

## The oppressive nature of admission tests to public higher education

### La naturaleza opresiva de las pruebas de admisión a la educación superior pública

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Fecha de recepción: 29 de Marzo de 2017 - Fecha de aceptación: 5 de Junio de 2017

#### Resumen

Las pruebas estandarizadas al igual que otros elementos de opresión nacen, se desarrollan y se mantienen en una *matriz de dominio* (Collins, 2009). Debido a que el uso de las pruebas estandarizadas reproduce las jerarquías sociales y la inequidad, en este artículo analizo cómo las tres funciones de la educación democrática propuestas por John Dewey (Bowles & Gintis, 2011) se contradicen y revelan la naturaleza anti-dialógica del proceso de admisión a la universidad pública. Para el desarrollo de este argumento, incluyo una breve revisión de los orígenes de la evaluación estandarizada y discuto cómo las funciones de *integración, igualdad y desarrollo* no se enlazan en el discurso del sistema nacional de evaluación.

**Palabras clave:** pruebas estandarizadas; opresión; educación democrática; universidad pública

#### Abstract

Standardized tests, as other elements of oppression, “originate, develop and are contained” within a *matrix of domination* (Collins, 2009). Since the use of standardized tests reproduces social hierarchies and inequality, I analyze how the three functions of John Dewey’s democratic education (Bowles & Gintis, 2011) contradict one another and reveal the anti-dialogical nature of the process of admission to public higher education. To develop this argument, I provide a brief historical review of the origins of standardized testing. Then I discuss how the *integrative, egalitarian and developmental* functions of education have no relationship in the discourse of the national system of evaluation.

**Key words:** standardized tests; oppression; democratic education; public university

## Introduction

### *How standardized tests became a practice of oppression*

More than a century ago, Francis Galton, the founding father of eugenics, was greatly influenced by Darwin's publication of *The Origin of Species* in 1859. To Galton, intellectual capacity was inherited and the preservation of races was a matter of selection (Alland, 2002). The idea that human beings were superior to other species spread new seeds of racism in Europe. Testing became a practice of oppression.

The French anthropologist Paul Broca was convinced that small brains were the result of innate and social inferiority. These radical ideas about the intellectual differences between "inferior" and "superior races" were the cornerstone of "scientific racism" – an ideology that deviated IQ tests from their original objective (Gould, 1981). Back in the nineteenth century, the Ministry of Education of France aimed to find a method that psychologists could use to determine the intellectual development of the child. By 1905, Binet had invented the first diagnostic evaluations after 10 years of trial and error. Contrary to the oppressive nature of standardized tests in the twenty-first century, Binet's evaluations were never intended to emphasize stereotypes but to figure out a way to improve the learning process of children.

Due to the impact of eugenics, the philanthropy embedded in Binet's tests disappeared in America with Henry H. Goddard, the man responsible for translating the tests into English. The first recorded misuse of IQ tests took place in the USA around 1912 when tests were implemented to measure the intelligence of those who crossed the Atlantic to "enjoy" the benefits of the American dream (Gould, 1981). IQ tests became a symbol of oppression and reminded immigrants their place in America just the same way that standardized tests nowadays remind students that public higher education is the privilege of certain groups.

The idea of genetic superiority was simply dehumanizing. In 1979, Leon Kamin reported what he called the great IQ fraud. According to Kamin, the psychologist Cyril Burt had falsified data to support his assumptions of selective education. To Kamin, Burt was a "pathologically disturbed scientist" who consciously falsified statistics to influence educational policies and maintain social hierarchies (Kamin, 1979).

Another example of dehumanizing science was the American physicist William Shockley, who in 1956 obtained the Nobel Prize of Physics. Shockley firmly believed that the reason why African Americans scored lower on IQ tests was because of their genetic inferiority (DOC & Co, Films for the Humanities & Sciences (Firm), & Films Media Group, 2011). Shockley, a eugenicist and a defender of the white-cognitive elite, was convinced that IQ and race were linked. He affirmed that black inferiority was inherited and that IQ tests had demonstrated the fact (Alland, 2002).

There is a cruel history behind the creation of IQ tests and, consequently, the origins of standardized testing are oppressive. Rebecca Zwick (2002) says that admission tests have long been viewed as a major barrier to higher education for people of color and other "minorities". This relationship between the dominant and the subordinate is well explained by Tatum (1997) when she says that dominant groups own the power and know how to use it to structure the kind of society they want. The use of standardized tests does not promote social equality but inhibits

the unification of the integrative, egalitarian and developmental functions of education proposed by John Dewey (Bowles & Gintis, 2011). In the next section, I analyze how the use of a standardized test for admission to public universities in Ecuador inhibits such unification. The analysis of the test itself is beyond the scope of this article.

***The anti-dialogical nature of admission tests to public higher education in Ecuador***

In 2010, the Ecuadorian government delegated The National Secretary of Higher Education, Science and Technology SENESCYT [For its acronym in Spanish] the responsibility to design a national test that would allow senior high school students selective access to public universities. The national admission test to higher education ENES [For its acronym in Spanish] was defined as an academic test capable of disclosing students’ abilities and skills through verbal, numerical and abstract reasoning. To the Ecuadorian government, ENES was a synonym for integration, equality of opportunities, and human development. However, a close analysis of the use of this admission test shows that the unification of the elements of democratic education is not possible by means of standardized testing.



Figure 1. Admission tests inhibit the unification of the three elements of democratic

**The integrative nature of education**

A recurrent argument is that the integrative nature of public education has allowed thousands of people access to public universities. However, the assumption that a national test that entails verbal, numerical, and abstract reasoning allows integration and fair competition is questionable.

Bowles and Gintis (2011) argue that schools reproduce inequality and thus the integration of new generations to the social order is not real. The meritocratic mechanisms of standardized testing enhance unequal economic positions. Consequently, the term meritocracy is a synonym for functional reproduction of economic patterns, one guaranteed through tests scores. “By the time most students terminate schooling, they have been put down enough to convince them of their inability to succeed at the next highest level. Through competition, success, and defeat in the classroom, students are reconciled to their social positions” (p. 106). Bearing this in mind, can we say that admission tests promote integration?

Milton Luna, from Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar, analyzes the negative impact of the use of the ENES test and reports a decrease in access to public higher education from thirty-

three percent (33%) in 2006 to twenty-nine point seven percent (29.7%) in 2014 (Luna, 2017). The use of the standardized test ENES does not promote the integrative element of democratic education, not only because of the decrease in access to public higher education but also due to the detachment between high school curriculum and the skills that the ENES test demands.

**The egalitarian nature of education, the pursuit of equality of opportunity.**

In the American context where standardized tests were born, Carl Brigham, one of the early test promoters, published a number of conclusions based on his analysis of tests results collected from Army recruits during World War I. Brigham affirmed that “immigrants were less intelligent than native-born Americans, and each succeeding wave of immigrants was less intelligent than the last” (Zwick, 2002, p. 5). Although much of the eugenicist thought has been reduced, the segregation entailed in testing remains. The oppressive nature of standardized tests inhibit integration and consequently the egalitarian element of democratic education is not promoted.

In the Ecuadorian context, one of the problems with admission tests is that the skills they demand are not developed during the years of school. The oppressive nature of these standardized tests is evidenced when students must look for expensive extracurricular support, and their chances to access higher education are reduced due to socioeconomic factors.

Admission to public universities evidences a segregating rather than an egalitarian element. For example, private training courses for the ENES test are not the privilege of socioeconomically disadvantaged groups. If students need to pay for expensive courses, education reproduces dominant practices and excludes the most vulnerable populations (Luna, 2017). This need to separate and categorize students’ performance contributes to *self-depreciation* – the unconscious acceptance of segregation as a suitable element of society (Freire, 2000). Those who can afford private universities seem to have more opportunities to enjoy the “egalitarian” nature of our education, since their chances to obtain a degree are higher.

Technology is seen as an egalitarian tool in the admission process to public universities in Ecuador. However, based on conversations with senior high school students from rural communities, technology has not favored most of them. Since this process of admission is online, opportunities are reduced for those who do not have permanent access to a computer with internet connection. This enhances segregation and self-depreciation, not to mention those whose first language is not Spanish and who have been denied the opportunity to take the test in their language.

The implications of the use of technology go beyond the process of registering for a test. Rebecca Zwick (2002), for example, mentions some issues concerning the reliability of the American testing industry and its influence around the world. Due to the ethical implications that standardized tests carry, principles for developing an appropriate test up to the release of scores have been established in the United States. One of the primary professional codes is the *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing* of the American Educational Research Association. In Ecuador, we do not have any Association responsible for the reliability of

admission tests, including the analysis of diversity, a topic that deserves great attention in our country.

The overwhelming role of standardized tests in determining access to public higher education contradicts the egalitarian nature of democratic education. Elements of oppression in these tests are timing, test makers rationale, and the test content itself. Standardized testing is an unfair lottery which “does not reward academic excellence, unusual motivation, or hard work” (Zwick, 2002, p. 32). Since admissions are limited, public universities are forced to be selective, and this selection is justified by the rationale that standardized tests can predict academic performance and professional success.

Luna (2017) reports a series of issues that are the result of a non-egalitarian process of admission to public universities in Ecuador: (a) policies are elitist; (b) the objectives of higher education are not clear; (c) the reliability of the ENES test is questionable; (d) private universities have increased their incomes while (e) there is a decrease in job opportunities for young people without higher education studies. This shows that inequality of opportunities inhibits the development of the egalitarian element of education.

### **The developmental nature of education**

To the National Secretary of Higher Education, Science and Technology (SENESCYT), college admission tests reveal the learning potentials that students have. From this perspective, scores are indicators of how students’ development will be in college. But how can scores predict success?

In 2014, Maria del Pilar Troya, Sub-secretary of Education affirmed that senior high school students were familiar with the ENES exam. Troya underscored the importance of the admission test ENES as a suitable tool to select those who deserve access to higher education. However, a brief but significant discourse analysis of her words seems to emphasize what we have previously discussed about the non-integrative and non-egalitarian nature of the use of standardized tests.

It is neither fair nor appropriate to think about human development when access to public universities reproduce elitist practices based on admission models of developed countries. This positivist point of view that verbal, numerical and abstract tasks in standardized tests are reliable indicators of students’ performance and success dehumanizes the individual. If the developmental nature of education involves liberation, assuming a passive role within an educational system that segregates is to accept that liberation is not worth pursuing.

The “dialogical character of education as the practice of freedom” (Freire, 2000) disappears when we adapt to the system instead of analyzing and questioning its nature. The use of the standardized test ENES for admission to public universities has caused different reactions from teachers, students, parents, and the community. Several manifestos have been published in national newspapers to express disagreement to an educational system that seems to deny the rights expressed in the Constitution of the Republic – those regarding equality of opportunities and free access to public education.

The national system of evaluation underscores selective education and considers that admission tests to public higher education are suitable. From this selective perspective, the developmental element of public education is reduced to test scores and the assumption that they reveal students' potentials. Bearing this in mind, we must wonder how isolated verbal, numerical, and abstract tasks can predict students' motivation, performance and success in college. Such selective consideration, according to Freire (2000) denies our historical development, our capacity to be reflective, our transformation and *praxis*. The idea that students' academic success and later professional development is reflected on a standardized test marks a segregating line between the chosen and the unchosen, being the latter deprived from the developmental character of education. The essence of anti-dialogical discourse is embedded in this contradiction – *the right for free education requires a minimum score in a test*.

### **Conclusion**

The use of standardized tests has its origins in oppressive practices that inhibit the unification of the elements of democratic education proposed by John Dewey. The *integrative*, *egalitarian* and *developmental* elements are superficially entailed in the process of admission to public universities in Ecuador. Admission methods that segregate and oppose the rights stated in the Constitution of the Republic are part of an anti-dialogical system of evaluation, a system that gives power to elites and silence the voice of students and teachers that are seen as “minorities”. The use of standardized tests reproduces oppressive practices and serves the beliefs of historical racist groups. What Freire calls *praxis* is simply denied.

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