

The Role of Evaluation in the Brazilian Education System

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Introduction

As a result of the reforms to the Brazilian state implemented in 1990s, educational evaluation policies have gained more and more centrality. These policies are shaping the education system under the logic of the market and are shifting state responsibilities into the hands of civil society.

The reformed state in its role of regulator establishes all the processes for the functioning of society (including the education system), decentralizes actions to implement new policies, establishes objectives, conditions funding based on reached goals and establishes an evaluation system that can guarantee 'expected results'.

The decentralization adopted by the Brazilian state is part of managerial reform implemented in 1995. But this decentralization does not include a re-distribution of responsibilities with an autonomous decision-making process; on the contrary, there is a major centralization of decision-making within the federal government.

This paper analyzes the role of evaluation as a new policy to regulate the education system and identifies how Brazilian education has been affected by the centralizing process, including content in curricula and how content is taught within the logic of standardized and large-scale testing.

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The role of evaluation

The decade of the 1990s saw a proliferation of educational policies at all levels and modalities, especially those regarding evaluation.

Afonso (2005) highlights that “in terms of management, evaluation is almost always a fundamental instrument”, and he stresses that since 1990, the key functions of evaluation are based on the selection of staff and “the productivist form of management of the education system”. (p.19)

Under a neoliberal platform, evaluation as a system gained a central position because it became a priority to satisfy market demands. In the Brazilian case, evaluation is related to the reform process of the Brazilian state and its centrality is linked to the many commitments the country made at the Education for All World Conference (1990), the Dakar Conference (2000), The Declaration in Inchoen – Education 2030 (2015) as well as the Millennium Objectives (2000) written by the United Nations.

In all these objectives, declarations and written documents, some key elements are repeated: the universalization of basic education¹ within an equity framework (equality is not a priority anymore), the mobilization of resources –pointing out the need to make alliances with both private and public actors -, and the strengthening of partnerships, including those from the international arena. At the same time, evaluation is also linked to the level of quality.

In this analysis, it is important to consider the current globalization of finance, of markets and of economies. Dale (2007) affirms that there are many efforts towards the development of new forms and models of education from a supranational level. The author develops and explains a rational logic where the dominance of regional models over national ones is clear to understand.

This belief that there is a common worldwide educational culture, within which curriculum and the training

1. In Brazil, basic education covers children from age 7 to 14, divided into cycles of 7-11 and 12-14. Secondary education refers to youth 15-17 and finally higher education includes university (both undergraduate and graduate levels).

of teachers are shaped by international influences, means that evaluation can play a role in guaranteeing that the “competencies” and “skills” required in schools can satisfy international interests, especially with regards to the training of labour.

International organizations and the role of evaluation

Education under a commodities market model needs to have certain standards that can guarantee a degree of competitiveness and form a workforce capable of responding to the demands of the international market. Therefore, some international organizations defend large-scale standardized testing because “it produces information that can compare students’ performance in different contexts [...], and its final objective is to present a vision of a country, a state or a municipality” (PREAL, 2008, p.5).

The academics and intellectuals who are part of the Evaluation and Education Standards Working Group of the Program for the Promotion of Education Reform in America Latina and the Caribbean (PREAL, 2007) believe that large-scale external evaluation can contribute to the productivity of the labour force, to the competitiveness of the national economy, and to an increase in opportunities for overall personal development, thus allowing people to participate in the knowledge economy.

The defense of this kind of evaluation is based on the standardization of curriculum, through a national common base for both the basic education system and the teacher- training system for those who will teach at this educational level. All of this represents a standard of what should be taught, of what will be considered part of “official knowledge” and which will reflect the result of the different forces in place at the moment of any adjustments.

In order to understand the need for external, standardized and large scale evaluation and to guarantee that evaluation tools correspond with local specifications, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has been carrying out the

*“One can observe that the **decentralization adopted by the state is part of the managerial reforms that have been incorporated since 1995** in the case of Brazil. It does not include a redistribution of responsibilities with decision-making autonomy. **On the contrary, it represents a greater centralization of decision-making** into the hands of the federal government.”*

International Program for Student Assessment (PISA)², which according to INEP (2016) has the goal of “producing indicators that can contribute to the discussion around the quality of education [...] as a way to improve basic education policies”.

PISA evaluates students’ abilities in reading, mathematics and science. In 2015, the evaluation included other new areas such as financial competency and collaborative problem solving (INEP, 2016). The OECD also established the Ibero-American PISA group (GIP)³ whose main objective is to include relevant topics related to the region in the exams.

In the document Educational Goals 2021: The education that we want for the generation of the bicentennials, produced by the Organization of Ibero-American States (OEI), the topic of evaluation is present insofar as it was part of the commitments on Education for All signed in Jomtien and again in Dakar. In this document it is noted that the member countries of the Ibero-American PISA group had lower results on the PISA exam than more developed countries. These same results can be seen on another exam, known as the Third Comparative and Explicit Regional Study or Terce, which measures learning through large-scale evaluation and which is

2. Brazil is not a member of the OECD, but as a partner country it adopted PISA from its inception and this exam will be used as a point of reference for other indicators discussed later in this article.

3. The countries participating in GIP are: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Portugal, Spain and Uruguay.

considered the most important test in Latin America.

The objective of Terce is to evaluate school performance in the third and sixth grades of basic or elementary education. As with PISA, this evaluation also includes a socio-economic questionnaire which aims to understand the learner’s context. In its 2015 version, the most recent, “national modules” were included to allow countries to have a deeper understanding and analysis about specific factors that could affect learning. There is also another module which aims to study the impact of the use of Technology and Communication Tools (TIC), and the link between nutrition and learning.

External Evaluation as Standard Evaluation

PREAL defines “standardized” evaluation as one that is developed by a central agency to evaluate the performance of students from various educational institutions. This kind of evaluation differs from the kinds that teachers apply with educational goals.

UNESCO upholds this kind of normalized/standard evaluation and provides arguments such as it is a way to show accountability to society and that it establishes well defined performance measures. However, the main argument is that there are many complaints at all educational levels that students lack basic knowledge. For UNESCO, these complaints show that there is an expectation of achieving specific skills, but if there are no established norms or policies around these expectations, there is no

way to demand responsibility and accountability from teachers and schools. Hence, it is necessary to develop norms around curriculum content, to describe what teachers need to teach, to establish performance norms for students at each grade and to define parameters in terms of opportunities and/or conditions for the availability of programs, staff, and other factors.

For PREAL (2008), standardized evaluation provides key information regarding the quality of education, even though it also recognizes that this kind of evaluation cannot be considered a complete indicator and it should not be the only kind of evaluation to be adopted.

Standardized evaluation and the quality of education

The National System of Evaluation of Basic Level Education in Brazil (SAEB) established by Ministerial Decree 1.795 (1994). Section I in Article 1st, specifies its role as a contributor to the development, at all educational levels, to a culture of evaluation to reach high quality basic education. Therefore, even before the enactment of the new national education decree, the country already had a national evaluation system.

When SAEB was implemented, the system evaluated primary students from 5th and 9th grades, and secondary students in third year high school from all private and public schools. In 2005, this system was renamed as National Evaluation of Basic Education (ANEB). SAEB was broadened and included the National Assessment of School Performance (ANRESC), also known as Prueba Brazil (Test Brazil). This test has the objective of carrying out an evaluation that includes children in 5th and 9th grades, as well as students in 3rd year high school, from public schools in the three school systems: municipal, provincial and federal. The objective is to evaluate the public school system.

In 2013, the National Literacy Evaluation (ANA) became part of SAEB. ANA aims to evaluate students in the 3rd grade of primary education in all public schools, analyzing specifically levels of literacy and numeracy. Thus, Brazilian system of evaluation of basic education is made up of ANEB, ANRESC and ANA.

In April 2007 the government approved by Decree 6094 the Plan for a Commitment to Goals: Everyone for Education which has the goal of improving the quality of basic education. Article 3 reads that the “quality of basic education should be measured, based on IDEB (Basic Education Development Index)” and this “will be the objective indicator to verify if the goals established in the Commitment has been achieved.”

The main role of this external and wide-scale evaluation system is explicit: the creation of a culture of evaluation that can contribute to improving the performance and quality of education. These elements show that evaluation as a system should be used as a tool for the management of education policies. Evaluation from the state’s standpoint plays the role of the new regulator of education. In other words, evaluation can provide elements, information and data that will help establish norms and regulations that will impact future policies and decisions following the logic of the international market.

In a document from 2010, the World Bank sees the Brazilian experience as positive in relation to the implementation of IDEB, and sees it as representative of the evaluation consolidation in the country.

The way standardized and external evaluation has been adopted has benefited the use of business management strategies in education and this has been evident, above all, in relation to financing. Some characteristics can be mentioned such as the emphasis on results or awarding students and institutions individually. These characteristics corroborate the thesis that evaluation systems are tools for the management of education in the ways it punishes, awards, promotes and distributes resources, including bonuses to teachers whose students achieve a higher grade.

Evaluation for those who favour education reform is a way to achieve quality education. But it is important to question the concept of “quality” that is being used in order to understand the concept of evaluation that has been adopted as well as the national and international evaluation systems that have been implemented.

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place that is considered advanced, the country has been criticized by international organizations because students do not learn what is expected for the level they are at and Brazilian students do not fare well on the international exams (PREAL, 2009). This criticism based on the results of external evaluations has increased the pressure on governments to change the situation.

The results of PISA in 2012 show that Brazil ranks 60th among the 76 countries that took part in the evaluation. This score was considered positive and OECD observes that this is an indicator that the country is growing, showing that it has improved since the last external evaluation in 2009.

Final considerations

It seems there is no doubt left about the role of evaluation and the centrality that it now holds in regulating education policies. The way evaluation has been used by both national and international organizations has transformed evaluation into one of the most important factors for “success” in learning. The OECD itself expressed this when addressing the Brazilian PISA results 2015.

Evaluation is fundamental. One cannot think of an education system without evaluation as a valid tool. Therefore, its usefulness, importance and pertinence

cannot be put into question. However, we have been questioning the way evaluation has become a tool to link results with financial purposes, without considering the process, and other variables such the valorization of the teaching profession, which includes initial and ongoing training, working plans and salaries.

A key aspect of this new regulation is the awarding or sanctioning of a school, which implies mainly a punishment or a “bonus” to teachers and managers related to performance measured by indicators established externally and measured by standardized tests.

When the state takes on the role of evaluator, as Afonso (2005) argues, with elements of competition, neo-Darwinism, adopting the market logic, highlighting education systems’ results or products, evaluation becomes an instrument that has to meet the requirements of the global market.

Adopting standardized, external evaluations that are not prepared by the teachers who are in direct and immediate contact with students can significantly reduce the impartment of important knowledge that leads to the development of a citizen and to the formation of a well-rounded subject as shaper of history. This kind of evaluation also contributes to changing the role and nature of the teaching profession.

External, wide- scale standardized testing has destroyed the education system in Brazil by creating a logic that has inverted the symbols and ethics of education. Now it is evaluation - the questions already made, and the way these questions are presented - that will determine what teachers should teach and how they should do it.

This almost “obsession” with evaluation and with reaching, or not, stipulated indices is what guides teaching work and modifies the role of the teacher in the classrooms, transforming the teacher’s role into that of an evaluation technician. This study also highlights how international curriculum is displacing and eroding regional and local issues in school planning and programs.

The decentralization of the role of the evaluator state should not mean a sudden break with the educational process or what happens inside the classroom. Emphasis on the “product” cannot be the most important part of

Evaluation is an important tool, but sometimes it is used as the central point of the teaching-learning process, subordinating the process to the need to reach results that can be fit into numbers and rankings by entities that **are not directly connected to schools, distorting the aims of evaluation and making the** results more important than the process.

the teaching-learning process. An evaluation process must happen, but not as the central part of the education process and not by subordinating school life to standardized testing.

The mere use of evaluation tools, compilation of results and standardization of testing are not fundamental elements to improve education. It is necessary to take into account other variables such as the professionalization of teaching practice, pre and in service teaching training, clear professional development opportunities, decent salaries and working conditions, etc.

Evaluation is an important tool, but the problem is that it has been used as a central part of the teaching-learning process which has become subordinated to the need to reach standards implemented by entities that are not linked or related directly with schools. This process then, distorts the objectives and puts a lot of emphasis on the results, displacing elements that are more important and fundamental to the teaching-learning process.

Wide scale testing is contributing to an increase in competition among teachers and among schools,

creating conflicts and harmful pedagogical practices. The focus on achieving results eliminates the integral formation of the human being as being the fundamental objective of formal education and forces schools to assume the weight of the results obtained in those tests. This type of evaluation has served as a currency of exchange for schools to obtain basic resources for their operation and teachers get bonds translated in cash or other form of compensation, and thus deviating from the proper role of evaluation.

This practice has also resulted in a degradation of the content of curriculum in the schools because teachers must prioritize teaching to the test instead of what is specified in the school curriculum. Teachers are even using test simulators or standardized testing applied in previous years as the base for their teaching-learning process.

There is a need to fight in an organized way against the 'obsession' for this kind of evaluation, supporting campaigns that can contribute to the end of the meritocracy and performance culture.

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