

Presentation note

Education Assessment: Ibero-American perspectives

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Before embarking on the presentation proper of this edition of the journal, a brief reference is made to the three fields within which the current debate on education assessment is developed.

CRITICAL ISSUES

Assessment has been one of the most common social practices under debate in education systems, particularly since the late 1990s. Indeed, an obsession with assessment, as if it might hold the magic solution to the problems of education and training may be observed. There is no doubt that around 100 years of research and theoretical construction has enabled us to assess a broad spectrum of realities more precisely and significantly, but it is also true that difficult to resolve problems still persist. Therefore, debates on a variety of *critical issues*, particularly in three main practical areas, have been held: a) assessment of student learning (e.g., relations between internal and external assessment; questions on the validity and feasibility of exams; issues regarding item construction and analysis); b) teacher assessment (e.g., assessment objects/fields to be considered; participation of actors; relations between teacher performance and student learning; aims, use and effects of assessment); c) school assessment (e.g., participation of the different *stakeholders*; relations between internal and external assessment; relations between school projects and student learning; assessment aims, use and effects). The assessment of programs and projects, curriculum assessment and

public policy assessment are fields within which the debate is equally intense.

NATURE, LIMITATIONS AND POTENTIALITIES

Assessment is not an exact science. However, it is always worth recalling that it is not merely a persuasive rhetoric either. It is the fruit of considerable and profitable theoretical development and its practices generate credible and socially useful knowledge on a variety of social phenomena and realities. Therefore, preciseness is essential and assessment can not be confined to a set of exercises or the formulation of opinions without any grounding. Assessment, per se, is very demanding in the formulation of relevant problems and questions: in the selection of information collection methods and processes; in the analysis and summary of results; in the production of credible, useful recommendations with real meaning. Meta-Assessment, which uses criteria and procedures that have been well established for around thirty years, makes evaluation of the quality of such assessment possible. In fact, this is a guarantee that should not be ignored as the *rigor, utility, feasibility* and *suitability* of assessment is what is at stake here.

DISCERNING QUALITY AND ARTICULATING PERSPECTIVES

Assessment, in fact, is related to quality discernment, which is a very familiar practice to human beings. Indeed, in every day life, and in all fields of activity, we are constantly formulating judgement regarding

the quality of a diversity of *objects* (e.g., research project; article on assessment; book on the Activity Theory; professional performance; student learning; emergency service of a hospital; service rendered by justice agents and courts) and making decisions on the basis of such judgement. However, the quality is very hard to assess in a supposedly objective way or in an exclusively subjective way. Indeed, in isolation, the obtained experiences or measures may not, per se, guarantee better discernment and, so, it is good that they can be articulated in an intelligent manner. Thus, on this basis it is possible to formulate more sustained and credible inferences in terms of the quality of whatever is being assessed and/or portray the complexity of social realities more faithfully.

The above research fields, among others, and reflection in the field of assessment are highlighted and examined in the articles of this edition of the journal *Sísifo*, entitled *Assessment in Education: Ibero-American perspectives*. In fact, a number of researchers and experts on educational assessment from six Ibero-American countries (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Spain, Mexico and Portugal) provided their collaboration. This is yet another opportunity for researchers to discuss and reflect upon assessment. The fact that they live in different countries and share a very similar cultural background is an important factor for approximation and sharing. It is our wish that this initiative may open the way to many others, so that further examination of relations among Ibero-American researchers may be possible. Such relations may stem from specific initiatives in the organisation of seminars and conferences, post-graduate education and in the production and dissemination of studies and research in the area of assessment and in other areas of education and training. A brief presentation of each of the articles is set out below.

In the first article, Bernardete Gatti describes and analyses a number of initiatives in the field of assessment that are being put into practice on different political and administrative levels in Brazil. This study sheds light upon the meaning behind the decisions taken, their most pressing problems and some of their consequences.

In the second article Ángel Diaz Barriga describes and analyses a variety of assessment programmes implemented by the education authorities

of Mexico, particularly from the 90s onwards. The reflections of this author have led him to draw attention to the excessive amount of bureaucratic and administrative assessment processes which bring no visible benefit to the education system, and the emergence of a spontaneously created set of *evaluators*.

In the third article, Marcela Román Carrasco and Javier Murillo Torrecilla analyse the learning and school performance of primary and secondary school pupils in Latin American countries, measured by means of national and international external assessment processes. According to these researchers, the data analysis highlights problems related to the quality of education and equity, which weaken Latin-American students' integration and social mobility.

In the fourth article, Maria Teresa Esteban analyses and reflects upon a large scale external assessment procedure— *Provinha Brasil*¹ — applied to all Brazilian children at the end of their second year of schooling (around eight years of age). The aim of this assessment procedure is to check that all children learn what is laid down in the national curriculum. Teresa Esteban questions the conceptions of education and assessment at the root of this assessment procedure as well as the possibility of providing a positive contribution to the learning of children, namely those belonging to the working class.

Almerindo Afonso, in the fifth article, develops a discussion around the concept of accountability, which is often associated exclusively with the so-called rendering of accounts and/or taking responsibility for actions. In his reflection, however, the author broadens this vision to put forward a model that includes assessment, the rendering of accounts and the taking of responsibility by discussing their respective dimensions. Based on this framework, Almerindo Afonso discusses the role of accountability in Portuguese state education and in some Latin American countries, presenting a number of challenges in this field.

In the sixth article, Juan Casassus provides a critical analysis of large scale standardised assessment procedures, considering that unlike what is generally mentioned, such forms of assessment do not, in fact, assess the quality of education. The author clearly questions the value of this type of test

for evaluating education systems, believing that it encourages social inequality and reduces the quality of education.

In the seventh article, Norberto Boggino focuses his reflection on the assessment of students as a pedagogical process, intrinsically associated with learning improvement. However, this author goes even further by suggesting that assessment should be a learning strategy geared towards the development of processes, without ignoring the results to be achieved by students.

In the eighth article, Domingos Fernandes performs a research analysis set in Portugal in the field of learning assessment. In the majority of cases, such research focuses on the conceptions and practices of teacher assessment, without data collection in a classroom context. The author suggests that the classroom, instead of the teacher, should become the main item of analysis in future research and reflects on the potentialities of the Activity Theory as an alternative to empirical rationalism and certain forms of constructivism.

Finally, in the ninth article, Miguel Santos Guerra analyses and reflects upon the relations between

the experiences of future teachers with assessment and its future practices. In this piece of work the afore-mentioned experiences are discussed and a number of interesting inferences are made for teacher training in general and for a more specific reflection on the real implications of certain training experiences in professional development.

The dossier ends with a critical review by Pedro Rodrigues of three ineluctable reference books in the field of education assessment produced under the *Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation*. It focuses on the standards for student assessment, teacher assessment and programme assessment.

ENDNOTES

1. A diagnostic test applied to pupils in the second year of *Ensino Fundamental* (education system for pupils aged between 6 and 14 years).

Translated by Tânia Lopes da Silva

