I lived and I have only my cellphone to communicate with my family, who live in a different municipality, and to send you this message. I have been very responsible with my activities and I have attended your synchronic sessions, which I have found fundamental for our teaching practice. I am only asking you to extend the deadline to hand in those two papers since I cannot get behind or lower my academic performance. I will try to do the papers and send them through my cellphone. I am aware that they will not be as good as the others, but at least I don't want my grade to be 0. Thanks for your understanding.

I was astonished by this message. My heart was beating fast and I felt a strong urge to cry. Online education is mediated by computers and the internet, which have allowed it to move beyond physical and temporal barriers. However, due to the social and political reality faced by our country, not even these electronic and digital resources were of much help to a student in the middle of an armed conflict.

How to evaluate this student? In this case a summative evaluation ceased to be relevant for me. I began to answer my student's message by making it clear that I understood his situation and that my paramount concern was his safety. I then eased his mind about handing in his papers: I told him to send them to my email address (in case he could not upload them to the online classroom) as soon as he finished them. I did not actually set a new deadline, since the situation was so delicate that we did not know when there would be peace again.

About a week went by and my student finally uploaded the papers to the online classroom. I was able to assess their quality. They were not as perfect as his previous ones, but it was evident he had done the required readings and made an honest attempt to write down his insights on them. I could only grade them with the highest grade for both papers: 5.0.⁴ I found myself unable to give him a lower grade because his safety, his mental health, his emotional stability weighed more heavily on my mind. I thought it would be of no use to grade his papers with a 2.0 if his life was actually in danger. After all, the grade was just a number and my student's life was invaluable.

A return to the origins: evaluation as a process

Some might wonder how I could know if the student was telling the truth and not taking advantage of the situation to get an extended deadline to hand in his activities. It cannot be denied that there are cases like that at every level of education, and graduate students in particular find it more difficult to hand in their papers on time because they have to make time for their job, their family, and their studies. However, in this case I decided to trust my student. I did not need him to sign a document and notarize it. I just took his word for it and felt a responsibility to ease

4 In Colombia, grades in college go from 0.0 to 5.0. Officially, 0.0 to 2.9 are failing grades and 3.0 to 5.0 passing grades.

his mind about his studies. According to Fernández (2020), in education the face of the Other makes demands from us and we respond by suffering with him because his presence invites our concern and responsibility.

I did not have an immediate solution to my student's reality, but I did have the duty to make the curriculum of my class more flexible so he could have some peace in the middle of the conflict. That was how I was able to turn the online classroom into a space for encounter where "proximity finds a way to take care of the Other" (Lévinas, 2014: 14). How many times have we made our curricula more flexible so that children who find themselves in complex realities feel embraced instead of more threatened? War, poverty, inequality, informal labor and segregation are some of the many elements seldom considered when evaluating academic performance. Evaluation is applied to everyone the same way, but it seems to disregard social levels and the interests of the system.

I could also understand that we the teachers are the first agents in charge of the fate of evaluation. We must remember that evaluation immanently invests the person who evaluates with power and therefore requires our utmost care. I could have given my student a negative grade because he did not achieve the pre-established goals of the study plan or because he "did not learn the contents". I could have said that it was his fault. However, I assessed and judged his situation with the aim of responding to the needs and interests of the moment. Thus, evaluating becomes a humanistic, dynamic and understanding tool (Álvarez, 2010).

According to Rosales (2014), an educational evaluation is often 1) systematic, because it sets objectives to accomplish a plan, 2) comprehensive, because it provides information about the reality and management of the teaching and learning process, 3) formative, because it is oriented towards improvement, 4) continuous, because it is permanent, 5) recurrent, because it also has an impact through feedback, 6) decisive, because the information received makes it possible to make decisions. That is how evaluation grades, adds, measures, classifies, and demands at a given time, but also motivates, forms, orientates, and integrates through time. Evaluation thus becomes a dialogic process since at least two people are linked and interact through interlocution, looking into the face of the Other for feedback in search of improvement.

For this reason, in educational evaluation it is not only the student who learns, modifies behaviors, self-regulates and achieves metacognition, but also the teacher who reflects critically upon his/her own teaching practice in order to make the modifications required by the social, cultural, political and family realities of the students. If "evaluation is understood as an appraisal and analysis in an education centered in individuals and processes" (Estévez, 2017: 18), then it transcends academicist and bureaucratic barriers, and therefore attends to what is really important in human condition: "to recognize each other in our common humanity and at the same time in our inherent cultural diversity" (Morin, 2001: 49).

Furthermore, this case modified formative and summative evaluation towards a *feeling-thinking* evaluation. This was because my student's reality affected me, altered me in every sense, and thanks to it I was able to connect myself with the student's situation and think about ways to orientate him and work towards his academic and personal wellbeing. According to Rotger (1994: 14), evaluation is so ancient that at any moment and in every circumstance we evaluate, but "the security and wellbeing of the person depends to a large extent on how good it is". For this reason, it is inconceivable that evaluation can be an external imposition, breaking the inherent link, connection or relationship of human life (Estévez, 2017).

Colombia's social reality, the health emergency we went through, and the imminent return to normality made us understand that we cannot keep repeating the same thing. Evaluation requires an urgent transformation. During the lockdown it was proven that the school is a setting that controls and, faced with the uncertainty to which it was exposed, had the pressing need to "de-school", as Calvo (2018) points out: it had to make the curriculum more flexible, embrace chaos as a means of learning, acknowledge the students' innate ability to research and to relate to other generations to educate themselves. Thus, the curriculum and evaluation were forced to take a step back and go back to the essential: contextualization in the territory and its other latitudes.

Moreover, it became necessary to put contents based on positivism into question: What does my class offer to the improvement of my students to return to the "new normality"? What should I maintain and what should I modify so that my students feel safe when they return to normal daily life? It was no longer enough to teach mathematics, science, and language, or in my case the theory of education and research. Reality made us attend to other forms of knowledge such as mental health, the formation of new habits, and favor meeting spaces for socialization and the strengthening of values. But it also encouraged us to rethink the beauty of silence, the importance of a natural environment without a massive human intervention, the cultivation of our inner world, and human charity towards those who lost everything during the pandemic (Fernández, 2020).

All these reflections made me realize that, faced with social changes and the uncertainties of humanity and nature, we cannot keep on believing that evaluation and education are meant to "make a man" tailored to the interests of adults (Meirieu, 2007). If our pedagogical intervention drifts apart from the contextual reality of our children, youth, and adults, we will hardly achieve a continuous improvement, and therefore a better writing of our Colombian and Latin American history (Alves, 2018). In this respect, Murillo and Hidalgo (2015) point out that evaluation has a political, psychological, social, and ethical character, and when applied in the evaluative action all of them inspire in students the experience of equality, solidarity, respect, and social justice, also fostering culturally sensitive individuals who think critically when making decisions and who are participative in their communities.

In this sense, an evaluation that goes back to its origins is not one centered only in momentary outcomes or one that encourages competitiveness, elitism, or individualism. Evaluation is not an instrument that represses the Other, promotes social injustices, or denigrates democracy. Evaluation is not focused exclusively in numbers and measurements. Today, educational evaluation invites us to take the step from selfishness to philanthropy, because in the donation involved in the act of educating “we are sharing ourselves totally for the benefit of the other” (Fernández and Sarmiento, 2014: 121). Consequently, evaluation could be regarded as a process in which we struggle and take risks in favor of human and collective formation. From this standpoint, an evaluation that transcends the moment or the demonstration of learning would then achieve a continuous transformation of the realities of each territory.

Conclusions

This experience has been a call to avoid repeating the same mistakes that sometimes denigrate, limit, frustrate, and underestimate our students’ development through evaluation. Evaluation is not the only tool that gives value to learning or teaching. Faced with the realities of the life of our rural Colombian students, such as extreme poverty, systematic violence, lack of opportunities, and scarce resources, evaluation as we know it has no place simply because their experience of being and being in the world require most of all to survive. Therefore, the exercise of educational evaluation in Colombia and in Latin America asks us to orientate the continuous improvement of our territories through processes that transcend concrete outcomes, parameters, standardization, or the moment.

Although this experience took place within adult graduate education, there have been others in our career as teachers in which evaluation had to be transformed for it to be really fair. Cases such as allowing a student to move on to the next level because that is preferable to having him drop out in a community where there are gangs, or grading more flexibly the exam of a student who has had to skip breakfast or dinner, might seem subjective choices that went against the grain of true educational evaluation. In spite of that, such decisions made by us as teachers are a living reflection of the fact that evaluating transcends a specific outcome or moment. How can we demand equal performance from children or adolescents if we know that they are alone at home, that they are abused, that they must work to help their families, or that they have been displaced by violence or been demobilized?⁵ The idea of going back to the origins of evaluation thus refers to looking after our students’ real needs, in order to protect them so they can continue their formation and find in education a form of progress.

The life of a student does not have a numerical value, nor can it be classified or measured. Demonstrating outcomes of learning in the midst of social conflicts where life itself is threa-

⁵ According to Fernández (2021), a mission of the curriculum in Colombia is to inquire when and how children and youths who have been victims of the conflict and demobilized are being recognized. In a post-conflict process, the educational community should be able to accept their vindication and make the learning, development and evaluation more flexible.

tened becomes unfair and selfish. The aim of evaluation is not to be better than the other but to be better than yesterday. In the long run, students manage their own rhythm and ways to acquire knowledge. Our task as teachers is then to evaluate as if it were an ethical event in which the presence of the Other makes us accept a responsibility beyond any contract, as stated by Mèlich (2014).

The pandemic opened up horizons of meaning and made us understand that education, the school, and evaluation are not the stages of power or tyranny that control what the other learns, but to the contrary, democratic means through which one becomes aware that learning is not achieved only in the school. Thus, the dialogical relationship of students with teachers, with their family, with their peers, and with their environment, is built cooperatively in the inner world, in subjectivities, and in collective consciousness, to achieve social transformation. As one of my students said:

I would like to evaluate like you, starting with the positive and not with the negative. You always tell us what is remarkable in our performance, and the negative as a proposal of improvement, not like we are doing something wrong. And that is what it means to be demanding. In fact, every day I set myself the task of doing with my students what you do with us (Personal communication, May 15 2022).

Going back to the origins of evaluation requires deconstructing paradigms that have permeated politics and economy for years, and rediscovering its real meaning. Evaluation in education takes us back to the aims of education that have been latent in the words of Amos Comenius, Rousseau, and Paulo Freire, but that our globalized reality has led to other paths that respond to interests different from the formative ones. Going back to the origins means to return to the learning process and not to the moment when it is demonstrated, because evaluating is a lifelong process and upon it depends the mark that we make, or in the words of de Santos (2019): "Tell me how you evaluate and I will tell you what kind of person you are."

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