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# Test-based accountability and the rise of regulatory governance in education: A review of global drivers

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## Introduction: regulatory governance and test-based accountability

*Governance* represents a shift in the style of governing public services that moves away from direct state provision towards the oversight of services delivered by a broader range of increasingly autonomous providers (Scott 2000). The governance shift also implies profound changes in how services are regulated and by whom, with the introduction of more independent regulatory agencies in the supervision of public services and with transparency and accountability gaining centrality in public administration (Lodge 2004).

The emergence of new forms of regulatory governance does not necessarily weaken the power and authority of the state but it implies that the state needs to readjust its functions and adopt new technologies that allow it to retain its regulatory powers and to ‘steer at a distance’ (Osborne and Gaebler 1993). Within the regulatory governance regime, accountability is one of key mechanisms that allows the state to retain control over service providers’ goals and outcomes without having to be directly involved in education provision.

Accountability can be broadly defined as a ‘relationship between an actor and a forum, in which the actor has an obligation to explain and to justify his or her conduct, the forum can pose questions and pass judgement, and the actor may face consequences’ (Bovens 2007: 450). While accountability is a multi-dimensional concept with multiple policy translations (see Maroy and Voisin, 2013; Verger and Parcerisa 2017), the form of accountability that is spreading more intensively in the governance of education has a managerial and outcomes-based nature and conceives teachers and schools as the

actors that should mainly give the account to both public administration and society. This is an accountability approach that focuses on students' learning outcomes and involves the generation of data through large-scale standardized evaluation instruments. This model of accountability is also known as test-based accountability or TBA (Hamilton et al. 2002).

TBA is deeply involved in the alteration of power relations within educational systems. Through external evaluations (and the incentives distributed according to the results obtained in these evaluations) the state has the potential to gain control over the agents that configure the educational system, its constituent parts and the behaviour of those tasked with running it. As part of the TBA trend, school-level educational actors, including teachers and principals, are pressured to explain their decisions and actions to education authorities (including government-run education departments and their inspection services, external evaluation agencies, etc.) and to families further, and need to be more open and responsive to external judgment about their work and results (Olmedo and Wilkins 2016). To a great extent, TBA challenges the self-regulatory dynamics that have prevailed in the education profession, especially in those countries with more advanced welfare states such as Scandinavian countries, and strengthens the presence and regulatory powers of external agents.

As a tool for regulating schools and securing compliance with governmental priorities and goals in education, TBA can be considered a globalizing phenomenon (Smith 2016). Recent literature shows how TBA has penetrated a broad range of education systems in different countries and regions such as the UK and continental Europe (Barroso 2009; Grek et al. 2009; Ozga 2013; Vesely 2012; Verger and Curran 2014), the so-called Nordic countries (Elstad et al. 2009; Moos 2013; Moller and Skedsmo 2013), the US (Lipman 2002; Hursh 2005), Canada (Leicht et al. 2009; Maroy et al. 2016), Australia and New Zealand (Codd 2005; Lingard 2010), and Latin America (Brooke 2006; Parcerisa and Falabella 2017).

The international spread of TBA as a global education policy approach is striking for at least two main reasons. First, countries from different regions of the world and with very different administrative traditions, education systems and levels of economic development seem to converge in the necessity of embracing TBA as a way to strengthen the governance of their education systems (Kamens and Benavot 2011). And secondly, countries appear to be adopting TBA despite weak and inconclusive evidence on the benefits produced by this policy technology (see Verger and Parcerisa 2017). Empirical research has reached very different and even contradictory conclusions on the effects of TBA policies on students' learning outcomes, instructional improvement and education inequalities. Education reform advocates see TBA as a way to promote transparency and quality in education. However, according to how accountability systems are designed and enacted, they might generate unexpected results and even undesired behaviours at the school level (Au 2007). Overall, there is still insufficient

understanding of the circumstances through which TBA can achieve the expected results.

Faced with this reality, this chapter analyses why TBA has been disseminated and adopted as a core tool of regulatory governance in education globally. Specifically, the chapter focuses on the reasons, factors and actors behind the international dissemination of TBA. The chapter is structured into two main parts. The first part focuses on the main drivers and circumstances that, in an increasingly globalized policy and economic scenario, are conducive to the spread and adoption of TBA in education internationally, whereas the second part focuses on the particular role of international organizations in the dissemination and promotion of accountability measures in education.

Methodologically, this research is based on the scoping review method which aims to identify the main trends as well as the critical areas of disagreement and the existing 'gaps' within a specific field of the literature. The scoping review approach allows researchers to map the existing literature on a certain topic in a shorter period of time. For the purpose of this particular review, we have used mainly two scientific databases: Web of Science (WoS) and SCOPUS. Additionally, we carried out hand searching in key books and journals, grey literature and documents elaborated by international organizations. In total, 51 documents that focus on the international dissemination of accountability policies in education were selected. All these documents were published between 1995 and 2015.

### **The emergence of TBA: global drivers and contingencies**

The factors that have led to the global dissemination of TBA are numerous and of a very different nature. As we show in this section, they include methodological advances in the evaluation of education, economic pressures for outputs-based educational reforms, the expansion of new public management (NPM) ideas within the education sector, the spread of global education policies that need of more intense accountability regimes, and the emergence of a global industry around accountability systems in education.

### ***Methodological advances in learning measurement***

The standardized testing of students' learning outcomes is not a new phenomenon. In fact, its emergence at an international scale dates back to the post-World War period (Kamens and McNeely 2010). However, current methodological and technological advances in psychometrics and in the digitalization of testing have contributed to intensify and scale-up related assessment activities. Overall, the scientific evolution in the field of students' testing is a necessary condition for the development of more sophisticated, precise and affordable test-based accountability systems. Specifically, advances in the definition of learning standards, the measurement of learning outcomes

and the design of value-added models to measure teachers' productivity have made possible an acceleration in the expansion of performance-based accountability worldwide (Gorur 2013).

The Programme for International Students Assessment (PISA) of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), as well as other international large-scale assessments (such as Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study), have become instrumental in terms of transferring the technology and the metrics that allows for assessing learning skills at the national level (Meyer and Benavot 2013). According to Lingard et al. (2016: 10), international assessments have strategically contributed to 'enhance capacities for datafication (...) by expanding the scale of assessments, the scope of what is measured, and the types of analyses that can be conducted'.

The centrality acquired by national assessments in education as an accountability tool has been reinforced by the fact that *learning outcomes* have become a commonly agreed-on proxy for 'education quality'. Many practitioners and scholars have conflated quality to the more concrete idea of students' learning, in part because learning outcomes are more concrete, comparable and measurable than other types of education quality indicators that are more context-sensitive and/or more difficult to capture through standardized measures such as education process variables, pedagogy and teachers' training (Sayed 2011).

Advances in the analysis and the visualization of the data generated by standardized tests have also contributed to make student's large-scale assessments more politically relevant. More and more politicians and policy-makers tend to justify their most important decisions on the basis of education statistics on students' learning results and on their visual representations – which, among other qualities, have the capacity of condensing particular education problems and legitimise policy solutions (Williamson 2016). Here, again, international large-scale assessments such as PISA are clear examples of the persuasive power of the datafication and visualization of educational problems and realities. To a great extent, the impact of the PISA report relies in the intensive and strategic use of rankings comparing countries' performance, charts representing trends in education or figures correlating different variables with learning outcomes.

However, the current expansion of national assessments focusing on learning outcomes does not only respond to methodological and technological reasons. As we develop in the following sections, motivations of a political and economic nature are also behind the globalisation of these types of assessments and related accountability measures.

## ***Economic pressures for educational reform and learning outcomes***

In a global economy, more and more countries face major *economic pressures for educational reform* and both governments and economic actors perceive learning, and particularly the acquisition of skills and competencies aligned to new labour market demands, as a key strategy for raising their economic competitiveness (Carnoy and Rhoten 2002). In fact, 'learning achievement' is considered by new human capital theory as the most significant independent variable for economic growth. For instance, according to Hanushek and Woessmann's (2008: 638) influential study on this matter, 'test scores that are larger by one standard deviation (measured at the student level across all OECD countries in PISA) are associated with an average annual growth rate in GDP per capita that is two percentage points higher' over the period that they analysed (1960-2000) (see also Hanushek et al. 2003). Similarly, de Mello and Padoan (2010: 10), in a working paper elaborated for the OECD Economics Department, argue that:

it appears that the most effective policy levers to raise GDP per capita in the long term are related to education, particularly reforms aimed at lifting the average number of years of education of the adult population and improving (students') performance.

Overall, in the current hegemonic economic discourse, basic skills are strongly linked to economic productivity and to the attraction of foreign investment. Framed by such an economic rationale, many of the ongoing education reforms conceive the increase of learning outcomes as a central goal. Accordingly, the measurement of learning achievement has become a necessary condition for establishing the level of reform success as well as the main benchmark for discovering which policies 'work' (or not) in impact evaluations. However, measuring learning outcomes has also become a central tool to find out about the level of economic competitiveness of countries. Within this context, TBA measures have become an important component of an education reform approach that situates schooling 'as the venue for increasing the economic competitiveness of the state' (Foster 2004, cited in Koyama 2013: 82).

This economic approach to education reform clearly focuses on strengthening the effectiveness of educational systems but also promotes some levels of equity. However, under this rationale, education equity is not framed by strong egalitarian principles, but is basically conceived as a way to guarantee that all students reach a minimum level of competence in core subjects.

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) federal law, adopted in the US at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, is likely the most well-known and paradigmatic example of this reform approach that promotes the effectiveness of the education system in combination with soft forms of equity. The NCLB law, which was advanced by President George W. Bush Jr., promotes TBA reform in education with a focus on students' performance (mainly in

two key areas, mathematics and reading). NCLB establishes learning goals that must be achieved by all students, and a system of incentives for schools that is directly linked to students' results. For instance, in schools that fail to make adequate progress during a certain amount of consecutive years, parents have the option to move to another (better performing) school or can request additional education services such as free private tutoring from the school (Stecher, Hamilton and Gonzalez 2003). After five years of not meeting the targets established, NCLB contemplates the possibility of the state closing the failed school or *charterizing* it (Burch 2009).

### ***New Public Management and public sector reforms***

The emergence and consolidation of NPM as a paradigm of public sector reform has placed greater emphasis on public services being managed more independently (in other words, through smaller managerial units) and according to the achievement of measurable outcomes (Gunter et al. 2016; Scott 2000). Overall, NPM can be broadly defined as 'an approach in public administration that employs knowledge and experiences acquired in business management and other disciplines to improve efficiency, effectiveness, and general performance of public services in modern bureaucracies' (Vigoda 2003: 813). NPM is absolutely conducive to the advance of TBA in education. NPM means that education systems need to be configured with more autonomous schools (regardless of whether they are public or private) whose actions will be scrutinized by external evaluation agencies, usually through the assessment of learning outcomes.

As mentioned above, the evaluation of students' learning outcomes in a standardized way is not a new phenomenon. It has been widely used in the past as a tool to select students for university education. What is new is the use of standardized testing as a managerial instrument, in other words as a tool to control schools' educational processes and judge their capacity to deliver desired outcomes (Kamens and McNeely 2010). Overall, TBA is a key component of education reforms informed by NPM in the sense that TBA systems are in line with more managerial governance styles at the school level and with a school leadership model oriented toward the use of performance indicators and the achievement of measurable goals and learning goals in particular (Lingard et al 2016; Moller and Skedsmo 2013).

During the 1980s, some elements of the NPM paradigm were embraced by conservative and New Right governments aimed at making public services more cost-effective (see Tolofari 2005). However, today, NPM is accepted as a valid reform approach by a broader range of political ideologies and for a broader range of purposes. In fact, NPM measures are currently also part of the public-sector reform agenda of many social democratic governments (Verger and Normand 2015). In the 1990s, social democratic

parties, under the influence of the so-called ‘Third Way’<sup>1</sup>, began adopting NPM reforms in education as a way to promote not only economic efficiency, but also equity and the diversification of public services by giving more autonomy to schools and responsibilities to local governments.

It needs to be taken into account though that beyond the role of political ideologies, accountability policies are also being adopted in many contexts because doing so is politically convenient and rewarding (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2011). Enacting accountability systems allows politicians to signal to their publics that they are working hard toward education change and that they are concerned with education results and the future of children. The fact that education systems are perceived as being in constant crisis is making governments to experience a sort of ‘addiction to reform’ (Morrow 2017) and more receptive toward the adoption of TBA and other types of policy solutions. TBA reforms are particularly appealing in this respect due to the fact that tend to involve low political risk (in fact, through TBA, the reform pressure is put on schools and teachers, rather than on the government), and are somehow ‘cheaper and quicker than alternative reforms’ (Smith et al. 2004: 50).

### ***Alignment with other globalizing education policies***

The spread of *global education policies* such as school autonomy and standards-based reform has also become conducive to the adoption of learning-outcomes accountability internationally. In current education reform packages, school autonomy and accountability tend to be conceived as inseparable. This is due to the fact that governments in their role as principal should be willing to give more autonomy to schools in organizational, budgetary and/or curricular terms, to the extent that schools accept stricter supervision and control via external evaluation and related accountability measures. As stated by the OECD, ‘greater responsibilities assumed by schools imply greater accountability requirements such as external school evaluation and public reporting of student performance’ (OECD 2013: 45).

Accountability is also reinforced by the so-called standards-based reform movement. This education reform approach focuses on setting very clear and measurable academic standards of what students should learn and be able to do in both terms of contents and skills. To a great extent, the development of common core standards in curricular reforms leads to an increasing emphasis on tests, rewards and sanctions (Darling-Hammond 2004). In a way, the common core standards adopted by governments define the results that schools are expected to achieve and standardized test-based evaluations are the main tool in hands of governments to find out whether schools have fulfilled such expectations.

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<sup>1</sup> The third-way is a political ideology that seeks to reconcile socialism and capitalism and, to this purpose, combines egalitarian and individualist policies.



Finally, as education policy in many places increasingly emphasizes the market mechanisms of school choice and competition, accountability systems and national assessments are being adopted as a way to disseminate public information about the 'quality of schools' (Forsey et al. 2008). External evaluations are seen as a central mechanism in all forms of market reforms in education (Verger 2012). In the context of these reforms, standardized tests are conceived as a way to promote families becoming more well-informed education consumers. Schools are expected to react to the accountability pressures that families' choices imply by improving their education and becoming more responsive to changing societal demands.

### ***The emergence of the testing industry***

Finally, the emergence of a testing and measurement industry is another driver behind the spread of accountability reforms in many world locations. For market expansion reasons, the testing industry sector is highly interested in the deepening of TBA reforms. The testing industry has become one of the most lucrative sectors in the context of the so-called global education industry recently (Verger, Lubienski and Steiner-Khamsi 2016). Companies like Pearson specialize in testing preparation services and on the evaluation and tracking of children's learning outcomes. Furthermore, on the basis of these data, these companies sell education improvement services, lesson plans and/or educational platforms to countries, local governments and schools and/or families (Hogan et al. 2016). Private companies, such as the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) or the Learning Bar, also benefit from important contracts with governments for the administration of national assessments and/or the analysis of the data these assessments generate.

Apparently, the emergence of such economic interests in testing and measurement activities is also behind the on-going spread of accountability reforms. According to the OECD (2013: 51), the fact that 'standardized student assessment becomes a more profitable industry' means that 'companies have strong incentives to lobby for the expansion of student standardised assessment as an education policy therefore influencing the activities within the evaluation and assessment framework'. In a similar line of reasoning, Carnoy (2016: 36) considers that 'test makers have a vested economic interest to have education systems and schools change what they define as academic knowledge or even useful knowledge to fit the particular test they sell'.

Overall, the increasing involvement of private interests within education testing regimes suggest that these regimes will expand toward new areas of education activity and education levels. This trend might be reinforced by the fact that some testing companies are increasingly embedded within policy spaces through which they can promote their agendas more effectively. We refer for instance to the Learning-metrics

task force coordinated by Brookings, or to the Global Alliance for Monitoring Learning (GAL).

### **The role of international organizations**

The influence exerted by a range of international organizations in the education policy field is also behind the expansion of learning-based accountability in education. International organizations have the capacity not only to fund the implementation of accountability reforms but also to promote normative emulation dynamics between member countries and a consensus around the desirability of adopting such reforms. International organisations like the OECD, The World Bank and more recently the United Nations Organization for Education, Science and Culture (UNESCO), have contributed to portray accountability measures as a key solution to address many of the problems that education systems face. In this section, we focus in these three international organisations due to the fact that are the most influential in education policy globally. However, it needs to be acknowledged that international non-governmental organisations such as the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), the Southern and Eastern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) or the People's Action for Learning Network (PAL Network), are actively involved in promoting and enacting different forms of test-based accountability globally.

### ***The OECD and the persuasiveness of PISA***

Many of the country case studies reviewed for the elaboration of this chapter coincide in pointing to the *OECD* - and to PISA in particular - as key drivers of accountability reforms at the country level. In fact, after six editions of this influential international evaluation (2000, 2003, 2006, 2009, 2012, 2015), school autonomy with accountability measures represents one of the policy recommendations that are more consistently included in OECD/PISA reports (see for instance OECD 2011). These OECD recommendations have framed policy change within numerous education settings. According to a recent study, 29 OECD country representatives (out of 37) admitted that PISA/OECD recommendations on accountability have influenced accountability reforms at the national level (Breakspear 2012).

PISA is also contributing to politicians and policy makers turning toward a 'global education race' aimed at students' achievement (Sellar, Thompson and Rutkowski 2017). Within such a competitive scenario for better learning outcomes between countries, the adoption of national standardized evaluation systems is a very strategic tool in hands of governments to promote their schools achieving better learning outcomes. For instance, the 'PISA shock' that several countries have experienced – especially after obtaining bad results in the first editions of this international

assessment – have also promoted the introduction of accountability reforms at the national level (Elstad et al. 2009).

The OECD division of education mainly advocates for managerial and test-based forms of accountability. However, this organization also emphasizes that accountability systems should be holistic and focus on improving classroom practices rather than placing excessive emphasis on learning outputs (see OECD 2012, 2013). The OECD is not against the publication of school results but affirms that the results need to be released in a ‘fair’ and ‘reasonable’ way. At the same time, it also considers necessary ‘aligning external evaluation of schools with school self-evaluation’ (OECD 2013: 8)

Aware of the fact that TBA generates controversy in many places, the OECD (2013: 14) also highlights that the adoption of accountability policies should be agreed on by key education stakeholders:

To be designed successfully, evaluation and assessment frameworks should draw on informed policy diagnosis and best practice, which may require the use of pilots and experimentation. To be implemented successfully, a substantial effort should be made to build consensus among all stakeholders, who are more likely to accept change if they understand its rationale and potential usefulness.

The OECD, on the basis of PISA data, considers accountability and school autonomy as two policies that fit well together. According to OECD/PISA, schools with greater autonomy in resource allocation show better student results in the context of strong accountability regimes, in which governments make school achievement data publicly available. The OECD (2011: 1) also acknowledges that ‘in countries where there are no such accountability arrangements, schools with greater autonomy in resource allocation tend to perform worse’.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that, since 2012, the OECD is implementing the project PISA for Development (PISA-D) to make the PISA instruments more relevant to low- and middle-income countries. This new international assessment tool might have similar effects to PISA and, by doing so, have the capacity to promote the adoption of national assessments based on PISA-related metrics in a broader range of developing countries (Addey 2017; Addey and Sellar 2018).

### ***The World Bank: Assessing learning for all***

The *World Bank* places bigger emphasis on accountability models that promote school choice and market dynamics, as well as the empowerment of families in front of teachers and the schools (Edwards 2012). The World Bank actively disseminates these forms of accountability through its numerous knowledge products, lending operations and more recently, through the so-called *Systems Approach for Better Education Results*

(SABER). According to the SABER framework paper on school autonomy and accountability, 'increasing school accountability is a necessary condition for improving teacher quality' (World Bank 2015: 4) and 'for improved learning because [this policy] *aligns* teacher and parent incentives' (ibid: 2). The World Bank also echoes the OECD message on the importance of fragmenting the system in more independent and autonomous school providers at the same time that accountability is being promoted:

School autonomy must be complemented with school accountability to promote academic excellence. This has been well documented through various impact evaluations. We also know that the highest PISA scores come from countries where autonomy and accountability are implemented together (World Bank 2015: 36)

For the World Bank, accountability in education is a key factor in the 'systems approach' to education reform that promotes, alongside the 2020 Education Strategy *Learning for All*. This document, which defines the World Bank education policy in the 2010-2020 period, considers that 'improved performance and measurable outcomes depend on a careful balance between three policy instruments that influence the behaviour of local actors: (1) greater autonomy at the local level; (2) enforcing relationships of accountability; and (3) effective assessment systems' (World Bank 2011: 33).

This international organization considers what it calls 'the shorter route of accountability' (which operates through school choice and school-based management) to have advantages over the 'long route of accountability' (namely, the administrative and/or legal channels families have to go through in case they have complaints about the quality of their schools):

The shorter route affords clients the power to more frequently provide feedback to providers to let them know how they are [performing] and to hold them accountable for good quality services [more directly] (World Bank 2015: 5).

The World Bank supports the implementation of different forms of learning assessments in the developing world. Nonetheless, it is important to notice that in the *2018 World Development Report*, exclusively dedicated to education policy, that World Bank (2017) warns that excessive testing and high stakes accountability practices might produce undesired behaviours among teachers and schools. This international organisation is also aware of the fact that 'testing can be hard' in the low-income countries it operates due to administrative capacity issues. Thus, the World Bank does not only support bottom-up forms of accountability (such as school-based management and citizen-led assessments) because it conceives them as inherently desirable, but also because they are technically feasible (World Bank 2006; World Bank 2017).

## UNESCO

The Sustainable Development Goal number 4 (SDG-4), which is the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) focusing on education, places important emphasis on the improvement of learning outcomes. Out of the seven targets included in SDG-4, five focus on learning outcomes and on the achievement of particular skills: literacy, numeracy, global citizenship, peace culture, etc. This shift *from school access to learning* is likely the most significant change that can be observed between the Millennium Development Goals/Education For All agenda approved in the year 2000, and the current SDGs/Education 2030 agenda approved in 2015. As a consequence, the *Education 2030 Framework* – which is the framework for action that was agreed on by the international community, under the lead of *UNESCO*, to advance the SDG-4 – promotes accountability systems that are at least partially based on the measurement of learning outcomes.

Accountability is one of the most frequently used concepts in the UNESCO Framework for Action Education 2030. For the reasons mentioned above, this framework conceives the creation of national accountability systems that focus on learning outcomes as an indispensable aspect in the monitoring and achievement of new education targets, but not only since, according to UNESCO (2015: 17), ‘monitoring quality in education requires a multi-dimensional approach, covering system design, inputs, content, processes and outcomes’.

In contrast to the World Bank, UNESCO does not promote market-oriented forms of accountability. In fact, this international organization is generally sceptic about assumptions concerning the benefits of market mechanisms in education and/or sanctions for schools and teachers (UNESCO 2009). For instance, in the *2017 Global Education Monitoring report*, which focuses on accountability in education, UNESCO embraces accountability as a core principle in well-functioning education systems, but also adopts a cautionary approach by emphasising potential undesired effects of accountability. Some of its key messages are that:

If held accountable for outcomes beyond their control, [teachers or schools] will try to avoid risk, minimize their role or adjust their behaviour in unintended ways to protect themselves.

Trust is largely absent when [school] actors operate in fear of punishment. A shared purpose, which fosters trust, is central to effective accountability. (UNESCO, 2017, np)

UNESCO proposes a model of mutual accountability – i.e. a model of accountability in which governments, and not only schools and teachers, are held accountable –

and a model of accountability that is participatory in nature. By focusing on the importance of deliberation and participation in the definition of accountability systems, UNESCO (2015: 17) and its partners also acknowledge the contentious nature of accountability in the education policy field:

As the primary responsibility for monitoring lies at the country level, countries should build up effective monitoring and accountability mechanisms, adapted to national priorities, in consultation with civil society. This includes building greater consensus as to what specific quality standards and learning outcomes should be achieved across the life course [...] and how they should be measured.

## **Conclusions**

In this chapter, we have reflected on TBA as a key component of the rise of regulatory governance in education. The chapter has focused on the main factors behind the globalisation of accountability in public education and, in particular, on the reasons why TBA has emerged as such a central device in the regulation of education in so many world locations, including more and more countries from the Global South.

As we have shown, a wide-range of drivers of a very different nature (economic, technological, political, discursive, and so on) are contributing to the intense dissemination of TBA solutions at the international level. To a great extent, the success of TBA relies on the fact that it is a data-driven regulatory mechanism that promotes the modernisation and rationalisation of education systems, at the same time that is portrayed as a key policy solution to a broad range of problems that most education systems face in terms of efficiency, effectiveness, equity, and so on.

The most relevant international organisations in the education policy field have contributed to generate such high expectations with accountability reforms in the education sector and, in fact, have portrayed accountability as a sort of ‘magic bullet’ in the global governance of education. Nevertheless, despite their apparent agreement around TBA as a core policy principle, there are still considerable divergences among international organisations in relation to the goals and instruments of the specific TBA models they promote. For instance, the World Bank aligns managerial forms of accountability with the promotion of market mechanisms, whereas the OECD is more inclined to use managerial accountability in combination with professional forms of self-evaluation. In contrast, UNESCO seems to be advocating for accountability systems that operate at multiple levels and in multiple directions instead of only focusing on teachers and schools as the main responsible of the delivery of good quality education.

Table 1 synthesizes the main TBA drivers (including contextual conditions, rationales and actors) that we have identified in this chapter.

Table 1. A Global Review of TBA drivers.

Source: authors

CONDITIONS	REASONS	ACTORS
Economic pressures for educational reform and learning outcomes	<i>Effectiveness:</i> improving the performance of schools, teachers and students	World Bank: lending and knowledge products to assess learning for all
New Public Management as a predominant public sector reform approach	<i>Efficiency and control:</i> align governmental aspirations on education to the purposes of schools	OECD: PISA as a model for national assessments, and behind an international educational race.
Methodological advances in standardized testing	<i>Equity:</i> guarantee that all students reach a minimum level of competence in core subjects	UNESCO: promoting national assessments in the global south through the monitoring of the SDGs
Global education policies aligned to TBA	<i>Transparency:</i> families accessing to more “objective” information about schools’ performance	Testing industry actors increasingly embedded in new policy spaces
The emergence of testing as an economic activity	<i>Pragmatic:</i> TBA adoption as a politically rewarding reform approach	
International educational race		

To conclude, it is important to remark that the international dissemination of TBA policies does not necessarily mean that specific and homogeneous changes are happening on the ground. As stated by Van Zanten (2002: 302), ‘states cannot avoid global pressures to change in specific directions, but they can twist and transform [these pressures] to fit national purposes and opportunities’. Thus, in real situations, TBA systems diverge considerably. Accountability systems can be high-stakes or low-stakes in terms of the consequences they imply, or more or less comprehensive in terms of the areas of knowledge they cover. TBA systems are not implemented in vacuum and interact with other forms of professional, social and/or market accountability that, in many places, have been in place for a long time. Furthermore, even when accountability systems appear to have very similar forms at the regulatory level, they may translate into very different practices according to how education actors experience and enact these systems. Overall, more research is necessary to capture the multiple trajectories and translations of TBA at the regulatory level and the way different TBA designs are conducive to different directions and results in the governance of education.

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