Provinha Brasil: school performance and standard discourses on childhood

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ABSTRACT:

This article presents an initial discussion about the *Provinha Brasil*[1], a national exam given to children aged around eight year old, which aims to monitor the levels of literacy taught in Brazilian public schools in order to guarantee that all pupils are literate by the end of their second year of compulsory schooling. I believe the process is carried out in line with a simplistic understanding of the literacy process, which is not viewed as a socio-cultural practice, and which is predominantly a quantitative and grading classification. As such, this paper questions the capacity of this evaluation process to make an effective contribution to the literacy of Brazilian children, placing the emphasis on the observation of its effects in the public schools that receive children predominantly from the popular classes, and who are historically denied learning opportunities and impeded from significantly enhancing their knowledge.

KEYWORDS:
Assessment, School failure/success, Childhood, Learning.

Only at a young age can the cucumber be bent
(Popular saying)

Unsatisfactory results have been prevalent in the popular classes of the Brazilian public school children. Concerns over school failure have been a recurring theme in drawing up public education policies and "the fight against it" is frequently seen in the presentation of diagnoses, plans and proposals. Different moments, different pathways and similar results: the children from the popular classes do not have the right to a proper school education.

In the cycle we have lived through in recent years, external assessment has taken on major relevance as one of the inducers of the so-called quality of education. Within the scope of this project, which associates the quantity of the performance with the quality of the education in a linear manner, in 2008 the Federal Government set up the *Provinha Brasil*, a large-scale exam for children in their second year of schooling.

This article intends to present initial reflections on the assessment project, questioning some of its assumptions and seeking to establish relationships with the everyday school practices. One cannot lose sight of the fact that up until today only one edition of the *Provinha Brasil* has taken place, therefore there is little information about its results and its impact in the construction of the desired quality. Even so, it is possible to formulate opinions based on the relationships among the exam, assessment, learning and performance, making reference to the

studies already carried out, research into the everyday school life and theoretical backup regarding the processes of emancipation and freeing of the popular classes.

PROVINHA BRASIL: REGULATION OF RESULTS AND SUBALTERNISATION OF SUBJECTS

The official documents clearly present the *Provinha Brasil* as a proposal aimed at bringing about equality and quality in education (INEP/MEC, 2009). As the name itself suggests, the assessment process is carried out through standardised tests, given at the start and end of the academic year, aimed at "monitoring" the literacy taught in public schools. The emphasis on the objectivity of the data obtained is one the crucial aspects in the design of this assessment project, which presents as its goal the undertaking of a diagnosis of the pupils' level of literacy, to prevent and correct "possible shortfalls" in relation to reading and writing.

The procedure involves bringing large-scale exams to the start of schooling and inserts small children into a process that involves a big gap between the processes implemented and the results obtained. The nearness/distance relationship in the implementation of this proposal, checking the literacy levels of the children enrolled in their second school year, is the first aspect to point out. The children are examined through a standardised test,

with strictly defined objective questions, paths and points of arrival:

> This, "Step-by-Step" document is part of the *Provinha Brasil* tool and supplies information about the background to its creation and implementation, its object and its aims, the theoretical assumptions on which it is based, its methodologies, and also the possibilities for the interpretation and use of its results, as well as the perspectives for the next cycles (INEP/MEC, 2009, p. 5).

As can be seen, the formulation of the proposal is disconnected from the everyday school life, and does not consider its peculiarities, the different social contexts and the cultures of the places where the children live and go to the school. The socio-historical dimension of the school dynamics leading to the results disappears. There is hence a big divergence between the results obtained and the subjects that, supposedly, produce them. However, the predominant discourse in the presentation of the *Provinha Brasil*, expresses a dialogue with some of the school subjects, showing proximity and partnership.

> Why take part in the *Provinha Brasil*?
> Manager — The *Provinha Brasil* will enable your teachers to find out the possible literacy difficulties of the pupils, and this can make your management task easier. With these results you can enhance the planning of your curriculum and the continuous training of the teachers who work in the literacy field.
> Teacher — Finding out the literacy difficulties of your pupils will help you plan your lessons better throughout the academic year. You will know what aspects to give priority to and what subjects you should dedicate more time to. Furthermore, the analysis and interpretations of the results and the pedagogical documents about the *Provinha Brasil* can also be another source of training (http://provinhabrasil.inep.gov.br, visited on 14/03/2009).

As the cited text suggests, the managers and teachers are expected to act to develop activities deriving from a diagnosis, in which they do not have the slightest involvement. The pupils' performance in the standardised tests and their desired improvement are interpreted as predominantly technical questions, with no

consideration taken of the complexity of the everyday school processes. The document itself that presents the *Provinha Brasil* simplifies the literacy process such that it becomes a socio-cultural practice that falls within the tight constraints of the standardised tests. The teaching-learning process is not assessed; what is measured is what can be easily gauged through a multiple choice test:

> Given that not all the skills developed during the process of learning how to read and write can be assessed through the *Provinha Brasil* (…), it was necessary to select some of these skills to build the test.
> Therefore, the skills defined to assess the reading and writing are those that can return relevant information in line with the proposed aims and the conditions imposed within the scope of this assessment (INEP/MEC, 2009, pp. 11-12).

It is clear that given the continued failure at school, an expression of the denial of the right of children from the popular classes to socially valued knowledge which is transmitted by the school, it does not act on the set of relationships implied in the school failure/success dynamic, or even on the restricted field of the school skills and competencies. The option is made to maintain the inversion that turns methodological problems into performance problems[2], falling back on the old formula: for better quality, more exams. In this case it is important to point out that the external assessment is based on a large-scale exam, applied in the whole of the Brazil, to children aged around eight years old.

Although the criticism of this assessment method, which carries out the process as a simple measurement of observable fragments of behaviour, is not recent, it is worth looking at again, especially at a moment in which the assessment of a quantitative nature, similar to a classification, is again gaining relevance.

To channel the reflection proposed in this article, I was aided by a study from the start of the 1990s, in which Barriga (2004) presents an analysis of the process of reducing assessment to an exam, showing the articulation of the school practices according to the demands of the functions of accreditation and control, which are the grounds of what he calls "exam pedagogy". This pedagogy is based

on the supposed scientificity of the exam which, through the objectivity of the tools and procedures used (designed to distance the subject who carried out the assessment — the examiner, which in this case may be the teacher himself — from the student, whose performance is assumed as the object of knowledge), will guarantee the authenticity and neutrality of the results obtained, which enables the distribution of the subjects into the different categories drawn up. The classification produced on a frequent basis also serves, albeit sometimes indirectly, as a justification for the implicit exclusion in the whole process and expresses the understanding of quality that articulates it. In Barriga's opinion, the objective test, a widely used method, is an exam technique and disciplinary technology that comprises a hierarchical relationship which gives visibility, monitors and sanctions the subjects in order to standardise them, submit them and direct their performance according to the demands of the hegemonic society model, as we were taught some time ago by Foucault (1997).

The careful reading of the process instigated by the *Provinha Brasil* reveals its classification nature, as there is no insertion in a scale without classification. The existence of performance levels, into which the children are inserted, increases the possibility of visibility of the *other* — he who does not correspond to the model idealised as the benchmark performance to be attained — creating new possibilities to exercise authoritarian control that traditionally runs through the assessment practices. The *levels* produce categories which the different children can fit into, with their different knowledge/performance. However, recognising the singularity and plurality that exposes difference can be part of a process of its denial through order and control. Quality as a result of an excluding dynamic does not respond to the demands of a democratic public school, in favour of the popular classes.

This external assessment model views performance as equivalent to learning, and assessment as a technical process based on measurement and control. It is carried out by using unified tools, producing results organised into a rigid and predetermined scale, which gives different grades in order to arrange contexts, processes, results and subjects into a hierarchy. It is devised based on a linear relationship between the exam — a process of coercion, certification and exclusion — and learning[3]. The *Provinha Brasil* is a new version of these procedures, which has not contributed towards the deepening of the democratic dimension of the school, or even towards any significant enhancement of the officially established quality indicators (Esteban, 2008b). Its design falls back on conceptions and practices that, despite being widely criticised, remain at the forefront of the school dynamic and the formulation of public policies. Ignoring the inconsistency between the purpose of the national assessment system and the results actually achieved, there is a belief that the more exams are carried out the better the quality of the education system will be.

The unsatisfactory results in the 4th year, as found by SAEB[4], formed the basis of the argument to enlarge the assessment system so that it included children just starting school. The external assessment results have confirmed what has been known for a long time in the schools: less than half the children are not learning in a satisfactory manner, and among those who have an acceptable performance, few have reading and writing skills compatible with the time they have spent at school. However, the understanding of the exam as a tool to enhance quality can be questioned by looking at the results of the SAEB themselves. After more than a decade of exams, with successive changes in the methodology to try and perfect it, not only are no data presented to show an improvement in the quality of the education system, but the results indicate a worsening of some performance indicators (INEP/MEC, 2004).

The exam, drawn up based on standards that stimulate the unifying of the processes and the results, plays and important role as regards moulding the practices, reducing the likelihood of encouraging difference, a natural characteristic of the classroom. It therefore legitimises inequalities deriving from the differences, naturalises subalternity and encourages the subjects to strive for standardisation. Simultaneously, it pushes away the student, the learning subject, from knowledge, which should be the object of the learning. This process creates fractures in relationships, isolates subjects and distances them from their own processes, which lose force given the overriding emphasis on results. This

dynamic makes it difficult to produce dialogues that are truly beneficial for an ongoing process of enlargement of knowledge for all. Therefore, it increases the possibility of producing a narrative that is socially valid about the *other*, which is made the object of the relationship, justifying the disqualification of alterity. It also reduces the possibility and the right of the subject to question himself about his own experiences.

The relationship between the application of a "provinha" and the guarantee of literacy in children by eight years of age reveals the lack of knowledge concerning the formulations, discussions and practices related to children's learning and the reading and writing process (Garcia, 2000; Garcia & Zaccur, 2008; Geraldi *et al.*, 2008). This proposal shows that there remains a simplistic perspective about childhood, together with mechanistic conceptions regarding literacy and assessment, which emphasises the technical dimension and pushes the historical and socio-cultural aspects that make it up into the background.

The idea of a "provinha", entitled as a diminutive, may seem a way of putting the exam in a children's context. However, it reinforces the stereotype of the child as a "second-class", incapable, citizen — a being who is preparing to be a somebody, but who is not one yet. A minor subjectivity, a minor citizenship. There is also a tendency to give something of a child's role to the teacher, who is sometimes responsible for applying and correcting the test, but never responsible for its preparation or interpretation of the results. This shows a clear lack of faith in the teaching action, its ability to formulate and understand its everyday practice.

THE PRODUCTION OF DIFFERENCE AS A SHORTFALL

The production of a discourse of disqualification of the results, processes, and in turn, the subjects who waver from the established norm, can be perceived throughout the documents that present and guide the application of the tests in the schools. On this point I believe it pertinent to reflect on the idea of *shortfalls* that guides the formulation of this assessment proposal.

The *Provinha Brasil* is a tool designed to supply teachers and managers of public schools and teaching networks with a diagnosis as regards the literacy level of the pupils, who are still at the start of the learning process, thus enabling actions with a view to correcting possible shortfalls presented in the areas of reading and writing (INEP/MEC, 2009, p. 9).

The results of the exam provides us with information that leads to the distinction between those who learn in line with the established standards and those who do not reach the levels expected for the second school year. Which can be easily translated into those who "learn" and those who "do not learn", or at least do not learn in a satisfactory manner. School learning is, in this perspective, unconnected to the whole pre and extra-school experience, as if the learning of the written language was not strongly tied in with the child's experience of the written word in his day-to-day life (inside and outside school; before and during all the school years). This relationship is especially relevant in a schooling project that fragments the reading and writing learning by considering:

> Literacy as the development of the understanding of the rules regarding the functioning of the alphabetic writing system and reading as the possible uses and social functions of the written language, i.e. the process of insertion and participation of the subjects in the written culture (INEP/MEC, 2009, p. 12).

Splitting the process creates difficulties in learning the written language, especially for children for whom school is the major place for them to be immersed into the written culture. One can deduce that children from the popular classes, who live in the urban periphery and mix in socially marginalised groups, may not present, in the same schooling period, similar performances to children from more privileged socio-cultural sectors. Which leads one to question the establishment of unified criteria to analyse the results of the tests, validating some processes and casting aside others. The differences in results, seen in the classification, are justified through the argument that does not take into account the socio-historical and cultural aspect of school learning and views performances

that do not fit into the proposed standardisation as negative and undesirable.

The diagnosis formulated by the *Provinha Brasil* articulates the possibility of "correcting shortfalls" or "overcoming problems", recommending special attention be paid to students who are graded at levels 1 or 2 (the lowest on the scale used). The ideas of *shortfall* and *problem*, as a translation of results that are systematically different from those desired, and the demand for pedagogical mechanisms that allow their correction[5], constitute, within the scope of a unification of processes project, the denial of alterity, in an effort to make the *other* an imitated reproduction of what is presented as the model *subject* to be achieved.

Negating the *other* is a symptom of an unequal society that, to maintain the processes of subalternisation, needs to marginalise different social groups. Historically, the proposals to homogenise the school dynamic have played an important role in this process, participating in acts towards the colonisation of knowledge, carrying out procedures that highlight difference in order to more easily eradicate it, as a strategy of denial of alterity. One of these strategies is to offer the subject a socially validated place, in exchange for him negating himself by abandoning the knowledge, cognitive processes and lifestyles produced by his experiences with his socio-cultural group.

One cannot separate the proposals for uniformity of school practices and results from the movements to conform to and maintain a colonial power structure (Mignolo, 2003), in which processes are created to silence segments of society. The differences are ascertained and exposed, although much of this knowledge is not recognised, let alone valuing the subjects positively because of their difference. Even less time is expended discussing the processes behind the production of inequalities and the way they are related to the differences.

In this background, the difference in the paths and results continues to be interpreted as a defect, a relationship implicit in some of the milder expressions used: *shortfall* and *problem*. No effort is made to find out the paths that lead to results presented, or the learning achieved to reach the levels of 'shortfall', or the knowledge that intertwines with the school teaching. No. Difference is merely viewed as

a *shortfall* and *problem*, which generates the need to correct it and blend in, so that the child falls within the strict predefined goalposts in the exam.

The standards use to classify the performance, and in turn the subjects, are accepted as ideal models that should be reached. By not questioning them, the hegemonic school project and the dynamics, which are of little benefit to students from the popular classes, remain outside the debate and are instead brought up and frequently cited for public policies. The reflection, deriving from the diagnosis on these grounds does not even tie in with the parameters and arguments used in the definition of children's success or failure at school.

This assessment is centred on the process of external regulation of the pedagogical dynamic, helping to reduce the school's ability to reflect on its work, formulate its own proposals for action or establish collective and democratic ways of regulating the work, aimed at producing beneficial practices in the learning-teaching process. However, the relationship established by the exam deals with the demand for the creation of places where students who do not demonstrate the knowledge expected of them can be inserted. The absence of expressions that directly evoke the abnormality of the learning paths of children who do not attain the idealised levels does not prevent them from being presented with a standardisation project, whereby the targets set are to be reached through the pedagogical work.

Standardisation makes different knowledge interchangeable, and with it the subjects that hold it: it is a systematic action that disqualifies and eliminates knowledge. These procedures, associated with the hierarchical classification and centralisation of knowledge, are relevant for the constitution of the disciplinary power (Foucault, 2006). As such, the high performance levels, presented as a goal to be achieved in expressing an improvement in the quality of school, do not necessarily represent an alteration in the subaltern condition of the subjects.

This seems to be one of the major features in the hegemonic project towards the schooling of all: reducing inequalities without questioning the social dynamics of the production of relationships of subalternity. This aim is another indication that the quality model taken on does not express a commitment towards the critical appropriation of knowledge, as

a historical-cultural production, which is indispensable for a social emancipation project linked to the extinction of the relationships of subalternisation of the subjects.

The classification of the children's performances reinforces the need to carefully deal with the relationship school establishes with difference. The existence of homogeneous parameters entails the risk of exposure of difference leading to a segregation and discrimination process, hidden behind concepts presented as neutral and objective; a prejudice that leads to and justifies exclusion. The categorisation of the children's responses, in a multiple choice test, according to predetermined criteria, does not consider the specific school dynamic as a producer of a mesh of intertwined failures, mistakes, doubts, impossibilities, incapacities, as well as their opposites, which are the characteristics of human interactions.

Although the *Provinha Brasil* ties the diagnosis it makes in with the reorientation of the pedagogical practice, the perspectives of knowledge, learning and teaching on which it is based immobilise the teaching. The strength of a homogenisation project of the results achieved and the processes developed transform difference into an obstacle for the learning, which simultaneously reduces the importance of the teaching. When faced with a child that according to the diagnosis carried out has a shortfall in his performance, indicating his inability or difficulty in learning, the teacher also faces the difficult task of finding ways to teach him. The child's failure to attain a certain level always supplies justifications as regards the learning that is considered insufficient.

Meanwhile, understanding difference as an expression of the complex processes of production of human life takes us away from simplified conclusions, which focus on the incompetence, or *shortfalls* of individuals isolated and removed from their daily background, where their alterity is moulded. By understanding that this difference cannot be graded into different levels — given that it expresses particular learning and development paths — the child is viewed as someone able to learn, which motivates the teacher to teach him. From this perspective the teaching action is not geared towards raising the *level* of the child, but rather towards undertaking new and deeper learning. Lack of knowledge

does not disqualify either the child or the teacher, but challenges one to broaden the learning/teaching relationship experienced in everyday school life.

This discussion shows the importance of deepening the debate and reflecting on the relationship between recognising difference and the production of inequality in the educational processes, considering that the school dynamics and public policies for education are intertwined with the social processes in which knowledge, practices and subjects are included/excluded. This point is especially significant for the public school, as the initial stage for society projects.

REOPENING PATHS

Considering the aspects briefly touched upon here, the *Provinha Brasil* (as with other exams that make up the national system of education assessment) has not been properly designed to bring about the best quality to the literacy process[6] in Brazilian public schools. However, it may provide detailed items for the construction of a discourse that, once again, justifies school failure without managing to be part of a process of real democratisation of the school, in which success and performance are not confused with each other.

The *Provinha Brasil* encourages the enlargement of control over the school, over the teaching action and over children's performance. The emphasis is on regulation, which goes beyond the exam, in the same way as shown by the results of other education levels, which contribute little towards a deep reflection on the pedagogical dynamic, the paths that have been trodden, the learning achieved or the knowledge needed and how to obtain it. The centrality of the exam, even if disguised as a "*provinha* (little exam)", which can be applied (but not drawn up) by the class teacher, guides the pedagogical action towards obtaining pre-fixed results, which diminishes, at school, the possibility of grasping, understanding and strengthening the multiple processes of learning and teaching that take place there, as well as the different knowledge that gives life to the classroom as a space of constant learning.

The institutionalisation of the exam creates a gap between the diagnosis, which is needed for the

formulation and analysis both of the public policies and the pedagogical practice, and the processes that are actually instigated on an everyday basis at the school. It is taken as a means to assess the children's development and learning processes, reinforcing the classification conception, strongly rooted on everyday practices, making it difficult to use other procedures that are more effective in the monitoring that is doubtless necessary throughout the pupils' school days. Therefore, the consolidation of the exam pushes away the possibilities of understanding and intervening in the learning process, as its focus is on raising the grades.

The production of idealised performance levels, unequally valued, such that some must be achieved while others avoided, makes it difficult to articulate the everyday practices that act in a dialogue perspective, acknowledging and valuing the *other*, in which the learning-teaching movement intertwines with the processes of affirming difference and production of coherent paths with social emancipation. Dialogue is stimulated by the asymmetries that make up the classroom, encouraged through the enriching experience of discord, which the presence of the *other* with his difference entails, leading to the possibility of the emergence of new thinking, practices and knowledge.

In the mesh of daily life, classification and exclusion processes are presented, and spaces are created that encourage the redefinition of relationships, to generate alternative forms of power and knowledge, collectively binding together processes, practices, projects and hopes. The assessment process needs to interact with this dynamic, viewing difference as the ideal feature for the production of new possibilities, which effectively contribute towards the learning of all children, without neglecting to pay special attention to the popular classes — historically marginalised and prevented from having their knowledge recognised, enlarged and deepened. It is essential to give emphasis to the assessment processes that can embrace, confront and mobilise different thinking, invent paths and incorporate difference. These possibilities are built into the daily movements in a fragile manner, still on the edge of the hegemonic practices, the validated discourses and the more visible relationships.

The production of a high-quality public school, tied in with the processes of social emancipation, which require that the processes of subalternity production be overcome, continue to challenge us to come up with procedures to assess children's literacy articulated with the commitment towards children's learning.

Endnotes

1. Translator's note: the literal translation of "Provinha Brasil" is "Brazil little exam" and refers to a literacy exam administered to 8-yer-old school children.

2. On this question see Barriga (2004) who deals with the inversions brought about by the exam.

3. On this point see Afonso (2000), Barriga (2004) and Esteban (2008a).

4. Basic Education Assessment System.

5. On the error in the teaching-learning process, see Aquino (1997) and Esteban (2001).

6. Here I use the literacy concept as formulated by Paulo Freire (1981), in which the technical, methodological, social, cultural and political dimensions articulate with one another.

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Translated by Thomas Kundert