Theoretical and real effects of standardized assessment policies

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Standardized assessment policies have developed tremendously in OECD countries since the 1990’s. Europe is no exception to this wave of reforms. Today only Greece, the Czech Republic, Liechtenstein and Scotland have not taken up national or local testing (Eurydice, 2009). These tests are defined by a standardization of their designing, administration and marking. Their main purpose is to assess students’ academic performances. The reason why this education-policy tool has developed in the vast majority of European countries and more widely in OECD countries is that it has been thoroughly changing for two decades. It used to develop mainly in Anglo-Saxon countries and was then considered a tool to assess students’ competences focusing on individual learning evaluation. Most of the times it was meant to certify or validate school levels. Nowadays it is a lot more widely used and connects the pedagogical field to the political one for which it has become a decision-making tool (Behrens, 2006). Those assessment tests are creating a new way to regulate education systems and beyond the results of the students, they focus now on the results obtained by the schools, the education systems, even the local authorities in charge of education where the education systems are decentralized.

Standardized assessment is now at the intersection of new trends that have been shaping educational policies in OECD countries since the 1980’s (Mons, 2007). To better understand them, standardized tests have to be related to four recent changes in our education systems:

- focusing on quantitative learning assessment and giving priority to cognitive objectives rather broader socialization objectives (Osborn, 2006), while linking it to the development of the concept of skills as defined in the economic theory of human capital;
- developing new social control over teachers and schools by education administrations in a broad sense (districts, towns, decentralized authorities) very often within the framework of decentralization or school autonomy (Maroy, 2008);
- changing the way decision making processes are shared between central or federal governments and the local managers who thus have a lot less leeway (Broadfoot, 2000);
- lastly changing the way schools accountability to the general public, and particularly the parents in the context of new relationships between politicians, government and administration on one side and civil society on the other. Those new relationships are underlain by the rise of a “public democracy” in which the common good is not defined only by the politicians in power anymore (Manin, 1996).
At the crossroad of those numerous influences which many people within the education systems try to resist – teachers resisting the new trend of quantitative assessments, local authorities resisting control by central or federal politicians, schools as impenetrable institutions resisting parents’ interfering – standardized tests, raised to the status of political instrument, could only be highly questioned policies. Based on the rhetoric of school effectiveness – setting up those tests should allow to improve the way education systems work in general and particularly regarding students’ attainment – these policies have to be assessed from this perspective so as to shed some scientific light on this lively public debate. Highlighting the effects of standardized assessment tests is therefore the goal of this paper. In order to do so, it is based on a review – both theoretical and empirical works – in economics, sociology, and science of education.

In a first part, we focus on the expected theoretical effects of standardized assessment tests taken as progress-monitoring devices (or regulation devices) for education systems as well as educational tools to increase the individual students’ attainment. What kind of theoretical and conceptual frameworks – both political and pedagogical since testing has this duality – have been thought of that can explain how standardized tests can improve the performance of education systems? It appears that depending on the disciplines and geographic places the writing originated in, we are presented with high-stakes accountability models – standardized testing is part of a reward and sanction system that highly regulates people’s behaviors – or models that we will call “low-accountability” models because no real consequences have been explicitly set in the assessment process except for informing the protagonists and symbolically asking them to compare their practices.

Moving beyond those various theoretical frameworks, the second part of this paper presents a summary of empirical research works on the real effects of standardized tests in terms of effectiveness and educational equality at school as well as efficiency. Indeed, beyond the average improvement in the students’ results that the concept of effectiveness implies, we need to ask ourselves what the impact of such policies is on underprivileged students (concerning social and ethnic factors) or students physically or mentally challenged. Assessing those policies also means trying to take a closer look at their cost-effectiveness. How much is spent on setting up the testing? For what results? Through this extremely controversial scientific field, we show that in terms of educational effectiveness as well as equality the effects of standardized tests are difficult to grasp because no clear empirical consensus is emerging about the benefits getting from those reforms.

This result or at least this lack of converging conclusions from scientific studies makes us wonder what processes in the local protagonists’ behaviors could explain why the results of standardized tests appear so different depending on their contexts. Therefore in a third part we are lead to describe the mechanisms linked to introducing testing with the behaviors of the various people involved: the teachers taken individually and collectively as teaching teams, the education system managers (principals, local education officers, etc.), the parents and of course the students themselves. How do all those people react to the setting up of standardized assessment tests? Their behaviors change according to the features of the reforms being implemented.

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