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EDUCATION AS COMMONS

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MID-TERM CONFERENCE

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Organizers and partners



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EQUITY AND INCLUSIVITY IN EUROPEAN NATIONAL STANDARDISED ASSESSMENT: A CONTEXT ANALYSIS

Marialuisa Villani (Università di Bologna "Alma Mater")

Abstract Large-scale standardised assessments can exclude certain groups of students at various stages, from the test's design to the analysis of its results. Students with disabilities, for example, may find it challenging to access the test due to the design or technological barriers, leading to their exclusion (Hickey, 2015). Additionally, biased or stereotyped analyses, such as the belief that girls are inherently worse at math, can exclude certain students (Villani & Carbone, 2020). The impact of these exclusion mechanisms can have significant implications for students' learning paths and the entire school system. Over the past twenty years, there have been efforts to make large-scale standardised assessments more inclusive (Cawthon & Shyyan, 2022; Hickey, 2015). According to Cawthon and Shyyan (2022), strategies for addressing assessment accessibility aim to balance equity in testing experiences while maintaining standardised test designs. However, this balance raises questions about what is measured and the various methods available to demonstrate an understanding of that construct.

INTRODUCTION

Advocates of global educational policy trends have been telling national policymakers that national systems need to be accountable to be more effective and efficient, and the best way to do so is by implementing large-scale standardised assessments (Verger et al., 2019). Generally, large-scale standardised assessments have been used for selection, comparison and accountability. The primary justification for using such assessments is that they produce objective data that can be used to design educational policies (Williamson & Piattoeva, 2019). However, critical scholars in education have shown that large-scale assessment is a normative (Mons, 2009) tool that increases competition between schools and pupils, generates forms of control, contributes to exclusion among pupils and consequently undermines equity (Emler et al., 2019).

Exclusion mechanisms in large-scale standardised assessments can happen in different stages of assessment production, from the design to the analysis of results. For

instance, pupils belonging to discriminated groups (i.e. pupils with learning or physical disabilities) have difficulties in access (Hickey, 2015) (i.e. due to the design of the test and technological barrier). It is also possible to identify exclusion mechanisms in biased or stereotyped analyses (i.e. girls are innately less skilled in mathematics' (Villani & Carbone, 2020). The impact of exclusion mechanisms has significant implications for pupils' learning pathways. Furthermore, exclusion mechanisms influence the entire school system.

Several attempts have been made to improve accessibility for pupils with special needs in the design of standardised assessments (i.e. granting more time to pupils with educational needs during the test, alternative tests), but epistemological and technical barriers persist (Cawthon & Shyyan, 2022). The challenge for institutions in charge of assessment is to balance equity in the testing experience for all students while trying to preserve standardisation in test design and implementation. For the institutions responsible for designing assessments, the capacity to achieve this balance is significantly impacted by the policy context in which it is situated.

This chapter presents an exploratory analysis of four standardised national assessments carried out in Italy, France, Germany and Finland to identify the elements of inclusion or exclusion that characterise these evaluation programmes.

In this analysis, the production cycle of large-scale standardised data is socially, economically, and politically embedded (Villani, 2018).

THE POLICY CONTEXT OF LARGE-SCALE STANDARDISED ASSESSMENT DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

Neo-liberalism, mainly through the lens of New Public Management (NPM), has served as the overarching policy framework underpinning the growth of national assessment programs across Europe in recent decades. These National Large-Scale Standardized Assessments are crafted to generate comprehensive data on educational systems, encompassing student performance, teacher effectiveness, and other relevant metrics (Chudowsky & Pellegrino, 2003). Their primary purpose is to inform and shape policy formulation and decision-making processes (Head, 2008). Over the years, large-scale assessments have evolved into pivotal tools for evidence-based policymaking.

Davis and colleagues (Davies et al., 1999) define *evidence-based policy* as a tool that helps people make well-informed decisions about policies, programs and projects by putting the best available evidence at the heart of policy development and implementation. The use of evidence-based policies became necessary to implement and realise the accountability process (Strassheim & Kettunen, 2014). According to some policy scholars, the role of statistics in policy design is crucial due to its *objective* nature (Scott, 2005). However, the relationship between the production of statistical data and policymaking is less linear than one imagines. Authors inspired by the work of Foucault (Foucault et al., 2004) on the relationship between power, policymaking and technical tools have shown that in the last thirty years, statistics became one of the “technologies of power” (Lascoumes, 2004). According to this point of view, the quantification process of social phenomena also revolves around performance indicators, accountability, and other tools established by NPM (Desrosières, 2014). The use of statistics shaped by the NPM framework produces a discontinuity with the old way these tools were used by governments. Desrosières (Desrosières & Didier, 2014) has shown that statistical indicators influence the behaviour of policy actors in retroactive ways (Lascoumes & Le Gales, 2007). NLSA’s become a public policy instrumentation. Lascoumes and Le Galés (2007) define policy instrumentation as a device that is both technical and social: it engenders its own effects, it elucidates a (reasonably explicit) theorisation of the relationship between the governing body and those being governed, and it is crafted with the intent of fostering innovation.

Morgan (Morgan, 2011) asserts that within the NPM framework, education plays an instrumental role in mitigating unemployment rates by nurturing the requisite skills and competencies in students for the demands of the workforce. Consequently, large-scale standardised assessment programmes are often driven by economic interests. In this context, it becomes fundamental to transform the knowledge and competencies acquired by pupils into metrics as a tool for an evidence-based policy approach.

The policy context, both at the national and supranational levels, significantly shapes the priorities of the institution responsible for the National Large-Scale Assessment (NLSA) program in determining what aspects are deemed valuable to assess. Supranational organisations, such as the Oecd or consortia like the IEA, exert soft power through their large-scale international assessment programs, influencing national assessment programs and indicators (Villani & Oliveira, 2018).

In Germany (Prenzel et al., 2015) and Italy (Arzarello et al., 2015), scholars have highlighted the influential factors of international large-scale standardised assessments on the development and design of national assessment programs. These efforts aim to facilitate the comparison of national pupil performance results with international standards.

In the last twenty years, several efforts have been made in the design of large-scale standardised assessments in order to be more inclusive (Cawthon & Shyyan, 2022; Hickey, 2015). Cawthon and Shyyan (2022) claim that strategies for addressing assessment accessibility seek to balance equity in testing experiences for all students as well as maintain the standardisation of the test designs. This balancing act consistently raises questions about the construct being measured and the various methods available to demonstrate or provide evidence of understanding that construct.

THE ASSESSMENT PROGRAMS STUDIED

This paper presents an exploratory analysis of four standardised national assessments on large-scale national assessments carried out in Italy, France, Germany, and Finland to identify the elements of inclusion or exclusion that characterise these evaluation programmes. This context study is performed through the analysis of the official documents and the official websites of the programmes considered. The programs analysed vary among them, but the aim of the paper is to highlight the different policies implemented in the countries under consideration.

In Italy, the INVALSI test is administered by the National Institute for the Evaluation of the Education and Training System (INVALSI)¹. This assessment program is conducted annually and is census-based. It is administered to students in the sixth, eighth, and tenth grades, as well as the final year of high school.

In France, the Cycle of Disciplinary Assessments Conducted on Samples (Le cycle des évaluations disciplinaires réalisées sur échantillon, CEDRE) is conducted by the Direction de l'évaluation, de la prospective et de la performance (DEEP)². This assessment is administered annually to students in the sixth and seventh grades.

¹ https://www.invalsi.it/invalsi/rn/sid.php?page=sid_it_00.

² <https://www.education.gouv.fr/cycle-des-evaluations-disciplinaires-realisees-sur-echantillon-cedre-en-fin-d-ecole-et-fin-de-2870>.

In Germany, the National Educational Panel Study (NEPS)³ provides longitudinal data on educational processes and competence development. It is the most significant long-term educational study in Germany. NEPS follows seven starting cohorts; it focuses on the development of competencies and the educational trajectories of pupils from early childhood to old age.

The Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC)⁴ carry out the Learning Outcomes Evaluation on national official languages (Finnish and Swedish), mathematics, and English. In autumn 2018, the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) arranged an assessment of learning outcomes among first-grade pupils in basic education for the first time. The assessment was called the starting level measurement.

DIFFERENT KIND OF EXCLUSIONS

There are different forms of exclusion that can arise during the design and implementation of large-scale standardised assessments. Hickey (2015) asserts that recognising diversity factors within the school context during the design and administration of large-scale standardised assessments goes beyond solely addressing the needs of students who qualify for an individual program plan due to learning, sensory, physical, or emotional disabilities. In order to make fair and accessible large-scale standardised tests, we need to consider the native language of pupils (that can differ from the national language in which the test is designed), socio-economic origin, culture, religion, and family composition (Hickey, 2015). Research literature shows that not all students can fully master learning and perform at their potential in an environment that predominantly relies on text as the medium for acquiring and demonstrating knowledge (Edyburn, 2011; Thurlow et al., 2008).

When analysing exclusion mechanisms in large-scale standardised assessments, it is crucial to examine this phenomenon through the lens of social justice (Klenowski, 2014).

In the last ten years, large-scale standardised tests have shifted from paper-based tests to computer-based tests (Villani, 2019). Digitalisation's ability to improve equity and inclusivity in large-scale standardised assessment has been the subject of intense debate. On the one hand, some scholars consider the use of digital tools an

³ <https://www.neps-data.de/Mainpage>.

⁴ <https://www.karvi.fi/en/evaluations/pre-primary-and-basic-education>.

asset to improve the usability of the test device and increase inclusivity (Cawthon & Shyyan, 2022; Hickey, 2015); on the other hand, education scholars argue that the apparent objectivity offered by digitalisation in fact continues to render large-scale standardised assessment intrinsically unequal and exclusionary (Williamson & Piattoeva, 2019).

According to Cawthon and Shyyan (2022), there are various approaches that assessment designers can take to minimise student exclusion from assessment programs. The first approach consists of ensuring the provision of access features that cater to all participating students. These features include resources embedded within assessments, accessible to all students regardless of disability or non-native language status. Importantly, these resources are intended not to alter the construct of the test items.

The second approach involves access features designated for specific students based on decisions made by informed educators. These resources are integrated within assessments and can be activated for students based on their individual needs, which may stem from their official national language proficiency or disability status. It is crucial to note that these resources are intended not to alter the construct of the test item.

The third approach involves accommodations, which are resources available to students with Individualized Education Program (IEP) or Special Education Need (SEN) status. These resources aim to ensure fairness in testing experiences for students with disabilities without altering the construct of the test item.

In the assessment design testing accommodations are intended “to remove construct irrelevant barriers that otherwise would interfere with examinees’ ability to demonstrate their standing on the target constructs” (American Educational Research Association, 2011; Lee et al., 2021)

The fourth approach involves modification of the content of the assessment test or the way the assessment is administered with the aim of increasing the level of accessibility. The test results are analysed separately from the unmodified assessment. Determining whether a specific accessibility strategy qualifies as an accommodation or a modification depends, in part, on the nature of the construct being tested.

Cawthon and Shyyan (2022) warn researchers to focus on more than just the exclusion mechanisms of the test but to consider all the social, economic, and linguistic factors that can produce exclusion.

THE EXCLUSION MECHANISM IN THE NATIONAL LARGE-SCALE ASSESSMENT PRODUCTION CYCLE

This part of the chapter presents the analysis of the different approaches applied in the four large-scale assessment programmes considered.

Miller and Yan (Miller & Yan, 2023) claim that two main factors increase the level of exclusion rate in large-scale standardised assessments: exclusion guidelines and exclusion of students with disabilities. Large-scale assessments (LSA) with vague exclusion guidelines, coupled with inadequate monitoring of their implementation, have resulted in significant variation in the exclusion rates of students, especially those with disabilities (Ysseldyke & Thurlow, 1994). Miller and Yan (2023) argue that ambiguous exclusion guidelines have made it challenging for administrators to accurately identify which students should be assessed and which should not.

The sample design produces the exclusion of pupils with special education needs (SEN). For instance, NLSAs like CEDRE programs may not incorporate any accommodations or modifications in the assessment test. As a result, the CEDRE program excludes students with disabilities from participating in the assessment.

In contemporary performance-driven societies, the academic debate has shifted to focus on gifted students with learning disabilities who excel in standardised assessments (Lovett & Sparks, 2013). On the one hand, this focus has urged researchers and assessment designers to refrain from excluding all students with learning disabilities (Miller & Yan, 2023). However, on the other hand, it risks perpetuating ableism by adhering to a medical approach to disabilities, neglecting the advantages of a multifactorial approach (Shakespeare, 2014).

Upon analysing the official document of the NLSAs, a combination of design approaches has emerged. In Italy, Germany, and Finland, the assessment programs offer an alternative test for students with disabilities and provide the possibility for pupils to have additional time to complete the test.

Whether or not this more broadly defined group of children receives additional support is again related to how far schools adapt their organisation, teaching and curriculum, including the assessment of pupils through national testing (European Commission. Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency & Eurydice, 2009).

Several attempts have been made to improve accessibility for pupils with special needs in the design of standardised assessments:

<i>Country</i>	<i>Granting more time to pupils with SEN During the test</i>	<i>Alternative tests based on the disability's characteristics</i>	<i>Collect demographic and family information through a survey</i>	<i>Collects biographies and relevant context factors with family and teachers' interview</i>	<i>Mandatory of the test</i>
Italy	X	X	X		X
France	X	X	X		
Germany	X	X	X	X	
Finland	X		X		

Tab. 1. Features of the national large-scale assessment programs studied

NLSAs typically gather demographic and socio-economic information about pupils and families through a survey tool. It is crucial to design items that collect personal data in a way that is easily understandable, particularly for pupils with low literacy competencies or Special Educational Needs (SEN), to minimise exclusion rates. For instance, when collecting information on parents' professions, simplifying the language and format can enhance accessibility for all students (Villani, 2019). Furthermore, this issue impact not only on the level of inclusion of pupils but also on the quality of the data gathered. Moreover, this issue not only affects the level of inclusion of pupils but also impacts the quality of the gathered data.

In the countries considered, we assisted in the digitalisation process of the national large-scale assessment.

As previously mentioned, the digitalisation of large-scale assessments can significantly enhance the accessibility of tests for students with disabilities (Lee et al., 2021). However, when examining the inclusion of all students through a social justice lens, it is crucial to consider the digital divide, which persists in some areas. Currently, we identify three levels of the digital divide; the first level of the digital divide represents the inequality of access to digital tools and infrastructures (Van Dijk, 2005). The second level of the digital divide is based on the disparities in computer and Internet use. Skills, competence and abilities to use the Internet have become more important than ever. Not only is material access to the Internet taken into consideration, but also the different uses of it (Ragnedda & Muschert, 2015). The third level of the digital divide (Ragnedda, 2017) represents the social and cultural benefits derived from accessing and using the Internet. Analyses the offline returns of accessing and using digital technologies, attempting to understand who gains the most advantage from the Internet (Van Deursen & Helsper, 2015).

Scholars (Pagani et al., 2016) have shown the influence of digital literacy on pupils' performances (Villani, 2019). This raises a significant concern regarding the barrier created by the transition from paper-based to computer-based tests.

As our societies become increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse, the standardised norms applied in tests can inadvertently lead to exclusion. Furthermore, It is crucial to identify any additional barriers that may arise during the implementation and administration phases of NLSAs, as social issues can emerge within these contexts(Sireci, 2020).

For instance, in Finland, the test is administered in Finnish and Swedish, ensuring accessibility to standardised assessments for linguistic minorities who receive education in these languages. Generally, students who are not proficient in the national language in which the test is administered are excluded from the assessment. In contemporary society, with the increasing importance of migration due to climate changes and global conflicts, a portion of the school population risks being overlooked and not considered part of the system. The phenomenon of exclusion rates applies to both national and international standardised assessments (Atasever et al., 2023).

The variables imposed by the standards in the assessment often do not take into account the social context in which the test is administered (Villani, 2019). The social dimensions of assessment exclusion play a critical role, particularly when the test is administered in marginalised contexts. For example, in Italy, the Invalsi test is mandatory and census-based. Non-participation in the test leads to exclusion from the national final exam at the end of middle school. In marginalised areas, this non-participation increases the risk of drop-out (Villani, 2019).

Not considering inclusivity aspects in the assessment design produces normative metrics and subsequent analyses that conceal the enduring problems, especially those related to gender and ableist barriers. Considering only one factor of inequality at a time provides only a partial representation of the inequality produced. In the analyses produced by the four assessment programs considered, the overlap between the categories of sex and gender is used interchangeably. Generally, the analysis considers the habit of interpreting gender gaps in student performance without analysing contextual factors, social background and cultural specificities but highlighting the differences between boys and girls (Villani & Carbone, 2020).

CONCLUSION

As state accountability systems evolve and assessment results become increasingly integral to policy and programming decisions, it is imperative that assessment systems prioritise inclusivity (Hickey, 2015; Liu et al., 2017).

In order to begin to address these limitations in the design of large-scale standardised assessments, we need to solve the problem of large-scale standardised assessment tools not being epistemologically inclusive.

A potential approach involves shifting the policy focus of large-scale standardised assessments from accountability, selection, and comparison to equity and inclusivity. This shift could pave the way for a new paradigm in designing, collecting, and utilising standardised data.

Another approach involves utilising an intersectionality framework to analyse factors contributing to inequalities. Intersectionality relies on the idea that social categories, such as gender, race, ethnicity, physical and learning disabilities, neurodivergent conditions, and social background, are interwoven and have consequences on inclusion. Despite the extensive use of intersectionality theory in qualitative education studies, minimal research has applied it to quantitative or standardised educational assessment studies. Previous research in relation to equity and standardised assessment shows that not considering inclusivity aspects in the assessment design produces normative metrics and subsequent analyses that conceal enduring problems, especially related to gender and ableist barriers (Mons, 2009).

From this contextual analysis, different aspects emerge that we need to increase the level of inclusion in NLSA programs.

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