

EXAM AND ASSESSMENT OF GEOGRAPHY AND HISTORY IN 5TH AND 6TH GRADE OF PRIMARY SCHOOL. AN ANALYSIS PROPOSAL

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Abstract

The main objective of this paper is to analyze the exams of 5th and 6th grade of Primary School, related to the contents of the social sciences and, specifically, those of history and geography, together with the mental operations which are necessary to respond to the exam questions. We will also show the methodologic procedures of analysis, collection and codification of the project "The Area of Environment Knowledge and the assessment process in 5th and 6th grade of Primary School: competences, criteria and procedures", financed by CARM (Comunidad Autónoma de la Región de Murcia, Spain) and the Center of Formation and Professional Development of the University of Murcia. Fifteen university professors and Primary Education teachers of diverse schools of the Region of Murcia take an active part in this project. The results of this investigation has been obtained using 100 exams and 1000 test questions about social sciences of 5th and 6th grade of Primary School. The study of these instruments of assessment has allowed us to establish different categories between the capacities, contents and format of the exams. But in the education-learning process, the assessment can not be an isolated mechanism. It is necessary that the assessment respond to the didactic objectives planned by the teacher and must comply with the suggested methodology. The analysis of the data will show the deficiencies or virtues (advantages or disadvantages) of the assessment in social sciences in 5th and 6th grade of Primary School and the high-priority elements that need to be improve.

Keywords: Assessment; Primary School; Social Sciences.

1 INTRODUCTION. ASSESSMENT IN SOCIAL SCIENCES AND THE DOMINANCE OF THE EXAMINATION AS THE TOOL OF MEASUREMENT

1.1 Assessment and social sciences

Assessment is one of the most widespread elements for students, families, society and the educational system itself (Escamilla, 2009). In the teaching-learning process, assessment cannot be an isolated mechanism but should respond to teaching aims established by the teachers and should be in line with the methodology planned by these. Assessment, as Alfageme and Miralles (2009) remind us, should be one more way of helping and regulating students' learning, to correct mistakes to take appropriate decisions. According to Santos Guerra (1993), assessment is a highly complex process since it involves assessing the classroom, the educational centre and the system. Part of student assessment is explained by the teacher who has the working methods with which to pursue this aim. However, in the actual classroom the tendency is for a predomination of grading and differentiating over orientation and motivation. The wealth of literature that has appeared regarding this in recent years is proof of the importance of this issue in gaining deeper knowledge of the teaching-learning process, especially since the introduction of European Union curricula with skills teaching (Trillo, 2005; Perrenoud, 2008; Marconi, 2008). Many pages have been devoted to analyzing assessment, from the classic work by Coll (1983), to Agüero (2007), Aguirán and Val (2007), Sanmartí (2007), Molina and Calderón (2009), López Facal (1999), Klenowski (2005), Gelfer & Perkins (2004), Zabalza (2004), Andrés (2003), Barberá (2003), Blázquez and Lucero (2002a and b), Álvarez (2001), Merchán (2005), Sánchez-Cano and Bonds (2005) or Trepát (2012), and finally the latest monograph on assessment in social sciences by the journal Íber (2009).

If we consider that the main teaching aim of social sciences is to prepare students for critical, democratic and active citizenship, and not just the mere conceptual acquisition of knowledge, then any assessment must be in line with such an aim. This is a radical change from traditional assessment practices. First, the assessment should make use of a variety of tools besides tests and examinations,

such as daily classroom observation, analysis of what students produce (tasks, exercise books...), interviews, etc. In this way it is possible to assess conceptual, procedural and attitudinal concepts. From this perspective, students should acquire the scientific knowledge proper to social sciences, learn to solve various practical questions and develop critical, reflexive and transforming thought (Gómez and Martínez, 1997). Second, social science teaching should focus on treating a small number of topics in depth, and should make use of transversal and inter-disciplinary elements. This gives students the opportunity to develop their thinking through monographic tasks and investigations. Students should be able to study the social reality and to reflect on complex questions of importance, so they need to be encouraged in cooperative learning and in the desire to research. Tackling an excessive number of topics can lead to superficial learning and memorizing, which has little commitment with the social environment. Finally, there should be active participation of the students in the classroom through reflexive conversations with the teacher, debates and round tables, where they can speak freely and argue points of view. This means that students can choose the topics to work with and it also requires the teacher to use qualitative assessment tools (Zemelman, Daniels and Hyde, 1998). The teacher will have to give importance to the students' creating suitable mental models which, when used in the teaching topics or units, can be applied and generalized to other contexts and social models. The assessment of these abilities should place importance on novel situations in which the learners can reason solutions to problems, predict and defend arguments (Alonso and Villa, 1999).

In short, the idea is to bestow teaching and learning of social sciences with a genuine, continuous and educational assessment that takes into account all the data obtained during the course in which one pedagogical aim is to help students to learn more and better. It is not only the learning of set objectives that is valued but also how these have been learnt, the possible difficulties they encountered, the materials they have used, the time required, etc. All this information has the essential goal of re-orientating the educational process towards levels of higher success (Triviño, 2008). Thus, assessment would lose the accumulative or final character found so often in the examination – the main tool used to assess students' learning.

1.2 The dominance of the examination

Nevertheless, examinations remain the number one assessment tool, even in Primary Education. The aim of these is for learners to show that they know something, or that they can do something autonomously (Triviño, 2008). The high reputation examinations enjoy is due to their supposedly neutral nature, sustained by ideas of merit, ability and equal opportunities. Their presence in schools, along with the explanations of the teacher and the work of the pupils, constitutes much of classroom dynamics. The examination becomes the important feature and affects classroom activities: "*The importance of the pupils' grades, through examinations or other tools to collect information, impregnates what goes on in classrooms and to a large extent governs the lives of its protagonists*" (Merchán, 2005, p. 119). The links between the examination and measurement, classification and selection are unquestionable, with no difference from assessment (Hargreaves and Ryan, 1998). The aim for which examinations were created as a tool for classification and selection is a consequence of the conception of assessment as a measuring element. Therefore, from the perspective of assessment, the best tool is the examination (Martínez Molina, 2008).

The use of short objective questions or tests is very common today in examinations and this is due in the main to three factors. One is the limited time – usually less than one hour - students have to do the test. Another is that the individual nature of the examination means that a lot of time is needed to mark them. Last, but not least, Perrenoud (1990) states that teachers seek objective criteria so that they can justify their marks against possible complaints from students, parents or inspectors, so grades have to appear objective. The outcome is that apart from a majority use of objective testing and short questions, these basically refer directly to the contents of the manual or to the teacher's notes. These reference materials serve to validate the answers. Furthermore, these types of exercises are accepted by the student as they are easier to prepare for and pass, since in most cases it boils down to a question of memorizing (Merchán, 2009).

Objective tests also present noteworthy deficiencies, including the positivist view of the knowledge being assessed, which takes on an instrumental value while attention is not paid to the learning processes. The questions require such precise answers that no room is left for interpretations or for uncontrolled and unforeseen answers. Everything is reduced to the levels of essential knowledge. This prevents the development of high level skills like reasoning or communication being developed, since these are difficult to demonstrate in such tests (Perrenoud, 2008). The massive use of objective tests and short questions referring to manual contents has a further drawback in that it reinforces the

widespread conception, typical of positivist behaviorism, that assessing is measuring or checking the amount of knowledge a learner possesses, and that the examination is the best means of doing this. But this is to falsify the true educational aim of assessment, since it is put at the service of measurement, sanctioning, choice, classification, competition and marginalization. Little wonder that life in the classrooms and the teaching-learning process revolve around preparing and passing regular examinations.

The distortion of assessment caused by the excessive multiplication of examinations led Álvarez Méndez (2008) to state that in school you are not assessed, you get examined. Continuous educational assessment is, furthermore, confused with continuous examining, when they are in fact two very different things. Continuous examining from an early age – in our case from the third cycle of Primary Education – twists and falsifies the conception and aims of education and the teaching-learning process, since the pupils' aim is no longer to learn but to pass (Santos Guerra, 2003). Students try to ascertain the whims and customs of the teachers in examination materials in order to adjust their learning methods, or they try to get through as best they can through last minute superficial revision. Perrenoud (2008) laments that there is no long term in the classrooms.

As a result examinations as they are done today do not help in real educational assessment; pupils do not learn by doing, there is little feedback through which learners can understand what they have learnt, view and correct their mistakes. At the same time they encourage superficial learning, which is fast forgotten. This is a huge concern when in Primary Education, assessment, which should be continuous, requires so many examinations to assure teachers as to whether or not their pupils have attained the aims and skills programmed. Other techniques, such as observation and daily work, which are very useful in ascertaining what and how pupils have learnt, would serve to improve assessment (Calatayud, 2000).

2 A PROPOSAL FOR ANALYZING THE CONTENTS OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AND COGNITIVE CAPACITIES IN KNOWLEDGE OF THE ENVIRONMENT IN THE THIRD CYCLE OF PRIMARY EDUCATION

2.1 Method

This study has analyzed examinations as an assessment tool in the area of Environmental, Social and Cultural Knowledge in the third cycle of Primary School Education, with the focus on the academic year 2010-2011 in six schools in the Region of Murcia, Spain. This study has sought to ascertain the essence and the characteristics of assessments made by teachers in the fifth and sixth years of Primary School in terms of the typology and number of questions comprising the tests, the format of the examinations, the cognitive skills demanded and the contents of social sciences and making a distinction between the contents in geography and history.

Information was collected from six centers of various types located in different municipalities and with varying types of students. The study enjoyed the collaboration of the teachers, who provided the protocols of the examinations used during the year. All the participating schools were state-run and belonged to four different areas of the Region of Murcia¹. 111 examinations and 1,240 questions have been analyzed. 87 examinations came from the year 2010-2011 and as a control group we used 8 examinations from the academic year 2009-2010 y 16 examinations from the academic year 2011-2012. On dividing the results by levels, 50 examinations correspond to the fifth grade (513 questions) and 71 to the sixth (727 questions). Distribution by schools (Table 1) returned a similar result, except for school number 4, where the number of tests available was lower.

¹ For a more details of the methodology used and the socio-economic analysis of the schools, see Gómez, Monteagudo and López-Facal (2012).

² These recording grids are an adaptation of that created by the DICS0 research group to study the characteristics of examinations in Geography and History in the third and fourth years of the ESO, respectively, under the research projects "Criterios, procedimientos e instrumentos de evaluación de los contenidos de Geografía e Historia en el segundo ciclo de Educación Secundaria Obligatoria" (08668/PHCS/08), funded by Fundación Séneca-Agencia de Ciencia y Tecnología de la Región de Murcia under II PCTRM 2007-2010, and "Los instrumentos de evaluación de los contenidos históricos en 4.º de Educación Secundaria Obligatoria" (P-III 08/124), funded by the Consejería de Educación, Ciencia e Investigación de la

Table 1. Sample of examinations and questions analyzed by schools

SCHOOL	NUMBER OF EXAMINATIONS	NUMBER OF QUESTIONS
1	19	212
2	20	217
3	32	316
4	6	67
5	16	245
6	18	183
TOTAL	111	1240

Two grids were prepared for the analysis of the examinations and the subsequent coding of data² (Tables 2 and 3). The tables below show the methodological process used in this study and the definition and coding of the variables in the grid.

Table 2. Data collection tools: analysis of examinations

1. School code.
2. Teacher code.
3. Test code.
4. Duration of test.
5. Date of test.
6. Textbook publisher.
7. Format of examination (objective test, short questions, long answers, etc.).
8. Type of test (initial, partial, final assessment, retake, unannounced or not, etc.).
9. Indications about assessment (questions, written or oral observations to students, help offered, etc.).
10. Topics or teaching units included in the test (contents).
11. Assessment criteria of the teaching program.
12. Academic year.

Table 3. Tool to collect the examination questions

1. Test code.
2. Wording of the question.
3. Type of skill demanded by the question (memory, understanding, application, appraisal, facts, concepts or procedures).

As can be seen, the information grid took in 15 items, divided into two tables. In table 2 the first items are completed with codes to identify the assessment tool with a specific education center, teacher and group of students. The following items ask for formal aspects of the assessment tool, such as duration, type and format, etc. We are especially interested in how the assessment tools are

² These recording grids are an adaptation of that created by the DICSO research group to study the characteristics of examinations in Geography and History in the third and fourth years of the ESO, respectively, under the research projects "Criterios, procedimientos e instrumentos de evaluación de los contenidos de Geografía e Historia en el segundo ciclo de Educación Secundaria Obligatoria" (08668/PHCS/08), funded by Fundación Séneca-Agencia de Ciencia y Tecnología de la Región de Murcia under II PCTRM 2007-2010, and "Los instrumentos de evaluación de los contenidos históricos en 4.º de Educación Secundaria Obligatoria" (P-III 08/124), funded by the Consejería de Educación, Ciencia e Investigación de la Comunidad Autónoma de la Región de Murcia.

programmed over the whole academic year, and in knowing whether students are informed about assessment criteria and whether after the assessments mistakes are corrected and how. The aim of the sections is to get an approach to the assessment process used by the teachers to see if this is understood in strict terms of marks or as an important part of the students' teaching and learning. Table 3 allows an analysis of each of the questions in an attempt to identify the skills demanded of the students, in particular the types of cognitive operations and contents. It uses an adaptation of the classification used by Villa Arocena (1996, 1997 and 2007). In this adaptation eleven variables are specified, from crossing cognitive skills (memories, understanding, application, appraisal and prediction) with the content types in the question (facts, concepts and procedures). The fourth and fifth cognitive operations proposed by Villa Arocena (appraisal and prediction) appear in just 5 of the 1,240 questions analyzed. Both the record grid above and the record of cognitive skills have been processed using the computer program Access through the creation of relational tables, thanks to the inclusion of the item "test code" (Gómez, Monteagudo and López Facal, 2012).

Table 4. Examples of questions on social sciences in the examinations on Knowledge of the Natural, Social and Cultural Environment (Third Cycle) belonging to each of the typologies of cognitive operations and contents

RECALLING FACTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What archipelagoes are parts of Spain? • Name three rivers that flow through the central plateau of Spain. • What events mark the beginning and ending of the Modern Age?
RECALLING CONCEPTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The form of government in which there is no monarch and the Head of State is a president elected by the citizens is: a. a republic, b. a monarchy c. a dictatorship. • What is a plateau?
RECALLING PROCEDURES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How is real growth calculated? • How is population density calculated?
UNDERSTANDING FACTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explain what romanization was. • Give three reasons why the atmosphere is important.
UNDERSTANDING CONCEPTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are basin and slope the same thing? Explain. • Explain what climate is.
UNDERSTANDING PROCEDURES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Look at the climograph and indicate what type of climate it belongs to. • Look at the graph and explain why it is wrong.
APPLYING FACTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write a sentence with each group of words. • Look at the map and say what stage of the European Union it corresponds to and why.
APPLYING CONCEPTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write the correct name below each illustration (menhir, dolmen or cromlech) • Indicate the following elements on the planisphere (latitude and longitude).
APPLYING PROCEDURES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Look at the map and calculate the distance in kilometres between the town of La Poveda and the town of El Otero. • Prepare a climograph of an area of the following precipitations and temperatures.
APPRAISAL OF FACTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What does this photograph suggest to you in relation to peopling (photograph shows large blocks of flats).
PREDICTING FACTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you think equal opportunities in the labor world can be achieved?

2.2 An initial approach to the findings

In this study we will offer an early view of some of the provisional findings of the analysis. The preferred typology of teachers in the examinations was short questions and objective tests. All the examinations analyzed had one of these two typologies or a combination of them. They are not exercises that demand a high level of written expression or any wide linguistic skill. Almost all of them

are short questions that apparently can be answered in just a few words, as is borne out by the teachers' model answers. The so-called objective tests generally consist of multiple choice questions, matching elements of filling in gaps in diagrams, tables and graphs. Only in three examinations were any long answer questions present – a rather low percentage for questions that involve more ability in expression and some mastery of language. Open long answer questions offer students more freedom to select, organize and describe their answers in their own words. As Trepát (2012) indicates, tests involving writing are an ideal way of assessing synthesis, appraisal or criticism, while at the same time allowing the relation between content and written expression to be valued. The shortage of such questions in the findings is rather indicative of lower demands for linguistic, analytical and reflexive skills.

Table 5. Number of examinations according to typology of questions

TPOLOGY OF QUESTIONS	NUMBER
SHORT QUESTIONS AND OBJECTIVE TESTS	77
OBJECTIVE TESTS	15
SHORT QUESTIONS	8
SHORT QUESTIONS, OBJECTIVE TESTS AND PROBLEM SOLVING	6
SHORT QUESTIONS AND PROBLEM SOLVING	2
SHORT QUESTIONS, LONG ANSWER QUESTIONS AND OBJECTIVE TESTS	2
LONG ANSWER QUESTIONS AND OBJECTIVE TESTS	1

The limitations of these types of tests are apparent as well when analyzing the cognitive skills demanded in the examinations. The preeminence of short questions and objective tests make memory the cognitive option par excellence. Recalling facts and concepts account for over of the questions analyzed (Table 6). Application of facts (10%) and understanding facts and concepts together (11%) represent a significant, but much lower, percentage. In any case, analyzed globally, the questions that demand that students remember or understand account for 85% of the total. This is very similar to the situation highlighted by Martínez Molina (2008) for the History *Bachillerato* (High School Diploma) Examinations in the Region of Murcia, in which the questions requiring students to know, understand or analyze represented the same percentage. The main difference lies in understanding knowledge, which was more common in the *Bachillerato* than in the third cycle of Primary Education. In the assessment tools analyzed we found very few references to problem solving activities or to any phenomena related to the social reality where knowledge learnt could be applied. Yet these are really interesting activities for teaching social sciences, as Miralles and Molina (2011) show.

Table 6. Cognitive capacity and types of contents by question

COGNITIVE OPERATION REQUIRED	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
RECALLING FACTS	798	64,35
APPLYING FACTS	133	10,73
RECALLING CONCEPTS	116	9,35
UNDERSTANDING FACTS	93	7,50
UNDERSTANDING CONCEPTS	45	3,63
APPLYING CONCEPTS	18	1,45
APPLYING PROCEDURES	17	1,37
RECALLING PROCEDURES	6	0,48
UNDERSTANDING PROCEDURES	6	0,48
APPLYING PROCEDURES	4	0,32
VALUING FACTS	3	0,24
PREDICTING FACTS	1	0,08
TOTAL	1240	100

It is revealing that the procedural contents do not account for even 3% of the questions and are often linked to knowledge of geography. It seems hard indeed, to comply with the educational aims of history and geography under the teaching approach they get in social sciences or from the school curriculum or teaching programs if procedural elements are left out. As Prats (2001) points out, one can aspire to working on knowledge of social sciences using elements from the immediate environment and with these practice procedures. These resources can serve to exercise control of chronology, they can be useful in learning to formulate hypotheses, analyze historical sources or perform classification task. The author proposes that working with the process that creates historical knowledge is an excellent intellectual exercise that allows students to form opinions and analyze things in a strict, rational manner. Hence, the assessment of these skills should break free from traditional methods and the preeminence of the examination and conceptual content (Prats, 2011). One interesting piece of information that we have gleaned from the analysis of the examinations is that questions on concepts only represent just under 15% of the total, as opposed to questions that demand cognitive operations related to specific facts, which comprise almost 82%. These results differ from those found by the same research group (DICSO) in other projects on Compulsory Secondary Education, where conceptual questions have greater weight (Monteagudo and Villa, 2011).

If, as Merchán (2005) believes, one ends up teaching what is going to be assessed, the results of the analysis of the 1,240 questions in the examinations studied show that the learning of social sciences in the third cycle of Primary Education continues to follow a highly traditional approach focused on conceptual type contents in which procedures and attitudes barely figure or are excluded from testing. While in all the cases observed the examination accounted for 60% of the total assessment (the rest corresponds to marks in the teacher's grade book and activities in the classroom), this percentage is sufficiently high for us to be able to see the main geography and history contents that teachers are demanding from their pupils when they finish Primary School. Moreover, on analyzing the questions which are not considered as testing "memory", such as application of facts or understanding facts and concepts, which account for the highest percentage after the former, we appreciate that these too demand a greater or lesser exercise of memory on the part of the students, as is shown in the answers the teachers provided us.

3 CONCLUSIONS

Analysis of data obtained shows that the prescriptive (formal) introduction of basic skills in curricula has not substantially changed the knowledge teachers demand of their students in primary school geography, history and social sciences examinations. First, the results show that examinations remain the main tool for assessment, since according to the teaching programs they account for 60% of children's final marks. Assessment of skills-based learning requires various techniques used in different scenarios and with a variety of materials (Escamilla, 2009). However, the reality is that these practices are not the norm. If the new regulation proposes valuing children's ability to apply knowledge gained in the classroom in situations they can meet as adults (Tiana, 2011), then the findings of this study are not positive. A detailed study of the questions included in the examinations shows that the contents and abilities demanded of the pupils are not in line with the proposed assessment.

Focusing on the questions that appear in the examinations, the teaching-learning scenario that this study finds is one that continues to favor memorizing contents and that pays little attention to understanding and applying knowledge. The scarce presence of procedural and attitudinal contents shows shallow learning of knowledge of social sciences. As a consequence these contents are seen by the students as closed knowledge, of little practical value and therefore generally quickly forgotten. The scope of the syllabus and the overwhelming number of dates, figures and concepts that children are called on to learn leads to a shallow learning of contents which is generally done by rote and with insufficient reflection. The scarcity of long answer questions and problems relating the social reality to geographical and historical contents causes children to decontextualize the knowledge learnt. Some international studies, e.g. the ICCS of 2009, show that Spanish students score higher in questions relating to direct knowledge yet encounter greater difficulties when it comes to analyzing and reasoning knowledge. This had already been pointed out by Alonso and Villa (1999) in similar academic courses when they reported the low skills pupils possessed in explaining historical processes, but has learned by rote the facts and figures provided by the teacher or the textbook. The abundance of short questions and objective testing of specific facts make the learning of general phenomena of little significance in general. All these tests tend to encourage geography and history to be seen as some erudite learning dates and numbers. This is a move away from the ultimate aim of the

teaching of social sciences, which is that students gain the skill to interpret the social reality in all its temporal and spatial complexity and so exercise critical, active and responsible citizenship.

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