

## External evaluation in municipal level: The impacts of an experience

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### Abstract

The external evaluation is a consolidated reality in our country. Besides the state and federal ones, there are some municipalities that develop their own evaluation programs. To contribute with the debate about the external evaluations, this article presents data from a research which aim was to identify the actions from the Educational Secretariat from a city in the State of São Paulo, Brazil, opposite to the results of PROMASE (Municipal Assessment of the Educational System) and its impact in school's units. It is still being analyzed the path taken by the program with the aim of explaining its conception of the teaching quality. This way, the qualitative research was chosen based on the interviews with the Educational Secretary, teachers and school's managers. Accordingly with the Secretary, after PROMASE, actions since improvements in the buildings to curricular restructuring and continuing educational were made. Even without the rankings and performance payments, it is noticeable in schools the built of what is called "hidden" and "adjustment" rankings of the pedagogical and evaluative practices to the matrix and to the evaluative instrument of the program to improve the teaching quality and improve the index. For an evaluative system to bring contributions to the network, it is noticeable that the quality must be anchored to the social quality, which more than the index, establishes its own scale as a protagonist in the process of looking to itself, adverse to the blaming of the teachers for the standards tests results and that, consequently, favors the social, political, cultural and human formation of the students.

**Keywords:** External evaluation, Evaluation on municipal level, Teaching quality.

### Introduction

The evaluation of educational networks and systems is a consolidated reality in our country for over two decades. Currently, in addition to federal and state assessments, many cities develop their own evaluation programs. By reflecting on those evaluation proposals, we found something in common between them: the intention of verifying the quality of education. In its official documents, the Basic Education Evaluation System (SAEB), for example, justifies its realization from the quality aspect and says that it "aims to offer subsidies to the formulation, reformulation and monitoring of public policies, contributing to expand the *quality* of Brazilian education<sup>3</sup>" (our emphasis).

This way we can conclude that quality and evaluation are intrinsically linked in the speeches from SAEB's policy makers and other assessment programs in the

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3 Available at: <http://www.inep.gov.br/basica/saeb>. Accessed on: 03/08/2009.

Brazilians' states and cities, as they follow the management model implemented by the federal government. According to Sousa (2013, p. 66):

It is possible to say, based on a research conducted in Brazil in mid-2000s, that state and local governments are gradually incorporating the public education management model implemented by the federal government, with increasing use *of the evaluation results on a large scale as the main indicator of quality* (our emphasis).

In this direction, a city within the state of São Paulo implemented in 2006, the PROMASE (Municipal Assessment Program of the Education System), which also aims to assess the quality of education. The city's Municipal Education Plan highlights:

The *evaluation*, carried out systematically, under the coordination of the Municipal Department of Education, with the participation of the City Board of Education, will cover the various factors that determine *the quality of education* (SME, 2007, our emphasis).

We realize, however, that although the word quality is present in programs/evaluation systems - whether national, state or local - the concept is not often understood enough that we can understand which quality is the proposal about. As highlighted by Dias Sobrinho (2010, p. 02), when discussing quality, two different concepts are in dispute: one related to social perspective, "from those who understand and seek to realize education as a public good" and "one that undergoes education to the market." Bauer (2006, p. 52), in turn, reminds us that the conception of quality from those who design and conduct the evaluation systems have a link with their philosophical, political and social options. In the author's words:

If there is a close relationship among the philosophical, political and social options of those who produce the assessment and the concept of quality to it underlying, one must question the quality conception of education in evaluation systems, given that many state measurement, improving or monitoring that quality as a system goal (BAUER, 2006, p. 52).

It is necessary, therefore, to reflect on the many external evaluation experiences in order to analyze the conception of teaching quality that they lead, as well as the consequences they generate. We believe that it is necessary reflecting about the experiences realized, since there is a growing implementation of evaluation programs. As those established by the cities, there are few studies that are intended for analysis (SOUSA, 2013).

Therefore, in order to contribute to the debate on the external evaluations at the municipal level, this article aims to present the data obtained from the qualitative research performed in order to identify the actions taken by the Municipal Department of Education compared to the results from PROMASE and their impacts within the school units.

To know, follow and understand the proposed evaluation of PROMASE, we were able to approach a municipal assessment experience that, with its own program, evaluate its network and, from that assessment, propose modifications with a view to achieve, as mentioned in the Municipal Education Plan, the quality of education. In contact with educational institutions and the City Department of Education, we analyzed the path followed by the program in an attempt to reflect on the concept

of quality that permeates the proposal, stressing therefore, the voice of municipal management, teachers and school managers.

### The Research and Its Findings

In 2011 we completed the master's degree research that was intended to monitor the evaluation experience of PROMASE (Municipal Assessment Program of Education System), implemented in a city of São Paulo, in 2006. Specifically, in this study, we analyzed:

- i. The actions taken by the Municipal Department of Education (SME), arising from the Program;
- ii. How those actions echoed in the network schools;
- iii. The impacts generated by PROMASE in school units every day.

To this end, we used qualitative research since it is from the methodology that “focuses on analysis of micro processes through the study of individual and group social actions” (MARTINS, 2004, p. 289). The approach of municipal managers, school managers and teachers, by carrying out semi-structured<sup>4</sup> interviews, was of great importance, since it showed us their ways of thinking and acting.

The contact with many actors was obtained in two stages: first, the approach with members of SME, whose objective was to understand the intentions by adopting its own program evaluation and then, the approach of four schools for the primary education of the municipal network to check PROMASE's impacts in everyday school life. Because it is a small network, with schools that besides the elementary school are also serving children from kindergarten, we decided to observe units intended only to elementary education, i.e. EMEFs (Municipal Schools for Elementary Education), since they participated in PROMASE from the first year of its implementation.

Such schools were tracked weekly for one academic year. In each school, two teachers were selected accordingly to the criteria of being at the same school since the first year of application of PROMASE, and with them we were in class, planning meetings, parent meetings, etc.

At the first moment of the research, we established contact with the Department of Education, and we found that the intention by implementing PROMASE was an external evaluation that was built from the ideology and structure of the network, in other words, an assessment that is close to the local reality. The Secretary of Education said that with external evaluation it is possible to detect faults, plot directions and demonstrate to the network that the flaws are not solved only by the manager but by everyone involved in the process. Accordingly to the Secretary of Education, in 2003, during the First Municipal Education Conference, it was decided that the external evaluation would be adopted as a way to broaden the debate regarding *quality*, taking as its starting point the *data obtained in the evaluations*.

4 According to Triviños (1987, p. 127) the semi-structured interview is a data collecting technique that “offers a wide field of interrogative, as a result of new hypotheses that arise as they receive the informant's answers.”

She also reported that meetings happened for network professionals, taught by experts as a way to promote discussion and training on the external evaluation, especially to demystify that the evaluation would be implemented to label teachers. She also pointed out that the teachers of the network were invited to suggest questions for the preparation of the testes; however, upon receiving the questions, SME's team found that the activities did not meet the required skills and expertise, and in the following years, evidence has been prepared by people from the Department, with advice from experts in Portuguese and Mathematics.

Given the difficulty of teaching staff in preparing the questions and the first results of PROMASE which, in turn, were not satisfactory, according to the municipal manager, the SME began to perform some actions in order to qualify education in the city. Among the actions taken, we include:

- a. Continuing education of the teacher, especially in Portuguese;
- b. Curricular restructuring, with the introduction of the Reference Plan which, in turn, brings the groups of contents, by subject to be worked out in each school year, specifying the skills and competencies;
- c. Construction of a teaching material guide of Portuguese and Mathematics;
- d. Meetings between professionals of childhood education and elementary school, so there is an integrated work among the stages of basic education in order to foster the child's development;
- e. Partnerships with Health Units and Social Assistance to assist children with a disability and families in socially vulnerable situations;
- f. Discussions of analysis on child development, seeking to discuss issues related to the development of children enrolled in pre-schools;
- g. Renovation and repairs in the buildings of the school units;
- h. Inclusion of Working Group to provide support and training to professionals working with children who have a disability;
- i. Support Group, where extra classes are offered, in the other period of study, to students with learning disabilities.

Relating the actions mentioned by the Department with the data obtained through visits to schools and interviews with directors, coordinators and teachers, we realized that these actions, in some cases, have been reformulated in the school environment or even new proposals have emerged since in the institutions there was also a concern to improve the quality of education and, in particular, to increase rates achieved in tests of PROMASE.

This way, we saw that from the actions to improve the quality of education reported by the Secretary, the Reference Plan was recognized and mentioned during the interview by six teachers. However, to succeed in the teaching of content, two of them said they split the Plan in two months; two others said trying to cover all the group of contents during the school year, according to the guidance issued by the EMS, and the other ones didn't state how they work with the Reference Plan.

Still regarding the curricular question, four teachers said they were planning their lessons according to the PROMASE requirements. The presence of the Reference Plan, in the teachers' speech also was related to the tests. Since PROMASE tests were prepared from the Reference Plan, the teachers understood that contemplating the requirements by the Plan meant working with the selected content for the test, a fact that proves the teachers' concern to emphasize the recurring questions in the program's tests, in order to achieve the expected levels.

From the actions mentioned by the Secretary, three teachers have recognized courses and guidance material. In one of the schools, while presenting the results of PROMASE, some teachers said that the Department should implement public policies for in-service training and increase the teachers' salary.

Although the subject of expansion and renovation of schools do not appear in the speeches of school managers and teachers, we realized that they were executed and the four schools that we followed received repairs in the building. We also noticed that the Support Group, mentioned by the Secretary, existed in the accompanied schools, and students with inadequate content and with learning disabilities received extra lessons in the period contrary to the classes.

The impacts caused by PROMASE in the daily life of schools and the educational work of the teachers are related to the intent of improving the quality of education, by increasing the indexes obtained in the tests. With observations in the classroom, we found that in addition to plan their lessons from the Reference Plan, the activities of multiple choice were frequently used by the teachers, in the classroom and in the testes, and six of them admitted, in the interview, that the use of the tests were intensified after the establishment of PROMASE. We also realized that the exercise of the tests from Educational Achievement Assessment System of the State of São Paulo (SARESP) and Test of Brazil were copied to be applied. Five teachers said they reorganized the work with certain contents after PROMASE and, as previously highlighted, those contents present in the Reference Plan and frequently in the tests of the program were discussed more emphatically.

That way, as we follow with PROMASE, the concern in raising rates meant that teachers and managers developed actions guided to favor the disciplines required in the tests of the program and, above all, the recurrent contents of these disciplines, which leads to the "narrowing" of the curriculum, observed and denounced by other researches on impacts of external evaluations (ARCAS, 2009; RAVITCH, 2013; SCHNEIDER, 2013).

Even though the intention to raise rates, and as a result of PROMASE, the management of two schools implemented an internal assessment to monitor student's achievement. In one, the assessment took place at the end of the year, in SARESP standards and, according to the teachers, had the intention to train students for the tests. In the other, the management drew up a project to monitor the performance of students in the subject of Portuguese Language, and during the Class Council,



the data found was analyzed. At the same institution, the faculty decided to apply the same assessment to the same school years in order to find disparities and promote the so-called “big intensive study” for students.

Arcas (2009, p. 148), in his research, identified something similar regarding SA-RESP as this evaluation system “has come to guide learning assessment procedures”. According to the author,

At first, the application of the tests, following the SARESP model aimed only to prepare students for the day of implementation of the external evaluation. Over time, the evidence began to be used to evaluate the teaching planned and developed by teachers in the course of the school year (ARCAS, 2009, p. 149).

The feeling of charging and the presence of comparisons was something noticed by teachers. The PROMASE reports, with their results, were presented to teachers by the managers at HTPC (Collective Pedagogical Working Hours), and together they all performed the reading and compared with the data from previous years. In these reports, there were not a ranking with the results of schools and/or classes. Although there was no ranking, the teachers reported that internally there were comparisons. In one of the schools, upon receiving the results of PROMASE, the faculty had contact with the averages of all classes, followed by comments made by the Pedagogical Coordinator, praising the good work of some. In other institutions, the teachers received the results individually, with the possibility to exchange information with co-workers. Even in the three institutions where the results were delivered separately, according to the teachers, comparisons were present, which leads us to believe that by the “comments in the corridors,” was the establishment of internal results hierarchies.

Consequently, we identified the “hidden” building of rankings within schools. The dissemination of results that happened in HTPCs and the socialization among the school members favored the practice of classification. Just as the same way “official” rankings, the “hidden” rankings in the researched network, led to the “alignment” of teaching and assessment practices to the pattern and format of the assessment tool used by the program.

We believe, however, that the PROMASE results could be analyzed during the institutional assessment, taking up the commitments made in the Political-Pedagogical Project and agreeing, through negotiation between the partners, the desired and necessary quality for the given context. The reflection on the results of external evaluation from the school’s reality, through the ongoing dialogue between the protagonists in a supportive and collaborative perspective, would enable the deconstruction of the culture that links assessment results to build hierarchies based on results. It would come through therefore a mutual and constant shaping among teachers, parents, administrators and others involved with the school. In this sense,

[...] Emerges the hypothesis that the assessment, as a process of reflection and collective action, seeks to improve and transform the institution, and thus, can be considered a formative process. The end is the formation. This is what it is a school. Moreover, the evaluation is to see how the school performs forming, how it is fulfilling its school project, its design of formation. It is also important to highlight that the conjoint treatment of these factors is what is responsible for school’s quality. (RODRIGUES, 2005, p. 45)

In this sense, Bondioli (2004) brings the concept of negotiated quality, where, from the institution's Political-Pedagogical Project, the school's actors collectively reflect, negotiate and demarcate responsibilities, seeing possible ways and collectively agreed objectives. The knowledge that comes from outside is not dismissed; however, the context of the institution is prioritized, and in a constant process of reflection, the institution assesses and (re) plans its practice of sharing domestic responsibilities and demanding from the government the necessary conditions (BETINI, 2009). Therefore, the reflection on the external ratings data needs to dialogue with the goals set by the school itself, in an exercise of questioning the assessment (SORDI; LUDKE, 2009), as opposed, to building rankings, whether "official" or "hidden".

Still about the data obtained in the field research, it is worth mentioning the understanding of the teachers on the PROMASE, since such data can help us understand the "hidden" rankings. For us, since being part of the network, the teachers would know what is the program's purposes. However, six teachers said they did not know the goals of PROMASE and one linked the program to the intention of the Department to see how they worked. Only one teacher defined PROMASE as an assessment to obtain numerical data on the network. The lack of knowledge of the real objectives of the Program on the part of the teachers, and their perceptions of it as a charging instrument, leads us to understand that the "hidden" rankings were accepted and incorporated into the school routine. However, as reported above, the Secretary of Education said that meetings with faculty happened to discuss the evaluation, in an attempt to demystify it as a practice performed to label the work of the teacher. Nevertheless, the teachers demonstrated to not completely know the proposal.

Even without knowing the objectives of PROMASE, it was brought up by four teachers in order to promote self-evaluation of the work done by them. By enabling the questioning of its practice, PROMASE wouldn't it be making that such reflection was focused only on results, with evidence of further classification principles? What is the quality conception present in a practice intended as training for the tests, and that prioritizes an educational program according to settings of the Program?

The attitudes announced above, based on training and curriculum narrowing, can be understood as a "defensive posture towards evaluation, because teachers resent the results that, directly or indirectly, point us as responsible for the poor performance of students in examinations proficiency" (SORDI; LUDKE, 2009, p 320). As much as PROMASE's proposal do not associate average proficiency to payment bonus and did not realize the dissemination of rankings, such actions were not enough to prevent the teaching and assessment practices are reached by the external evaluation.

Consequently, the experience of PROMASE shows us the necessary discussion of the external evaluation and its consequences for school, especially for teachers and students. For teachers, because their practices are achieved and especially adjusted to evaluation patterns and the style of the instruments used. The innovations consequently lose ground since what takes effect are the contents, and following different paths can lead to undesirable results. There is, for students, as a consequence, exhaustive training for the tests, the decrease in time allocated to other subjects and the reduce of their learning process of reading and mathematical calculations.

Facing the twentieth anniversary of the Brazilian experience in external evaluation, the academic literature on the national and state systems assessment denounces as our schools are being affected; this, however, has not been enough to change such scenario. On the contrary, with the approval of the National Education Plan, we see that there is an appreciation of standardized tests, since there is the intention to align the states' education plans, the Federal District and cities to the federal level, in other words, "there is an effort of articulation of national assessments with subnational initiatives" (MEC, 2014, p. 31).

Still on the value assigned to the external evaluation and its possible effect on networks and education systems, the 7<sup>th</sup> goal of PNE - which links quality of basic education to achieve the goals set by the Basic Education Development Index (IDEB) - deserves special attention because it tends to:

- accentuate the existence of large-scale assessments in state and municipal levels through the goal 7.32 which refers to the strengthening, in collaboration with the National System of Evaluation, the State System of Evaluation, with the participation of municipal networks, to guide public policies and pedagogical practices (BRAZIL, 2014).
- link the IDEB with control mechanism of teaching practices from its association with the payment of wages, since the goal 7.36 "sets out stimulus policies to schools with better performances in IDEB, to value the merits of its faculty, direction and school community" (BRAZIL, 2014).

Having an association between external evaluation and quality, seen in its correlation with the increase in rates and the average proficiency, we are facing the so-called "pedagogy of the results", sustained in the logic of the market and therefore the total quality (SAVIANI, 2007, p. 1253), for

[...] As companies aims to achieve total customer satisfaction and interprets that, in schools, those who teach are service providers; the customers are the ones learning and education is a product that can be produced with varying quality (SAVIANI, 2007, p. 1253).

The evaluation is therefore reduced to this extent. Such measures produce results that started to guide school activities and, as stated by Sordi and Ludke (2009, p. 320), there is an "idolatry of good grades" and thus the "end justifies the means purposes." Although it is necessary, it is noteworthy that only measurement does not mean review. The assessment considers the reflection as, in turn, it causes a change in attitude. Such understanding of the evaluation enables the school community to think and rethink the institution. External evaluation of the results should be considered; however, the analysis does not stop them, because the various aspects of the local situation, including the government's responsibilities, are the core of dialogue that establishes the necessary commitments in favor of the integral formation<sup>5</sup> of the student and their community.

5 We understand that the integral formation of the student, beyond the cognitive aspects checked the tests, promotes the emotional, social, physical and political development. It arouses criticality, creativity and sensitivity, favoring the student performance in different social environments in a supportive and liberating way.



## Final Considerations

Finally, we want to emphasize that we believe in the external evaluation collaborative potential, especially when carried out at the municipal level, as it enables the involvement of network members around its reality and its philosophy. However, as we followed, PROMASE effectively targeted to raise rates with a view to improving the quality of education, meant that teachers and managers develop actions that have distorted the original project - whose focus was a social quality education for all - causing undesirable impacts on teaching and assessment practices.

We agree with Sousa and Arcas (2010) by stating that:

Assessment policies may contain emancipatory possibilities or will serve to the intensification of educational and social inequalities, by its means and ends and the use of its results are revealing the real meaning they take place in the educational process (SOUZA; ARCAS, 2010, p.187).

This way, for a municipal assessment system to bring positive contributions to its network, we understand that, in its construction, the main purpose should be the commitment to comprehensive education and integral formation of students. For this, the political, philosophical and educational ideals should be agreed and set so that the set up system is guided by negotiation (BONDIOLI, 2004) and the establishment of pacts in a quality perspective, in frantic search of the opposite of rising rates performance. In addition to the settlements set forth in its constitution, agreement on how the information obtained will be used in the evaluations is fundamental in the process of building an assessment really committed to their students.

As the effects of evaluation results of PROMASE, we saw that not building official rankings was not enough to avoid them, leaving, therefore, a reflection on the “hidden” rankings. We realize that these also influence the teaching practices, evaluation practices, the concept of quality and personal relationships in the workplace. While they wanted to demonstrate safety, in the informal testimonies of the teachers we noticed a reversal feeling, so that they, in everyday life, began to prioritize actions to the program. Notice that, in the proposed PROMASE, in addition to not building official rankings, there was also not an award for teachers for their results; nonetheless, the pedagogical and assessment practices of most teachers accompanied, as already mentioned, were “adjusted” to the program.

The accountability for students’ performance and, above all, the credit assigned, even if informally, to the teachers whose classes obtained good results, made the rankings “hidden” emerged in schools. There was not, this way, a share of responsibilities and commitments. The result, obtained by a group in a given year, was understood as the result of the work only by the teacher of the school year in question.

So, once again, we emphasize the importance of institutional assessment. In it, the quality of the institution and therefore of the education, is the core reflections, and the results are analyzed by the school’s collective from sharing responsibilities. In this sense, we agree with Freitas (*et al.*, 2009) when he states that:

[...] Evaluation system is an important tool for the monitoring of public policies and their results should be forwarded, as subsidy, to the school, so that, *within an institutional assessment process, it can consume the data, validate them*

*and find ways to improve.* Institutional evaluation will make mediation and will give subsidies for evaluation in the classroom, led by the teacher. However, without creating this mediation mechanism, simply sending or delivering data in a site will not have a safe way of reflection on them. The data may even have technical legitimacy, but will lack political legitimacy (FREITAS, *et al.*, 2009, p. 65, emphasis of the authors).

Accordingly, we believe in an external evaluation linked to the institutional assessment whose results are used to strengthen the school community, and that it has, as its main objective, the integral formation of its students. Therefore, the desired quality in a context of shared commitments and responsibilities is anchored in the perspective of social quality, that is, a quality conception that has no central index and measurable results to the market. The social quality works *with* the context that surrounds it and has commitment to students, families and social projects that advocate for the good of the community, through “meaningful learning and effectively democratic experiences” (SILVA, 2009, p. 225).

The social quality, so necessary for our public schools, beyond the index, sets the school itself as a major player in the process of looking at each other with a commitment to be a human development space for all who are there. It is anchored in horizontal relationships, averse to the frequent blaming of the teacher for the results obtained on standardized tests and hence favors the social, cultural, political and humanized of students who we envision to build in different educational spaces of our society.

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