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Systems, ideologies and history: a three-dimensional absence in the study of assessment reform processes

María Teresa Flórez Petour

Centre for Educational Assessment, Oxford University, Oxford, UK

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This paper makes the case for the need to study assessment reform processes from a broader and more complex perspective that takes the historical, ideological and systemic aspects of assessment policies into account. It draws on a larger study to demonstrate how the understanding of Assessment for Learning (AfL) reforms is enriched by such a perspective, taking the Chilean case as an illustrative example. The study draws on polysystems theory as an overarching theoretical tool and on critical discourse analysis and intertextuality as a means to reconstruct the polysystem of assessment reforms. These tools are used to analyse two types of sources: documents from different periods of Chilean history of education where reforms relevant to assessment were carried out, and interviews with policy authorities involved in the AfL reform as well as with teachers from different backgrounds and contexts.

**Keywords:** assessment for learning; complex; systemic; history; Chile; assessment policy

**Introduction**

In recent years, calls for complexity have been made in the area of assessment reform processes (Hayward & Spencer, 2010). Along the same line, a few authors have attempted to study assessment reforms considering the chaotic aspect of policy design (Baird & Lee-Kelley, 2009; Ecclestone, 2000), the embeddedness of these processes in broader political discussions (Daugherty & Ecclestone, 2006; Ecclestone, 2002; James, 2011) and the inclusion of the voice of different actors involved in these processes (see Hayward, 2012 for a study on students’ perceptions around feedback).

Despite these scattered attempts, research around assessment reform processes tends to remain focused on the ‘success’ or ‘failure’ factors of policy implementation and does not frequently consider a broader perspective, even when this emerges as a crucial aspect of the object of enquiry. The study of reforms around Assessment for Learning (AfL) is not an exception. AfL has been globally imported and piloted and/or researched in a wide variety of contexts (see, e.g., Azúa & Bick, 2009; Carless, 2005; Chow & Leung, 2011; Hopfenbeck, Tolo, Flórez Petour, & El Masri, 2013; Kellaghan, 2004; Tan, 2011) and has the characteristics of a research epidemic (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004). However, besides its widely recognised positive effects on students and teachers (see, e.g., the literature reviews of Flórez &
Sammons, 2013; Hodgson & Pyle, 2010; Tierney & Charland, 2007), the question about why the approach has been borrowed in several contexts (including the political reasons to do so) as well as the question around the processes of translation and interpretation (Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012) that AFL is subjected to once it is adopted by and adapted to the local context have seldom been addressed, if addressed at all.

Likewise, evidence on the obstacles for the implementation of AFL, often ignored by policy-makers, has been addressed by research only to a limited extent. Evidence of these difficulties is abundant. Aspects such as lack of commitment from senior staff (OFSTED, 2008); a low level of knowledge about assessment, curriculum and disciplines among teachers (Carless, 2005; DfES, 2007; Gioka, 2006; OFSTED, 2008; Stiggins & Arter, 2002; Thompson & Wiliam, 2008); replicability at a wider level of the professional development programmes designed for research (DfES, 2007; Dori, 2003; Torrance & Pryor, 2001); contradictions experienced by teachers between AFL and the demands of high-stakes external assessment systems (Black, 2004; Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & Wiliam, 2004; Condie, Livingston, & Seagraves, 2005; Dori, 2003; Gipps, McCallum, Hargreaves, & Pickering, 2005; Hayward & Spencer, 2010; Kirton, Hallam, Peffers, Robertson, & Stobart, 2007); superficial and technique-oriented understanding of the approach (Hayward & Spencer, 2010; Klenowski, 2009; OFSTED, 2008; Tapan, 2001; Webb & Jones, 2009), among others, have been widely recognised since the beginning of research on AFL.

Experts have examined these issues looking mainly for improved models of professional development (see, e.g., Hayward, 2010; Gardner, Harlen, Hayward, & Stobart, 2011; Leahy & Wiliam, 2012), where traditional models of top-down change are criticised and the role of the teacher as an agent of change becomes central. This research has contributed multiple valuable insights about how AFL programmes are conceived in terms of teachers’ interaction with new knowledge and practices around assessment. However, this perspective suffers from absence of a broader view in relation to the difficulties mentioned above, which could be why AFL is not being widely used in schools even where it has been promoted as a large-scale reform (see, e.g., Black et al., 2004; Gioka, 2006; Kellaghan, 2004; OFSTED, 2008; Tapan, 2001; Thompson & Wiliam, 2008; Weeden & Winter, 1999, among others).

This literature also inadvertently adopts a top-down approach to reform. Independently of how tight or loose the models of professional development in which research on AFL occurs are, the approach is generally decided upon by researchers and/or policy authorities. No exception was found in this respect in the literature around AFL policies, perhaps due to researchers ‘going native’ (Batteson & Ball, 1995) by being too close to policy. Consequently, despite the increased level of teacher agency (Gardner, 2010) or collaborative learning in teacher communities (Leahy & Wiliam, 2012), education professionals are constructed as executioners of someone else’s decision, while policy elites and researchers are positioned as the ‘agents of redemption’ (Popkewitz & Brennan, 1998, p. 7) in change in education. The connection between this division of labour and the slow and complex process of appropriation and change observed in AFL literature (Hayward & Spencer, 2010; Leahy & Wiliam, 2012; Willis, 2008) is a strand of research that would require further study.

Contributions from outside the field of assessment have suggested potential paths for a different understanding of assessment reform processes, including AFL. Sociological enquiry has highlighted the connection between assessment practices
and broader ideological and political issues, challenging thus the myth of assessment as an exclusively technical matter (Filer, 2000). More recently, critical policy scholarship has studied national and international standardised assessment systems as tools for governing education systems at a distance, a characteristic of neo-liberal models of education (see, e.g., Grek, 2008, 2010; Lawn & Ozga, 2009; Ozga, 2009). Critical policy scholarship has also studied the complex processes of enactment of AfL in English schools, where contradictory assessment policies engender contradictory and discontinuous professional identities (Ball et al., 2012). Finally, the attraction of principles of complexity theory in physics and mathematics to the field of education and assessment policies has generated criticism around evidence-based and accountability approaches and argues for the need of a perspective where partial causality, uncertainty, emergence, interpretation and probability are accepted as inherent to the study of complex human phenomena (Geyer, 2012).

The article proposes that the diverse difficulties observed in the processes of AfL reform, although apparently varied in nature, all respond to a common element: the lack of a broader and more complex view in relation to assessment reform processes in both the spheres of policy-making and research. A narrow perspective on assessment phenomena predominates, where only some specific system and its actors are included, or where a specific discourse on assessment is analysed in isolation. Such a narrow view in research and policy-making avoids complexity in three different dimensions: historical, systemic and ideological.

Through a critical discourse analysis of documents related to assessment processes in Chile, as well as interviews with policy authorities and practitioners, this article seeks to establish a case for situating the study of assessment reforms in the context of three broader dimensions, namely the historical dimension, that incorporates the diachronic aspect of assessment reforms in both the short and the long term; the systemic dimension, related to the processes of production, circulation and consumption of discourses around assessment in a complex web of systems, beliefs, interactions and (power) relationships between their actors; and the ideological dimension. The ideological dimension offers a perspective on the extent to which theories and research on assessment and their translation into policies are related to perspectives about education and society sustained by specific powerful groups.

Theoretical and methodological framework

The findings presented in this article are part of a broader study that aims at approaching assessment reform processes from a more systemic and dynamic view. The research questions that guided the study on which this paper is based are noted below:

- What are the main systems (with their actors, activities and internal relations) and the main interactions between them involved in assessment reform processes in Chile?
- How are discourses on assessment produced, how do they circulate in this system and how does knowledge on assessment relate to power issues?

The study develops a systemic perspective about power relations and discourses on assessment involved in policy design and policy enactment processes, taking Chile as an illustrative case. Polysystems theory is selected as the main
methodological framework. This theory, developed by Even-Zohar (1990), offers a perspective where interactions between systems can be hypothesised in order to understand phenomena in a broader, more dynamic and complex sense, thus gaining a richer understanding of the way in which discourse on, in this case, assessment, circulates inside a polysystem. Instead of the traditional isolated, mechanistic, closed and homogeneous analysis of a static monosystem, this theory ‘intends to account for how a system operates both “in principle” and “in time”’ (1990, p. 11) and understands a system as an open, changing and heterogeneous structure. Even-Zohar understands a polysystem as ‘… a multiple system, a system of various systems which intersect with each other and partly overlap […], yet functioning as one structured whole, whose members are interdependent’ (1990, p. 11).

A polysystem is dynamic in nature and involves a permanent struggle between the central and the peripheral. There is a hierarchy in the systems in what Even-Zohar sees as ‘the permanent struggle between the various strata’ (1990, p. 14). The system that rules the production of texts (e.g. a system that promotes an assessment paradigm or a policy that becomes hegemonic against another policy at a particular time) is central. Simultaneously, each system can have its own centre. By processes of canonisation (institutionalisation), something that was peripheral (marginal or centrifugal) may become the centre of a system or the centre of the whole polysystem. This theory takes into account the tensions between strata both inside a system and in the polysystem, that is, the struggle between canonised and non-canonised strata. Texts circulate inside this complex structure and are produced according to a repertoire, that is, according to a series of laws for text production. These repertoires can be primary or innovative (Even-Zohar, 1990, pp. 20–21), which means that they introduce a change inside a system or the whole polysystem, or secondary or conservative, that is, one that reproduces the hegemonic repertoire.

In order to reconstruct the polysystem, some established procedures that facilitated the reconstruction of the repertoires for assessment were followed. Such procedures are based on two theoretical tools: critical/ideological discourse analysis (Potter & Wetherell, 1995; Van Dijk, 1999, 2008) and intertextuality (Bakhtin, 1990; Fairclough, 2009; Kristeva, 1987).

On the basis of this methodological framework, a three-step strategy for data collection and analysis was followed. First, a selection of a series of discursive practices around assessment reform processes was made. On the basis of keyword search and snowballing sampling in physical and Web archives, along with further inclusion/exclusion procedures on the basis of iterative coding and reading (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009), 166 documents were selected for analysis. Each discursive practice was then critically and ideologically analysed in order to detect the point of view about assessment defended by each actor and the context in which each discourse was enunciated. Additionally, four policy authorities (named here PA1, PA2, PA3 and PA4) that were involved in different roles in the AFL policy in Chile as well as 20 teachers with varied levels of experience and from a wide range of initial education types and working contexts were interviewed. Appendix 1 provides a summary of the selection criteria for participant teachers and describes the characteristics of interviewees.

Following the ideological analysis, the second step involved an intertextual analysis of the selected discursive practices and the interviews, with the aim of detecting relationships between actors, contexts, groups and perspectives. Finally, the intertex-
tual analysis served as a basis for interpreting how the polysystem worked. Figure 1 summarises the phases of analysis and interpretation described above.

The selection of discursive practices was made not only for the present, but also for some past periods of Chilean history of education in which reforms around assessment were carried out. This was considered as polysystems that must be interpreted from both a synchronic and a diachronic perspective, in order to observe how discourses were generated and how they struggle or overlap today, expanding our view and avoiding the myopia of the ‘here and now’. Four periods were selected, each one starting with a process of reform where assessment played an important part: 1860–1900, 1920–1940, 1965–1985 and 1990–2010. Twenty years were deemed a sensible range of time for ideas to spread throughout the polysystem. The first period is longer because the recent independence of the country made reform processes more difficult in a context where the institutional bases of the nation were being set.

Potential limitations of the study are related to the researcher’s interpretation of documents and interviews, although a process of peer validation of the analysis was carried out with two colleagues from Chile. Other limitations could emerge from the work with archive sources, as officially compiled documents could involve ideologically motivated selection processes and, thus, the intentional silencing of specific voices. These silences and omissions, nonetheless, were considered as part of the ideological analysis in this study. Finally, the researcher understands that some detail may have been lost in the search for a more overarching perspective but the contribution of the findings justifies this risk, and detailed accounts of particular initiatives are readily found in the available literature.
Despite the diachronic approach, and due to limitations of space, emphasis is given in the article to current AfL reform processes in the more recent period. The past is addressed in connection to the ways in which persistent discourses could be intertwined with AfL policy or in terms of inherited system structures that may have a role in AfL reform processes. Constraints of space also reduce the presentation of results to general findings and do not allow for the provision of more than a few direct quotations from interviews. A more detailed account of the interpretation process and the evidence that sustains it can be found in Flórez (2014).

Findings

Systems and actors

From the systemic and historical dimensions of this study, two relevant interrelated findings are derived. Unlike existing evidence, where the main actors and systems are commonly limited to schools, researchers and policy-makers, the complex approach to assessment reforms used in this research illuminates the field by incorporating other systems that play a central role in assessment policy. In connection to this, a second finding emerges: the same systems intervene throughout the history of Chilean reform processes. In all the selected periods the systems that emerge as relevant are: political parties, institutions of education governance, schools, the economic sector, foreign models or education systems, families, public opinion, teacher education and the academy. The internal actors and relationships of each system as well as the hierarchical arrangements and relationships between systems are dynamic and vary in time according to the political and historical context. The account below explains the role of each system by focusing on the enactment of AfL as a policy in Chile.

Political parties

In all the periods under scrutiny, actors holding political power and representing specific ideologies play a fundamental role in assessment policy processes. Discussions around examinations and who should have the control of them as well as the opening or closing of specific social mobility gates guarded through examination processes mark most of the political discussion around assessment in the first three periods.

This system continues to be crucial in the process of AfL policy in Chile. When asked about the reasons to develop this policy, authorities indicate in the interviews an official motivation, namely the absence of policies related to classroom assessment and a demand for such policies from teachers. However, two policy authorities add a political unofficial motivation for reform. Low results from TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) and the national curriculum assessment system (SIMCE) by the end of the 1990s and beginning of the 2000s generated criticism from the political opposition to the left-centre government coalition that had been in office since 1990. According to PA1, this involved recognition of the failure of education policies developed during the first decade of the coalition’s government. A series of policies were developed simultaneously as a response to this criticism, although without a high sense of consistency but mainly as fast policy (Peck, 2002) derived from political pressure.
Once it is formulated as a policy at the Unit for Curriculum and Assessment of the Ministry (UCE), interviewees refer to the constant shortage of funding due to the lack of support that AfL received at the Finance unit of the Congress. PA1 indicates about the AfL initiative:

Look, basically because ... uh, eventually it was administered [ ] by UCE and [ ] Finance [ ] increased UCE’s resources a lot [...] in 2006–2010 but always subordinate, because people from Finance was quite anti-curriculum [...]. Then [ ] the dialogue with them was complicated, then, what we [ ] presented as increase, they never funded it. That’s why, for instance, we didn’t have resources to print [material].

Conversely, a parallel assessment policy around standards that emerged as part of the unit of the Ministry in charge of SIMCE, received considerable economic support. AfL, then, remains as a small experimental policy in the Ministry and is finally absorbed by the standards agenda. When the government changes to a right-wing alliance in 2010, PA2 indicates all the AfL team was dismissed from the Ministry. Furthermore, all the interviewed policy authorities recognise in this transition, the end of AfL as a public policy.

The power of political discussion around assessment policy demonstrates its effectiveness when teachers interviewed in this study do not recognise AfL as a policy from the Ministry, and the few that know the approach do it because they attended a university programme where it was taught. On the contrary, Progress Maps and SIMCE Levels of Achievement, the two policies derived from the standards agenda, are recognised by all the teachers, although with different levels of understanding of their contents.

The economic sector

The involvement of the economic and productive sector in education policy was gradually incorporated in Chilean history of education. It starts from a movement that intended the abandonment of exclusively verbal, theoretical and encyclopaedic approaches to pedagogy and assessment, and their replacement for an education that aimed at the incorporation of students to the world of labour through more practical approaches to teaching and learning. After this initial motivation, governance structures proposed in different periods involved the direct participation of representatives of the industrial, agricultural and business sectors in decision-making processes.

Compared to previous periods, the involvement of this system is more abstract and at the same time more pervasive in the present. On the one hand, employers are not directly involved in education reform processes, although new partnerships between the private and the public sectors allow for an increased influence of the business sector in education. On the other hand, their demands and the imperatives of the global economy are insistently quoted as a justification for reform and as an argument for the defence of a functional approach to education and society (see the section Discourses on assessment and power struggles), as can be seen in the legal and curriculum documents from the period.

As described below, functional perspectives in the current neo-liberal context are more consistent with standardised testing regimes as a means of governing decentralised systems from a distance (Ozga, Grek, & Lawn, 2009) and of enabling the selection and distribution of individuals in a pre-defined social structure. In a context
like this, a classroom- and learning-based perspective like AfL can only be included after a process of absorption and adaptation to the existing ideological context.

Institutions of education governance

The context where the implementation of AfL is attempted in the 2000s is determined by the Chilean historical governance tradition in two ways. First, the structure of the Ministry of Education becomes increasingly complex, as previous units coexist with the new ones in an overlapping of education governance structures. Secondly, top-down models are inherited from previous periods and teachers’ responses in the interviews reveal a weakened professional self-concept where they assume their role in relation to government policies as one of compliance. These two aspects generate a chaotic governance structure in education, where different units of the Ministry as well as local authorities generate their own assessment policies without much space for practitioners to make sense of them or to dissent or agree with them.

AfL becomes in this context only one programme among the different assessment reforms developed by the Assessment and Curriculum Unit as well as by other units of the Ministry. Interviews with policy authorities reveal internal and external conflicts inside and between the units of the Ministry during the process of development of assessment policies, as well as changes of authorities derived from political contingency, which carry with them sudden policy shifts around assessment in terms of both the discourse on assessment being promoted and the relationships between specific units of the Ministry. PA3, for example, explains:

the level of [ ] information available on assessment inside the different... parts of the Ministry and [the contradictions they had] was huge. Then you put a document in the system and you have one idea on assessment, then you [manage] another document and there is another idea on assessment, so, in 2005, 2006 there is an attempt to unify and to sit [ ] the different heads of the Ministry to try to define some of the common features about assessment.

In the search for consistency, the Ministry developed initiatives such as a round table around assessment between its different units in 2006. In theory, this derived in AfL as the approach to be promoted by all the units. Document analysis, nonetheless, revealed the enactment of this agreement as a source of hybrid discourses and phony policies (Philips, 2004) where, for example, AfL was addressed as an appendix while the main document proposed a different approach, or where it was mixed with assessment through standardised testing systems. Additionally, municipalities developed their own assessment systems at the local level, adding more confusion to the polysystem.

In a top-down context, policy authorities indicate in interviews that once the policy is delivered to the system, they do not manage information about its effects. The reactive and contingent character of policy formulation as responding to test results and political criticism turns change into a simple gesture, where the priority is to show that something new is being done rather than the careful monitoring and following up of the process and its consequences and effects.
Foreign models and education systems

As Schriewer and Martínez (2004) have highlighted, travelling policies and policy borrowing are not new phenomena. In the case of Chile, each time a reform is attempted some form of dialogue with ‘things going on elsewhere’ occurs. In historical perspective, this dialogue has ranged from local experts travelling to foreign contexts to attract new ideas in education; to teachers’ interest in international ideas around more emancipatory pedagogies; to the strategic use of the discourse of international organisations as a means to validate new policies at the local level.

This long tradition of looking at foreign models is embodied in current assessment reform processes in the figure of the international travelling expert, and AFL is not an exception to this. Both the standards and AFL policies involved the attraction of a foreign expert who was contracted by the Ministry. Margaret Forster in representation of ACER (‘the Australians’ in the words of participants) had an important role in the development of progress maps in relation to standards and a foreign expert from the International Baccalaureate (not named here due to anonymity issues) was hired with the aim of developing a classroom assessment programme in the Unit for Curriculum and Assessment, which became the AFL policy.

When asked about the reasons to opt for AFL among other potential approaches, all the interviewees signal the foreign expert as the one responsible for this decision and none of them is able to justify such a decision beyond the options made by this actor. Surprisingly, the foreign expert declares in her interview not to be an expert on assessment and not to have a very detailed knowledge of AFL. She justifies the adoption of this approach because, after a general review of the available literature, it was closer to what she thought was correct on the basis of her practical experience in assessment. From the beginning of the AFL policy, therefore, as PA3 highlights, the original discourse is mixed with the experience of the expert in the International Baccalaureate. When asked about her role in the process of AFL reform, she describes it in terms of bringing light to a place where knowledge on assessment was in complete darkness at every level: policy authorities, universities and teachers. In that context, she needs to teach what AFL consists of and to persuade actors about its benefits. As part of this persuasion process, the foreign expert decides to undertake a literature review and the Assessment and Curriculum Unit begins a study to collect data on teachers’ assessment practices, from a logic that questions current evidence-based approaches to knowledge generation and transfer (Levin, 2011). Rather than using research as a basis for decision-making, the foreign expert indicates she and the members of the unit knew there was a deficiency and a demand in the system around classroom assessment but they needed to have a more scientific basis to make this knowledge from practice more credible. In that sense, the use of research in policy responds in this case to what Byrne and Ozga (2008) have called a tactical relationship between policy and research.

The knowledge of the foreign expert is accepted without question by authorities at the national level. A very top-down process of transnational policy learning occurs in this relationship, independent of the views on reform processes that the foreign expert brings and of the actual level of knowledge that she has. In that sense, compared to previous periods, the present seems to be the most passive in its acceptance of foreign ideas.
Schools

Schools also reproduce the traditional top-down structure of the system and currently they have retained the structure determined by the legislation of the 1980s. According to documents and interviews, assessment policies circulate from the Ministry to local authorities, who transfer the initiatives to Headteachers and Heads of Technical-Pedagogical Units (UTP Heads)⁴. In turn, UTP Heads act as *translators* of policies (Ball et al., 2012) and transmit a filtered version of policies to teachers through three different strategies: (1) not informing teachers at all and, thus, teachers knowing about new policies through their colleagues, the news, professional development programmes or their own web searches of official sources; (2) the provision of general information, leaving teachers to decide about the enactment of the policy; (3) the most infrequent case, generating an in-depth discussion about the policy in order to reach collective understanding and decision-making on it.

When assessment policies are not high stakes, like the case of AfL, a difference in the degree of freedom given to teachers in terms of enactment decisions is detected between private, private government-subsidised and public schools in Chile, the former being the ones where teachers are granted greater autonomy and the latter where they feel more pressure to implement policies. However, no differences were detected in relation to high-stakes assessment, as in a market-centred model, these systems are related to competition between schools and, thus, school owners, Headteachers and UTP Heads think of them as compulsory and crucial. AfL as an innovative repertoire, then, faces the difficulty of struggling with high-stakes standardised assessment discourses, which are experienced as more pressing by teachers from different contexts.

Additionally, an aspect that is found historically in Chilean schools is the co-existence in these spaces of innovative and highly motivated teachers with conservative and less motivated colleagues who hinder their attempts for change and exert resistance before new repertoires. These teachers resist change by reproducing discourses on assessment from previous decades, contributing to the overlapping of discourses in the polysystem.

To this internal logic in tension one must add the chaotic aspect of education governance described above. All the simultaneous messages from authorities around assessment reach schools at the same time and practitioners have to struggle to make sense of these parallel policies and to prioritise those they see as more relevant or urgent. For example, Participant 11, an experienced Mathematics teacher, indicates:

> Interviewee: Yes. That feeling that, suddenly one thing arrives, ok, this is like the novelty of the year and then some months later another one appears, yes, there is, there is a bewilderment, there is a bewilderment.

> Interviewer: And how do you manage, how, how …?

> Interviewee: Only a bit resigned and … like a [laughs], [ ] really like resign, with resignation, I mean, [ ] and see if it’s useful we apply it and if not, we don’t.

> Interviewer: That is, you try to prioritise what is more …

> Interviewee: The one that interests us more, yes.

Interviews with teachers also reveal their perception of assessment policies as confusing and contradictory, and as an aspect that generates role conflict in them (Berryhill, Linney, & Fromewick, 2009), i.e. that makes them assume practices such
as teaching to the test despite this going against their pedagogical and disciplinary beliefs. Although they do not use the name, teachers mention a series of practices that are today considered as part of AfL and of constructivist approaches to pedagogy. They agree with these practices and see them as ethically correct but they do not see many spaces in the current assessment policy context to use them. However, they have developed strategies to be able to keep practices that are consistent with their beliefs while ‘playing the game’ with more external and pressing policies (Jeffrey & Woods, 1998). In general, teachers use strategies to defend aspects such as: professional autonomy and criteria, qualitative judgement of students’ learning, going beyond conceptual content, promoting a focus on learning, developing higher-order thinking skills and participating in more meaningful learning activities. In that sense, one has to ask how new AfL is to teachers, given that they already believe in these principles. Rather than their lack of understanding, then, the stumbling block seems to be the chaotic messages from the government, the historical subjection to top-down structures and the pressures of high-stakes assessment policies upon their practice.

Students are also an important factor in assessment reform processes. According to all the teachers interviewed in this research, students show a high tendency to resist innovative repertoires around assessment and have turned marks and grades into the central motivation of their work. They do not naturally appreciate learning for the sake of learning but act in the majority of cases on the basis of the promise of a number or a reward. They also tend to demand written tests, which constitute the practice they have more often been exposed to, and think of new practices as complicated and difficult to understand. Teachers who have managed to introduce more innovative practices along with the traditional ones, indicate the resistance of students as an important obstacle and describe the process of change as slow and as requiring students to learn about the new approach and its use.

Families
In historical terms, there is continuity in the social differentiation that operates in this particular system. Since the nineteenth-century, Conservative groups have theoretically advocated for parents – as opposed to the State – as responsible for the education of their children and, in relation to this, for their right of choosing among the varied offers of educational institutions. However, in practice, there has been a historical absence of the voice of parents from lower social strata, who ‘are told’ by the archive. Their relationship to school is described as one of tension, where they do not see education as important and thus hinder children from attending school or do not encourage their attendance, or where they blame teachers for the low performance of pupils. It is only in the 1960s that parents’ associations are formally included in the polysystem but their functions are reduced to collaboration in school activities.

Teachers from state schools, which are the schools for the more vulnerable groups in the currently segregated structure of the Chilean education system (Valenzuela, Bellei, & De los Ríos, 2010), indicate in their interviews that they try to get parents involved in the assessment process beyond marks reporting (e.g. explaining to them that their children should always ask for assessment criteria in any assessment activity) but parents do not understand more innovative repertoires
and, similarly to their children, demand a number, which is the language they have historically understood.

Conversely, high- and middle-class parents have historically been a participative group that states its demands with a loud and clear voice. Mostly located in schools where the private sector is involved or in elite selective state secondary schools, they have defended their interests throughout history. Their main interest in the first three periods was to make certification as straightforward and simple as possible for their children to be guaranteed access to higher education, an important aspect of their self-concept as a social group. They gradually achieved, along with the Conservatives, the detachment of the State from its control over examinations and schools were authorised to have their own examination processes (a principle called freedom of examinations). The means to solve this was to turn annual assessment per subject into a single examination at the end of secondary school, a mechanism that is still in place nowadays. Teachers also refer in their interviews to parents from higher social strata in terms of being held accountable by them. Teachers feel more compelled to provide them with detailed feedback about their pupils’ learning. Furthermore, Participant 6 adds a new type of involvement. Parents from the private school where she works, defined by her as left-oriented, resist SIMCE as they think it is a test that does not assess what they think matters. On that basis, they discourage the attendance of their pupils during the day of the test.

The results of this study therefore confirm those of authors such as Filer and Polard (2000) and Xaba (2011) in terms of the neo-liberal principle of parents as demanding consumers of the education system as a myth only valid for middle- and high-class parents. Parents from lower social groups have historically sustained a different relationship to formal education, moving from tension to lack of deep understanding, although they are still highly under-represented as a direct voice. The consideration of parents, then, is crucial when a new, more learning-centred approach to assessment is to be promoted, as their tendency to privilege marking and certification may act against the enactment of reforms such as AfL.

Public opinion

The role of public opinion or of discussions around assessment through mass media and other public spaces has been historically important. From a very elite-restricted circuit in the nineteenth century it shifts in the 1920s to a more multi-voiced space once workers and teacher organisations start their own publications. In the 1960s, another aspect of this system emerges, as for the first time public opinion begins to be explicitly addressed as a system by education governance institutions, and the need to ‘report back’ to the public about the results of education is instated as a mechanism. That is when a unit for national assessment is established in the Ministry and when standardised testing results begin to be used as a means to demonstrate the success of a government. Contestation and controversy define this system, and its role is mainly one of exerting pressure in order to change the course of education reform.

In the current period, policy authorities recognise in their interviews the role of public opinion, although in a more abstract and ‘omnipresent’ form. Public opinion is not embodied in a particular subject but mainly perceived as a panoptic judge by policy authorities. It may be sometimes people demonstrating on the streets, or media messages around surveys on citizen perceptions, or the education system as
conservative and resistant to change (an important factor in the enactment of AfL), or the education expert community represented by teachers and less frequently by researchers. In all cases, policy authorities see this system as exerting pressure and as able to change the course of education policy, even though there is no systematic account of the views of its actors but only rumours about their reactions to specific policies. An intelligent and responsible use of public space therefore becomes crucial as a strategy for enacting assessment reforms in schools.

Teacher education and the academy

Universities have been important spaces for the dissemination of ideas around assessment. In historical terms, these institutions started incorporating assessment as a specific technical subject since the 1930s for secondary teachers and the 1960s for primary teachers; first, through professional development courses and later, as part of initial teacher education. Despite the inclusion of assessment as a topic, both the experienced and recently graduated teachers that were interviewed evaluate their initial education around assessment as deficient. It is characterised alternatively as too theoretical or too atheoretical, but in either case, as distant from the reality of the school. Given the lack of tools with which they enter the school system, all of them describe their learning on assessment as an ongoing process of self-construction on the basis of their own school experience, the knowledge of their colleagues and trial and error in practice. Teachers therefore are being educated by their colleagues and by recurring to past school experiences, which involves the reproduction of past discourses that continue circulating in practice, overlapping with the ‘new’ ones, AfL among them.

PA3 and PA4 call the knowledge of universities in charge of teacher education into question and denounce how innovative repertoires, such as AfL, are absorbed in a superficial way. According to PA3, new discourses on assessment become a part of a commercial strategy to attract more ‘clients’ by using the ‘brand’ name of a new fashionable approach, while in practice the emphasis is still on traditional assessment theories and practices. Although the responsibility of teacher education institutions in teachers’ lack of knowledge on curriculum and assessment is evident, it is rarely taken into account in assessment reform processes.

Along with teacher education, the academy is connected to assessment reform processes in other ways. In different moments of Chilean history of education, academics have been appointed by the government in order to act as providers of new ideas for reform. What characterises this relationship in the current period is its contractual aspect, in terms of universities as providers of a service where they develop materials and programmes that enable the Ministry to implement a preconceived idea at a larger scale. This is the case in AfL as well as in policies from other units of the Ministry, where partnerships with traditional universities are established in terms of solutions for the implementation of a pre-defined agenda at a larger scale. Additionally, independent research is limited through the scarce funding opportunities that currently exist in the country. According to PA4, a university-based policy-maker, however, academics involved in policy try to be strategic through the insistence on complexity and the observation of more problems where authorities want solutions, and through the establishment of alliances that allow them to disseminate their views on education.
Discourses on assessment and power struggles

Another important finding of this study refers to discussions on assessment policy as embedded in wider struggles around education and models of society. When approached historically, education reforms in Chile can be characterised as a recurrent attempt to promote a more emancipatory model of education, focused on the development of the child and on his or her learning, and where the teacher emphasises the active involvement of students through learning experiences with the aim of developing critical and creative citizens. Documents provide evidence of the same principles being advocated in several waves of reform, principles that are not exclusive of the cognitive-constructivist reforms of the 1990s, as more ‘here-and-now’ perspectives may suggest. Figure 2 summarises the connections found in this study between models of society, ideas on education and perspectives on assessment, which struggle historically for the hegemony of the polysystem. They represent two extremes that have been adopted with different degrees of intensity and hybridity by political groups.

High-stakes assessment systems have played an important part in hindering emancipatory models of education from becoming mainstream and have kept them as marginal discourses enacted only by a few highly motivated practitioners. The first three periods are characterised by attempts at curriculum and pedagogical reform, led by liberal academics and intellectuals in the first phase, by innovative teachers and academics in the second phase and by the government in the third phase. In all three cases, the persistence of the high-stakes examination system in

Figure 2. Summary of the connections between models of society, education and assessment.
more traditional ideas of learning and knowledge undermined the enactment of reform, as the actors who were the recipients of the consequences of assessment opted for following the direction where the stakes were higher. Despite paradigm shifts in pedagogy, curriculum and assessment, the history of enactment is one of continuity of content-centred and memory-based teaching under the pressure of high-stakes assessment systems, with practices such as teaching to the test as long-standing phenomena. Only one attempt to abolish high-stakes assessment systems is found in Chilean history of education, led by teachers in the 1920s, who sustained examinations were against the principles of modern pedagogy. This attempt is shortly and violently repressed by the authoritarian government of Carlos Ibáñez del Campo, and innovative teachers are persecuted because their ideas were considered as a form of leftist indoctrination.

In these several rounds of reform, different discourses on assessment have circulated (and still circulate) in the polysystem, overlapping with ‘new’ repertoires such as AfL. The first discourse derives from practice and not from a specific theory, and is embedded in memory-based pedagogy from the Spanish colonial times. This discourse is focused on examinations procedures, certification, marking, awards and punishments, ritual conditions of examination and public surveillance. Additionally, it is related to two aspects whose continuity can be traced until the present: it is high stakes (teachers and students are judged on the basis of assessment results), which consequently generates teaching to the test, and it sets social and educational boundaries that allow for the continuity of social segregation.

During the 1920s and 1930s, deriving from an initial interest of teachers and in the context of the development of pedagogy as a scientific discipline, a second discourse enters the polysystem: testing theory, from the initial developments of Binet to the well known by teachers Gauss curve later in the 1960s. This discourse contributes to turn assessment into a technical subject that has to be studied and that constitutes a fundamental aspect of the teaching profession. It is embedded in behaviourist pedagogy, in terms of the ‘objective’ observation of expected behaviours in relation to specific learning goals, and testing through homogeneous stimulus-response structures, where all students have to provide a single answer. This approach is reconciled with existing marking practices through statistical norm-referenced modes of reviewing and correcting tests, where students are ranked according to their ‘objective’ performance in the test. The underlying principle here is a view of intelligence as something unchangeable, and the homogeneity of teaching and learning processes where students are differentiated solely according to their natural aptitudes. This discourse starts as marginal among teachers in the 1920s and is later canonised through teacher education programmes and national standardised high-stakes assessment systems in the 1960s.

From the beginning of the circulation of this innovative repertoire in the polysystem, teachers and academics, along with highlighting its potential benefits, warn in their journals against its potential consequences in terms of social segregation through selection and of artificially separating students according to their ability. When it becomes high stakes and national, however, schools opt for adopting these practices as the main means of assessment.

In the context of the 1965 curriculum reform, a third discourse on assessment enters the arena: formative assessment, as conceptualised by Benjamin Bloom. Although it is known that this concept at a theoretical level is introduced by Scriven (1967), the idea that circulated the most according to the testimonies of experienced
teachers and the analysis of documents from the period, is that of Bloom’s. His ideas contain some emancipatory potential in terms of introducing a dynamic idea of learning, where under the correct treatment, all students are able to achieve a high performance (Herrera Ruiz, 1980). However, documents show how this discourse where terms like feedback and assessment as a central part of the learning process are used for the first time, is situated in the same behaviourist pedagogy as traditional testing theory. Its principles are assimilated to a Fordist model of education and a mechanistic idea of learning where assessment basically consists of a quality check against pre-established homogeneous aims.

Interviews with experienced teachers also reveal that Bloom’s ideas enter the polysystem through teacher education and through legislation and thus, they do not emerge from teachers’ learning needs or intellectual curiosity. As a consequence, they are perceived as something external and there is not an in-depth understanding of their underlying principles. They are rather adopted in a superficial and technique-centred form and assimilated to existing testing and assessment practices, which leads to a gradual abandonment of the innovative repertoire. Participant 19, an experienced Spanish secondary teacher, remembers how the implementation process of these initial ideas around formative assessment took place and how the discourse gradually vanished from the system:

I do remember that feedback thing, that one had to write down in the class book, let’s say, ok, test, then [ ] delivery of the test, content reinforcement or feedback and at each end of unit [ ] that had to be on the book.

It lasted, I think that until around the year 85, because then it [ ] was a thing that was so [ ] like warped, that sometimes no one [...] we consciously didn’t do it, but you had to write it down, because, let’s say, sometimes they came [to check].

All the emancipatory potential of the 1965 reform therefore is undermined by the predominance of multiple-choice, standardised, high-stakes testing practices, which insist on a mechanical idea of learning and are embedded in a functional model of society.

These three discourses can be traced in the texts of different actors of the polysystem nowadays, which reveals an overlapping of ideas that coexist, struggle and often generate contradictory practices. The excerpt below illustrates this in the context of the first experiences the foreign expert had around assessment in Chilean schools:

[... when I just arrived to the first school where I worked here, I remember a teacher very affectionately sat me by his side and told me: ‘assessment, ok, here you are’, and he, and he draw the [ ] Gauss [curve] [ ], he gave me a graph paper where I could put the 4, the 7 and could calculate my average, with the score, etc., and THAT WAS my first experience around assessment in Chile. I remember asking myself if this was more advanced, you understand me?, like I lost something important in my experience until finishing a doctorate [...].

Today, nonetheless, these persistent discourses have been fully accommodated to a neo-liberal ideology, where governance by numbers (Greš, 2008) and steering from a distance (Ozga et al., 2009) are the main uses of assessment as a technology of power.

This is the context where the fourth discourse, namely AfL, begins circulating. It is probably the first assessment discourse that is moderately consistent with an emancipatory curriculum and pedagogy to enter the polysystem. However, attempts
to canonise it have to be made against a thick layer of ideas that have circulated historically and have been consolidated in tradition, exerting resistance to innovative repertoires. Evidence from this study reveals how the long-standing tradition of number-centred assessment discourses immediately reacts by generating tensions in teachers’ enactment of this new approach. It is also politically resisted by the decreasing funding from the Congress (see the section Systems and actors), and by more Conservative groups inside the Ministry who only adopted it in formal terms. AfL therefore was doomed to fail in a context where a top-down mode of education policy had been historically imposed, where it was not supported or promoted as a project of the Ministry as a whole, and where a functional model of society, embodied this time in neo-liberal principles, required forms of assessment that were more consistent with them.

The way AfL is finally adopted (before its abandonment by the new government in 2010) is similar to the enactment of Bloom’s ideas, which were alternatively adapted by the Christian Democrats (left-centre), the Socialists and the Conservatives (during the period of the dictator Augusto Pinochet). The closest assessment discourses have got to more emancipatory ideas, then, has been through moderate versions that allow for accommodation. AfL is finally adapted to another discourse on assessment that circulates in the current period: standards. As standards were resisted by some actors inside the Ministry, according to policy authorities, and had the potential of being resisted by teachers, AfL was used as a framework that made them more readily acceptable for these actors. Both discourses are therefore neutralised in a moderate version that is characteristic of the ambiguous political practices of Chilean Third Way politics or politics of consensus during the left-centre governments of the 1990s and the 2000s (Delannoy, 2000). However, funding, along with their closeness to SIMCE, and negotiations with Conservatives that surrounded a

Figure 3. Representation of discourse struggles around assessment in the 1990–2010 period.
change of Minister in 2008 as a response to a student movement in 2006, make the standards discourse prevail, while the discourse of AfL remains as another residual that circulates in the system through the voice of those who believe in its potential. Again, emancipatory discourses are neutralised because educational and pedagogical reforms do not attempt to simultaneously change high-stakes assessment systems. The avoidance of ‘chemically pure’ discourses around assessment (quoting the words of PA1) also facilitates tradition remaining at the centre of the polysystem. Figure 3 illustrates how AfL is situated in the context of broader discourse struggles around assessment in the period.

Conclusions

The study of assessment reforms, and of AfL policies in particular, benefits from the findings presented in this paper. The polysystemic approach has provided some guidelines on how these phenomena should be addressed in future research. First, AfL needs to be studied beyond a specific programme developed in the context of a partnership between schools, researchers and policy-makers. Assessment reform processes, AfL among them, are defined by the complex interaction between multiple systems (political parties, the economic sector, families, schools, universities, media, etc.) in a given context, and by the internal dynamics between the actors of each system, which are equally complex. AfL and any innovative repertoire around assessment, then, must be studied in the context of how it enters and circulates inside this dynamic, contested and fluid polysystem.

Additionally, AfL needs to be studied in connection to other discourses on assessment with which it interacts and competes. It constitutes a marginal discourse and possibly one of the few that are more consistent with emancipatory views of education, hence it faces considerable resistance due to the persistence of three traditional discourses in the polysystem: the examination-centred discourse, testing theories and formative assessment from a behaviourist approach. The common aspect between the three discourses is that they have become functional to the social aspects of assessment, namely certification, selection, grading, reporting, rather than learning and the development of critical citizens. Although teacher beliefs have been highlighted as relevant to AfL reforms (see, e.g., Brown, Kennedy, Fok, Chan, & Yu, 2009; Carless, 2005; Torrance & Pryor, 2001; Willis, 2008), the historical roots of these beliefs and their embeddedness in the whole system rather than only in teachers emerge as an important finding of this study. Consequently, in terms of the understanding of AfL reform processes, future attempts should not ignore the need for: deconstructing previous beliefs, sending clearer messages with fewer contradictions, promoting more participative approaches to change and, if past mistakes are not to be repeated, transforming (if not eliminating) high-stakes assessment systems.

Finally, another aspect that emerged from this study is the political resistance that AfL faces as a policy, also highlighted by authors such as James (2011) and Daugherty and Ecclestone (2006) in the English case. AfL is part of a series of attempts for a more emancipatory education where the aim is learning and the holistic development of students rather than individual success or the adaptation to a pre-defined model of society. In that sense, it is embedded in a long-standing ideological struggle, where high-stakes assessment systems have been a strong lever to move the polysystem toward a specific direction and to keep innovative repertoires in the margins of the system.
More importantly, the approach developed in this study reveals the position of actors inside the systems they inhabit and thus has the potential of generating an increased awareness about these locations, which could potentially lead to a more strategic approach to their involvement in assessment policies and in research around them.

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Notes
1. The approach used in this research in relation to systems thinking derives from semiotics and is embedded in the principles of critical discourse analysis, understood from its Bakhtinian and Foucaultian roots. This involves, on the one hand, a dynamic and interpretive idea of systems, in which the struggle for meaning between different voices from a variety of spheres of human activity is at the core. On the other hand, the idea of power is conceptualised from the perspective of Foucault, in the sense that it is not understood from an oppressor/oppressed perspective but as circulating among different actors, institutions and activities through discursive practices. The perspective used in this study, therefore, is different from systemic theories that derive from engineering frameworks, and is also different from more recent trends in CDA where the researcher is seen as taking the role of a redeemer. For a more detailed account on the theory and methodology of the study, see Flórez (2014).
2. The concept of discursive practice is understood in this work from the three-dimensional perspective proposed by Fairclough (2009), where the relationship between discourse and social structure is seen as dialectic, dynamic and, because of that, as a 'felicitous ambiguity' (2009, p. 66). From this perspective, the dimensions of social practice and text are mediated by a third dimension, namely discursive practice.
3. The two attempts of re-thinking this structure in a more bottom-up fashion were repressed by the authoritarian governments of Carlos Ibáñez del Campo (1927–1931) and Augusto Pinochet (1973–1990), respectively, who brought the system back to its traditional top-down structure and instated a system of teacher evaluation that allowed for increased surveillance and political persecution of teachers.
4. ‘The Technical-Pedagogical Unit is the organism in charge of programming, organising, supervising and evaluating the development of curricular activities. It is directed by the Head of the Unit and composed of the corresponding specialists. It assumes, amongst others, functions related to Orientation, Assessment, Plans and Programmes, Collaboration Activities and the Library’ (Chapter V, art. no. 14, Legal Decree 1049 of 1978).

Notes on contributor
María Teresa Flórez Petour graduated in 2014 as a DPhil in Education at the Oxford University Centre for Educational Assessment (OUCEA). She has been involved in different research projects related to AfL implementation and impact at the Oxford Education Department. She won...
the 2012 New Assessment Researcher Award of the AEA-Europe. She worked from 2001 to 2009 in the Programme for Continuous Teacher Education of the University of Chile (PEC), mainly coordinating programmes and as a lecturer. She has also done consultancy work for different units of the Chilean Ministry of Education through PEC and the Centre for Advanced Research in Education of the University of Chile (CIAE), including the Assessment for Learning programme developed by the Assessment and Curriculum Unit of the Ministry from 2003 to 2008.

References


Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice


Appendix 1. Summary of the selection criteria for participant teachers and characteristics of interviewees

1. Selection criteria of participant teachers

2. Characteristics of interviewees

2.1. Policy authorities

For the sphere of education government, a purposeful sample of four key actors in the process of AfL reform was executed. The criteria for selection considered a variety of roles in the policy-making process, in order to gain an understanding of the variety of perspectives, interactions and relationships that can be found in this particular system. The roles of each participant are detailed below:

- **Participant 1 (PA1):** held a leading role in the Assessment and Curriculum Unit (UCE) during the period of AfL reform.
- **Participant 2 (PA2):** an academic who was working in the UCE in a role more related to theoretical support.
- **Participant 3 (PA3):** was a member of the assessment group of the UCE in a more executive role in the process.
- **Participant 4 (PA4):** person in charge of coordinating the implementation of the AfL programme in the University of Chile.
The acronym stands for ‘Policy Authority’ along with the number of the interviewee. This term was selected rather than ‘policy-maker’ to avoid bias towards a top-down perspective of policy processes, where government authorities create policies that others have to implement, highlighting instead a perspective where all the actors involved in policy processes make policy (Ball et al., 2012). Although not all the participants are government authorities as such, then, they held positions as representatives of the Ministry’s discourse at the time, which allows them to be called policy authorities.

### 2.2. Teachers

Table 1 summarises the characteristics of the interviewed teachers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Profile</th>
<th>Level of teaching</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Type of current school</th>
<th>Type of school location</th>
<th>Discipline (if specialised)</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Recently graduated 1</td>
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<td>F</td>
<td>Private GS</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>English as a foreign language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Primary F</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>English as a foreign language</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Primary M</td>
<td>Private GS</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>History, Geography and Social Sciences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Primary M</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Not applicable</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Secondary F</td>
<td>Private GS</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Physical education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
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<td>Private NGS 2</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Philosophy</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Urban</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
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<td>Urban</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experienced 10</td>
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<td>Public</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Biology</td>
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<td>Urban</td>
<td>Philosophy</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>20</td>
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<td>Public</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Technologic Education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: 1 Private government-subsidised schools; 2 Private non-government-subsidised schools.