



School institutional assessment: concepts, contexts, and practice¹

Avaliação institucional da escola: conceitos, contextos e práticas

Evaluación institucional de la escuela: conceptos, contextos y prácticas

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Abstract: The relevance of assessment processes to meet educational goals and school aims as well as the acknowledgment of the interdependence of the multiple objects of analysis of educational assessment and of their micro, meso, macro and mega sociological structure levels to the implementation of the assessment process in schools are the purposes of the investigation discussed in this article. The qualitative exploratory/document research included a document analysis of books and publications related to educational assessment and school institutional assessment from a sociological perspective paying special attention to school self-assessment. The article is divided into three parts: contemporary educational assessment, school institutional assessment, and school self-assessment and institutional development. Some of the theoretical frameworks about institutional assessment and the possibilities of its implementation in schools are discussed.

Keywords: Institutional assessment. School Self-assessment. Institutional development.

Resumo: A relevância dos processos avaliativos para a concretização dos fins educacionais e da escola e o reconhecimento da interdependência dos múltiplos objetos de análise da avaliação educacional e dos seus níveis de estrutura – micro, meso, macro e megassociológicos – para a efetivação de um processo avaliativo na escola são os propósitos da investigação apresentada neste texto. A pesquisa de cunho qualitativo, exploratória/bibliográfica, teve como procedimento a análise documental de livros e publicações relacionados à avaliação educacional e à avaliação de instituições escolares, numa perspectiva sociológica, com ênfase na autoavaliação da escola. O artigo está estruturado em três partes: avaliação educacional na contemporaneidade, avaliação institucional da escola, e autoavaliação da escola e desenvolvimento institucional. Nelas são discutidos alguns aportes e subsídios teóricos sobre a avaliação institucional e as possibilidades de operacionalizá-la na escola.

Palavras-chave: Avaliação institucional. Autoavaliação de escolas. Desenvolvimento institucional.

Resumen: La relevancia de los procesos evaluativos para la concretización de los fines educacionales, la escuela y el reconocimiento de la interdependencia de los múltiples objetos de análisis de la evaluación educación e de sus niveles de estructura – micro, meso, macro y megasociológico – para la efectución de un proceso evaluativo

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escolar son los propósitos de la investigación presentada en este texto. La pesquisa del tipo cualitativo, exploratoria/bibliográfica, adoptó el procedimiento de análisis documental de libros y publicaciones relacionados a la evaluación educacional y a la evaluación de instituciones escolares, en una perspectiva sociológica, con énfasis en la autoevaluación escolar. El artículo se estructura en tres partes: evaluación educacional en la contemporaneidad, evaluación institucional de la escuela, y autoevaluación escolar y desarrollo institucional. En ellas, se discuten algunas contribuciones y subsidios teóricos sobre la evaluación institucional y las posibilidades de implementarla en la escuela.

Palabras-clave: Evaluación institucional. Autoevaluación escolar. Desarrollo institucional.

Introduction

Socio-economic, political-administrative, scientific-pedagogical, and legal reasons that justify the need for school self-assessment are approached in this theoretical essay aiming to clarify the school institutional assessment importance. It also aims to gather conceptual elements that can contribute, on the one hand, to the understanding of the education and the school assessment to capture the institutional movement, and, on the other hand, to provide a methodological refinement in the field of school assessment, understanding evaluation as a critical analysis of the reality, becomes an invaluable source of information, problematization, and resignification of education processes and, consequently, plays a strategic role in the school institutional development and in education management.

This theoretical essay aims to share part of the existing research production and also introduce the readers and education and assessment researchers some referential theoretical-methodological contribution to the development of further studies, research, and projects related to school assessment and institutional development by means of a logical and reflexive exposure, and a thorough argumentation originated in the research on school assessment, and management and education assessment.

The paper is divided into three parts. The first part surveys the theoretical production on new conceptions and understandings of contemporary education assessment. The second section discusses some theoretical input on the school institutional assessment, its epistemological foundations, and their relations with different contexts and the possibilities of operationalization of the school self-assessment process, considering from the planning phase to the communication of results obtained. The third part addresses the use of results in the school action plan elaboration, that is, the usefulness of the institutional self-assessment.

Education assessment in contemporaneity

The word *avaliação* in Portuguese, assessment/evaluation in English, contains the words 'value' and 'action'; therefore, we should consider this education action value conception. Casali (2007, p.10) defines evaluation, "in general, as *knowing how to place on a daily basis*, in a certain hierarchical order, the *value* of something as *a means* (mediation) for the concretization of the relevant individual(s)' life,

in the context of *cultural values* and, in the limit of *universal values*.”

For that author, assess is to recognize or ascribe a value. When it comes to education values, he advocates that a radically ethical and epistemological posture must be adopted. Values are historically and culturally built, consequently, assessment is historical and cultural. Since value only exists as a mediation reference of a concrete action, the education assessment is not the end of a process, but rather the means to it. There are three spheres of value scope, thus, of assessment: “There are values for an *individual*, for a *culture*, and for the *humankind*. The singular, the partial, and the universal. Assessment is a measure of a value reference in one, or two, or the three spheres.” (CASALI, 2007, p. 13).

That author explains that assessment refers to the determination of merit or value of a given process or its outcomes, either in the sphere of the individual, the culture, or the whole humankind. The complexity inherent in the assessment processes evidences the demands for results from the students’ and schools’ performance, and shows that currently, the education assessment presents a much broader perspective, not only regarding the results of the school performance, but rather including all elements that permeate the teaching-learning process, that is, the education reality as a whole.

Figari (1996) states that, in this education assessment broader sense resides the notion of structure that defines different realities: macrostructures (education systems), mesostructures (schools), and microstructures (classrooms). In the macro and mesostructure space, assessment is usually the process of observation and interpretation of the learning results that aim to guide the decisions needed for the proper functioning of schools, education systems, and to inform the elaboration of public policies.

Following the same reasoning, Al-merindo Afonso (2003) analyzes the education assessment in a *sociological* perspective, *at the following levels*: micro, meso, macro, and mega. The perspective of evaluation defended by that author understands that the “school faces ethical, symbolic, political, social, and pedagogical dimensions that must be considered as a whole by those that hold special responsibilities in the education administration at the state, municipal, and local levels, or even at the individual school level”. (AFONSO, 2003, p. 49).

The assessment microsociological level occurs in the classroom sphere, and includes learning evaluation, which is the teacher’s responsibility. It must have a strongly educational character, be continuous and based on reflection upon the teaching-learning process.

The mesosociological level of assessment is the one involving the analysis of a school institution as a whole, that is, it comprises all components of the educational process: school management and organization, teaching-learning process, curriculum, teachers’ qualification, school infrastructure,

education results, students' socioeconomic profile, school interaction with society, parents' participation, among other school aspects.

The assessment macrosociological level is the one developed at the national level, by agencies external to the school and aims to verify the quality of teaching and education throughout the country. In Brazil, the INEP – Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais (National Institute for Education Studies and Research) coordinates the school external evaluation processes. Some examples of this kind of assessment are *Prova Brasil* (Brazil Examination), the *SAEB – Sistema de Avaliação da Educação Básica* (Basic Education Evaluation System), and the *ENEM – Exame Nacional do Ensino Médio* (High School National Examination).

The evaluation megasociological level is the one developed by international agencies that seek to set performance standards used as reference for the creation of targets and guidelines applied to different countries at a global level. One example is the PISA – Programme for International Student Assessment, coordinated by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development - OECD.

The creation of these more global levels (mega and macro) is owed to the fact that assessment has gained great centrality in public policies by the governmental agencies, particularly in education policies aiming to broaden the state action regarding the control and inspection of schools and education systems. This phenomenon has been pointed out by assessment researchers as the presence of the “Assessor State” in education.

School Institutional Evaluation

The basic school institutional evaluation has not become a consolidated practice in the Brazilian education context yet. The external evaluation promoted by official agencies such as the *SAEB*, and the recent proposals of *Prova Brasil* and *IDEB*, is an assessment of the education system on large scale, which analyses students' proficiency at the end of a school cycle. However, the internal evaluation is carried out inside schools and is not inserted in the various actions developed by them as a systematic analysis of the institutions seeking to identify their weaknesses and strengths and to enable the elaboration of intervention and improvement plans. Studies and research have revealed a gap in the school professionals' education to develop it, due to lack of knowledge regarding institutional assessment theoretical-methodological foundations.

Aiming to contribute to the school professionals' education and also to the operationalization of self-assessment processes, this paper discusses some theoretical-methodological bases of the school institutional assessment, its relations with different contexts, and the possibilities of operationalization of the school self-assessment process.

School assessment: concepts, contexts, and relations

The assessment of school institutions and other education objects evaluated might (or not) be based on the same theoretical foundations. Thus, when addressing the assessment conception adopted in an assessment process, it might be ascribed to the assessment of learning, curriculum, teachers, public policies, programs, projects linked to the assessment of specific school institutions such as basic schools, higher education institutes, universities, among others.

Every institution, mainly in education, presents organic characteristics that justify this correspondence and, consequently, similar bases for the assessment processes. A school institution is understood as a set of processes and relations that are produced daily by the individuals belonging to it: mainly educators and learners.

The institutional assessment in a critical perspective is the one that manages to capture the institutional movement found in the institution relations. Every institution is made of two principles in permanent tension: the instituted and the instituting. Castoriades (1975) explains that the instituted is the set of sedimented and consolidated forces that seek to preserve and reproduce the existing institutional framework. The instituted is the shape. At the same time, the set of forces in constant tension, change, transformation, and recreation is the instituting. The instituting is the field of forces.

The institutional assessment is formally the assessment of the instituted and the instituting. It has to identify concrete aspects, either formal or informal, explicit or implicit, internal or external, which enable the achievement of educational objectives and ends proposed in an institutional project. Therefore, one must consider the whole institutional dynamics to capture the spirit of the assessed institution. In such perspective, the institutional assessment has an educational character and targets the understanding and promotion of the school institution self-awareness.

In contemporary debates about education there is a growing demand on the school performance, because it is considered a social institution that is vital to the current society and to the human development, even if this demand is expressed in varied and contradictory ways. After a period of oscillation of evaluation issues between the *macro* level of the education system and the *micro* level of the classroom, it is exactly the school institution context – *meso* level – that the education innovation proposals, according to Nóvoa (1995), have targeted, believing that it is in the school space that they can be implemented and developed.

However, one of the school institutional evaluation approaches that is presented comprises the one whose directing axis is the organized actions of norms and prerogatives put forward by the federal government, that is, the State becomes an external assessor as already pointed out in this report. Named Assessor State, it controls, monitors, accredits, and offers performance indicators to schools and education systems throughout the country. This modality is usually decided based on

macrostructural reasons that are linked to the need for organizational control at the level of education systems and is known as external institutional assessment.

The external assessment is, therefore, the one in which the evaluation process is carried out by agents from outside the school (belonging to public or private agencies) even if, with the indispensable collaboration of members of the assessed school, and the education community.

Another approach is the one called institution self-assessing or school internal assessment. Unlike the external assessment, it is a kind of evaluation that still requires further theoretical and methodological investigation, mainly in the Brazilian context.

The school institutional assessment is a product of the integration and intertwining of external and internal assessments. School assessment is clearly a complex task that is usually conflicting, since school institutions are organizations, and power is inherent in all organizations. When 'provoking' this power, in a school evaluation process, one interferes with the interests, posture, motivations, and objectives of the school community. The external assessment process must be completed with the institutional self-assessment process and vice-versa. Such *coavaliação* (co-assessment) has been proposed by Santos Guerra (2003), that is, the combination of the external assessment process, which tends to focus on the education process outcomes, and the internal assessment, which focuses on improving the schoolwork internal processes.

It seems relevant to draw attention at this point to the problems that might appear in the school, according to its nature associated with the type of assessment chosen:

- 1) external assessment originated externally (government agencies);
- 2^a) external assessment originated internally (at the school level);
- 3^a) internal assessment originated internally.

In the first type, external assessment originated externally, those being evaluated usually interpret this as an inspection process and control of the schoolwork aiming to set comparative measures, rankings, or even, a characteristic of punishment or reward for worse and better performances. The generation of internal defense mechanisms might occur seeking to give the assessors a distorted image of the school reality.

In the external assessment originated internally, the school might choose an assessor to meet their interests, one that agrees with the philosophy adopted by the school, and the resulting information might be concealed if the outcomes are contrary to the school community expectations and intents.

As for the internal assessment proposed by the school institution, one must be attentive to the several problems that may arise from it: hostility and resistance in relation to the evaluation process, the assessor's ethical professional reliability, the individualist character of the teacher's job,

lack of technical, logistic and time support, eagerness to obtain results, concealment of key information, lack of professional motivation, immersion of the assessor team into the reality being evaluated, internal pressure due to specific interests, institutional inertia, that is, the school culture in itself.

In addition to the aspects already described, another that we consider of great relevance is the qualification of the team working on the assessment process, because few professionals focus their studies on the school assessment field. In such context, lack of knowledge of the theoretical foundation of the institutional assessment, specifically related to basic education, might generate poor planning, objectivity, and credibility within the school community. One must present scientific and technical-methodological competence to guide the school internal assessment development giving it legitimacy.

Schools are more and more characterized as centers of learning for all their members and of their own organization. For being core organizations in current societies, they cannot be oblivious to the changes and transformations around them, either economic, political, scientific, pedagogical, or legal. Therefore, one cannot assess them employing an individualized analysis of each of their elements, but rather observe them as whole, global, and original entities. According to Rocha (1999), the need to evaluate them is due to:

a) Socioeconomic reasons:

- The limitation of financial resources for public expenses, considering the recent and repeated economic crises.
- The society democratization and the development of social participation processes, mainly in the education field.
- The public opinion pressure that is usually supported by a “wild” evaluation based on hearsay, comparison between schools, that is, ranking, or even the public disclosure of results and weaknesses of the education system by the media, which many times do not reflect the reality of schools or the conceptions of assessment programs and projects adopted.

b) Political-administrative reasons:

- The contemporary society has become more demanding regarding the performance of schools and their function of reducing social inequalities. Public powers started to invest more in education and, consequently, to demand from schools to justify such expenses and their destination.
- The increase in the autonomy of schools from the 1990s (nineties) onwards with the society democratization and administrative decentralization, due to the state inefficacy in managing the education system efficiently.

- The legitimacy of democratic governments controlling, within their competences, the performance of schools, questioning them about the efficiency, efficacy, effectiveness, and relevance of their educational action, particularly in public schools.
- In this process, while society becomes more complex, social changes are faster and unpredictable, education systems become larger, and the school-organization becomes the natural means and most relevant to many education changing projects.

c) Scientific-pedagogical reasons:

- New approaches to the school and education problems, introduced by the scientific community as a result of their investigations, for example, appreciation of school contexts, search for explaining factors for the difference in quality between schools, and the shift from a student-centered approach to a school-centered one, and the problematization of the efficacy of education reforms, at both the local and global levels.
- The school assessment progressive consideration as an innovation strategy for the introduction of their own processes of change in the school spaces.
- The evolution of education assessment conceptions, which shifted from a perspective almost exclusively focused on the students and programs, to the appreciation of factors related to the classroom, but also those that allow an action that is more adjusted to other contexts and education targets, seeking better quality of the education processes (practice) and their outcomes (products).

d) Legal reasons:

- Changes in the national law from the enactment of the Lei de Diretrizes e Bases da Educação Nacional LDBEN 9394/96 (National Education Guidelines and Bases Law), which provides for the autonomy of schools and consequent opening for the need for assessment. The law refers to the Organization of the National Education, in article 9th, items V, VI and VIII, emphasizing the evaluation principle as one of the main parts of the education administrative structure.

The reasons presented justify the need for school assessment. It is a new requirement that schools have to adapt to and learn how to develop.

School self-assessment: making sense, producing meanings

The questioning around school assessment has evidenced the need for discussing, on the one hand, the importance of the institutional assessment as a process permeating the education work and the improvement of the school management process; on the other hand, the possibility of institutionalizing assessment practices based on a policy of change and development of the education

quality, taking into account the singularity of each school, not only the burden of preset results, which are standardized by the public agencies, as in the external assessment.

The school self-assessment is the one in which the process is managed and carried out by members of the education community. It can be defined as a systematic analysis of the school aiming to identify its strengths and weaknesses and to enable the elaboration of intervention and improvement plans. It is frequently carried out with the main purpose of following the school pedagogical project, within the frame of an organizational and institutional development dynamics. The assessment inserted in the several actions developed at the school level becomes a mediator of the school community growth, therefore:

The pedagogical project and the institutional assessment are closely related. The inexistence of one of these processes or their separation results in damage to the school. The lack of a pedagogical project that sets the intents of the education action and offers horizons for the school to project its future will result in the lack of reference to the whole work and its basic conceptions. (FERNANDES, 2002, p.58).

Since the internal institutional assessment is not as easy to operate as one could believe or propose, it is not easy to build up ways of self-assessment that manage to deal with the effects and tensions resulting from the plurality of meanings, powers, dilemmas, and perspectives that occur/interact in the school context. The internal institutional assessment, or self-assessment, is a process of search for the school reality, with its trends, knowledge, conflicts, and dilemmas.

It must support the decisions and changes in the education practice. It is dynamic, and for this reason, must gain a place as a process that permeates the school action and the curricular development, thus clarifying the school purposes and its relations with society.

The school-centered institutional assessment presents the following characteristics:

- It is the process through which the school is able to look at itself critically, aiming to improve its performance, through the identification of more problematic areas, and the search for more suitable solutions for the development of the school work;
- It is a permanent investigation of the meaning of the school organization and actions conducted by the professionals that work in that environment;
- It is a process of school improvement, carried out through the construction of referential or through the search for proving facts or evidence for the elaboration of value judgement.
- It is a collective exercise, based on dialogue and confrontation of perspectives regarding the meanings of the school and its organization;
- It is a process of professional development;
- It is a social responsibility act;

- It is an evaluation towards usefulness;
- It is a process conducted internally, but at the same time it can rely on external advice.

Theoretical-methodological approaches of the school self-assessment: Is it a rationalist or a naturalist approach?

To carry out any school assessment process, the choice of an analysis conception is fundamental. Traditionally, two epistemological approaches to the assessment have outstood: the rationalist conception of positivist origin, also called quantitative; and the naturalist approach of a constructivist conception, also known as qualitative. These theoretical perspectives are also valid for the assessment of schools, since they define the scientific structure, the world view, and the philosophy employed in the reading of the social reality being evaluated.

When opting for the quantitative approach, one considers education as a technological process, believing in the objectivity of the evaluation and using the hypothetical-deductive method. The results are better valued than the education processes, the purpose of the assessment is the control, and more value is ascribed to the stable character than to the dynamic character of the education reality. Conversely, the qualitative approach considers education in close connection with values, it questions the objectivity of the assessment and uses more qualitative and broader methods, valuing the education processes rather than its results, considering the improvement as the assessment main aim. In addition, it also places more value on the dynamic and subjective character of the education reality.

Both assessment approaches present some flaws. The rationalist or quantitative seeks to translate the school reality into numbers and measures and runs the risk of deforming it, even if it seems to express it accurately. This occurs because, on the one hand, it undervalues the importance of contexts and very meaningful sources, and on the other hand, it simplifies them, reducing their qualitative multidimensionality into a quantitative unidimensionality.

The naturalist, critical or qualitative approach, even if being currently considered the best approach to the study on the education phenomena, might intensify some intentional subjectivism and generate distorted interpretations of the education reality.

Currently, some scholars (BONNIOL, 2001; FERNANDES, 2002) have pointed out that both the quantitative and the qualitative approaches must be seen as complementary to each other and be used as a function of the assessment process needs. They have argued that, although this practice might require more time, qualification and resources, the effort is worth it to 'obtain the necessary triangulations to support the conclusions and to reach a mutual strength of methods and cater for the plurality and diversities of the initiatives, types, purposes, foci, and objects of assessment'. (ROCHA, 1999, p.49).

Operationalization of the school self-assessment process

Each school can set the phases for the construction of an internal assessment process. To define it, some background choices are needed, such as, what should be evaluated, which dimensions? (objects of analysis or school assessment); - Who can/should evaluate the school? (subjects, work group); - What are the purposes? (objectives); -What are the foci? (conceptions and types of evaluation: external /internal); - How, when, or who, and which resources? (methodology, sources; instruments; data collection, organization, and analysis; schedule); - How to disclose results and propose improvements? (intervention plans).

For these choices to become a plan, it is essential to relate and articulate them with the purpose of and focus on assessment, that is, to set the operationalization of the assessment process.

Fernandes (2002) proposed three phases, which are described below as a suggestion: preparation, implementation, and synthesis.

1) The preparation phase consists in actions that precede the implementation of the assessment process.

- Constitution of the school work team;
- Elaboration of a preliminary school evaluation proposal;
- Discussion of the proposal with the school community;
- Definition of the self-assessment project containing the following elements: justification, theoretical background, objectives, dimensions to be evaluated (assessment objects), methodological procedures, schedule, resources, and references).

(2) Implementation phase – comprises the elaboration and use of data collection instruments, organization and analysis of the information gathered.

- Elaboration, discussion, testing, and application of the data collection instruments;
- Tabulation and organization of the data collected;
- collective discussion of the data collected with the school community.

(3) Synthesis phase – refers to the organized data, which will guide the actions that the school will develop based on the analysis of results by the school community.

- Revision and adjustment of the assessment process;
- Elaboration of conclusion reports;
- Discussion of the results with action proposals;
- Final report publication and dissemination.

To develop self-assessment, the school needs to build up an analysis referential that considers its institutional identity, its subjects, and the purposes of such evaluation. The first step is the definition of the dimensions, analysis categories or subdimensions, and aspects (indicators) to be evaluated. There

is a hierarchy among these words, starting from more general data to more specific ones. They are explained below:

- *Dimensions*: these are points of coverage to be evaluated, the large areas of assessment. They might cover administrative, pedagogical, physical, and structural, or relational aspects.
- *Analysis categories or subdimensions*: these are the basic points inside the dimension chosen for the assessment.
- *Aspects or indicators*: these are small indicator points for the questions in each of the analysis categories.

Although there are different ways of building up an analysis referential for the school self-assessment, we decided to present the referential proposed by Alaiz, Góis, Gonçalves (2003), which indicates six areas or dimensions:

- a) Dimension I – *External context*: the external context variables are not flexible, that is, they are not directly influenced by the school action, but this is one of the assessment areas that is highly important, insofar it enables the school social framing. It can contain the following analysis categories: social, economic, and cultural characterization of the families and students; families' and community's expectations regarding the school work; pressure for quality in the external context perspective exercised by entities or groups outside the school such as secretariats, regional offices, parents' association, or other institutions.
- b) Dimension II – *Internal context*: this dimension corresponds to, in a simple language, "conditions in which the school tells the history of the school institution; physical resources; curricular structure; teachers; administrative staff, and students.
- c) Dimension III – *Organization and management*: the analysis categories that are part of the organization and management refer to the school pedagogical proposal and its execution, and evaluations.
- d) Dimension IV – *Teaching and Learning*: the assessment analysis categories contemplated in the teaching and learning area appear in the work developed in the classroom.
- e) Dimension V – *School culture*: the categories associated with the school culture might include: institutional identity; emphasis on teaching and learning; participation in the decision making process; teachers' motivations; expectations regarding students' performance, teamwork, professional learning and development, acknowledgement of the school professionals and the school itself; discipline and security in the school, how pleasant the school space is, and relationship with the school community.
- f) Dimension VI – *Education results*: students' results are measures of the school performance. Ultimately, they reflect the quality of the intermediate results observed in the remaining areas.

It might include the following analysis categories: quality of the success (internal rankings, result statistics, standardized tests, other non-academic results), and schooling conclusion.

The school can be assessed considering the six dimensions presented or those considered most necessary can be chosen. However, it is vital to start from a diagnostic evaluation of all dimensions and, from the results achieved, develop new assessment phases inside the school.

Instruments: elaboration and use

After defining the dimensions, analysis categories, and indicators, instruments and techniques for data collection must be chosen to be employed in the self-assessment process – these include: questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, observation, portfolio, seminars, file research, document analysis, quantitative analysis, and reports, among others, which can be applied collectively or individually.

The instruments selected must be suitable to the dimensions, categories, and indicators proposed in the project. One must consider that no assessment instrument is complete, therefore, the types chosen should complete each other.

Once the procedures have been defined, the information source for data collection must be chosen, these might include: documents, projects, plans, school regulations, managers, teachers, students, parents, workers, members of the school administration, and members of the external community, among others.

The instrument application phase for data collection is the most difficult part of the research, which is to confront the assessment subjects, that is, the target audience. It is the project implementation phase, probation, confront with reality, observation of imperfections, and adjustments that guarantee the assessment validity.

If this were a process of a love relationship, we could say that when the romantic phase finishes, in which enchantment and enthusiasm are very high, the assessment is the best way of knowing the school and can be very useful. Apparently, nothing like that has ever been done at the school, and then comes the crisis phase, during which one can find out that not everything is perfect or easy – To evaluate, it is necessary to master the techniques, chose instruments carefully, overcome difficulties, and manage conflicts. (ALAIZ, GÓIS, GONÇALVES,2003, p. 97)

Those authors complement by stating that this is the moment to notice whether there is motivation and enthusiasm of the participants to contribute with their perceptions on the aspects addressed in the school assessment. The data collection can be carried out without disturbing others and with professionalism since the school does not stop just because it is going through a self-assessment process. Therefore, group discussions, interviews, questionnaires, and observations must

be carried out at times when they will provoke the least alteration in the routine of their respondents, and nobody should neglect their usual work due to the school assessment.

Data treatment, analysis, and interpretation

Depending on the nature of the data collected and the assessment questions, it is possible to opt for a specific analysis process. Quantitative data, for example, should be subjected to statistical analysis, while the qualitative information might be presented in descriptions, but could also be subjected to content analysis. Before starting the data treatment, the gross data must be verified and prepared for the first analysis, which is usually employed to 'clean/refine' the data.

Next, comes the analysis, integrating and synthesizing results. The data analysis work consists in reducing or summarizing them in tables, graphs, structured summaries according to the analysis categories, synopsis, register of short episodes, or diagrams showing the relation between them. These are presentations of the data collected by the instruments in a synthesized way, which allow a first analysis, in which one cannot forget the objectives and assessment questions initially proposed. This phase produces the first trends, the first images of the school, not yet articulated in a global image, these are the preliminary results. They usually originate more questions, either because there is a combination of unpredicted or unforeseen information, which implies a new view of the original data.

When this phase is concluded, the results must be organized according to the dimensions, categories, and indicators proposed in the self-assessment project. Thus, the images of the school are revealed.

Obtaining this portrait is a moment of celebration in the development of the assessment process. On the one hand, because this portrait of the school was achieved. On the other hand, because these results are raw material for the hardest moment of the process, that is, the data interpretation and consequent elaboration of conclusions and recommendations. That is the moment when the usefulness of the self-assessment is observed, but it is also the moment of all conflicts. (ALAIZ, GÓIS, GONÇALVES, 2003, p. 102).

The meanings of these results express the school collective thought of those that took part in the assessment process. The data does not speak by itself, therefore, it must be interpreted, that is, one must establish the extent to which the results are positive or negative, represent success or failure, strengths or weaknesses, thus showing the school potential and flaws, and the areas where the school needs to improve.

The dissemination of the results to the school community is vital to legitimate the assessment process. They must be presented, disclosed, and debated broadly, creating opportunities of manifestation of viewpoints and the revision of conclusions. At this point, the discussions add

contributions that help deepen the interpretation. A report must necessarily answer three questions: What are the assessment results? How were these results obtained? Considering the results, what can be done to improve? Therefore, a school self-assessment report is not only a document in which the school describes itself, but rather a work instrument to base the analysis of what can be done to improve the whole context.

Even if the process theoretical-methodological option must be chosen by the school, the work must be started with a collective project preparation plan, followed by its implementation and synthesis of the results obtained. It is an assessment cycle that involves different moments that enable the constructions of a school portrait to analyze it based on valid and reliable evidence, extracting from the self-assessment whatever gives meaning to the school life, as well as its usefulness for the creation of internal improvement proposals towards institutional development.

School self-assessment and institutional development

The school self-assessment is a necessary process to understand the institutional dynamics, which might and should be useful for the school, provided that is not only translated in the identification of strengths and weaknesses, but also in the elaboration of recommendations that must be considered in the proposition of qualitative improvement for the institution.

This includes the use of results to elaborate action plans for the school development. It is, therefore, in the mobilization of results that resides the usefulness of the self-assessment.

A school development plan is a document that contains the school collective intentions, reflecting their view of the future, and the necessary school development. It identifies the action priorities and sets targets and ways to achieve them. Bolívar (2003) argues that the school institution improvement needs to reach the whole school, with an intersection at three levels: school development as an organization, teachers' development, and curriculum development. The curriculum and school organization development constitutes an inseparable field.

Professional development is understood as a continuous learning process, which provokes changes in the teacher's professional action, through the way they ascribe meaning to their experiences and how these experiences influence their daily practice; however, depending on how much the personal and professional development is conditioned by the *school context* as the workplace and relationships, their education is guided to the concretization of a close articulation between education practices and work context, optimizing the education dimension of the work processes, upon a reflective and academic learning (BOLÍVAR, 2003, p. 68).

In that author's understanding, teachers' professional development and the school institutional development must walk together since one does not exist without the other. The possibility of institutional development is attached to the internal ability of change, which is different in each school,

considering their history, identity, and singularity, and is conditioned to the education policy and the social context in which it is inserted. Institutional development is seen as “changes in schools as institutions that develop their abilities and actions aiming at permanent improvement”. (FULLAN, 1992, apud BOLÍVAR, 2003, p.75).

The school development plan as an institution must be understood as a set of necessary actions of planning and management of the school growth, its continuous improvement, which assumes the strengthening of its institutional ability in internal processes of work at the school and decision about changes to be implemented.

The elaboration of an institutional development plan might be guided by the following questions: Which changes do we need to implement? How can these changes be managed over time? How can we know the effects or impacts of the measures adopted?

According to Alaíz, Góis and Gonçalves (2003), the elaboration and development of an institutional development plan involve four phases: self-assessment or audit, planning, implementation, and evaluation. The first phase comprises the analysis of the self-assessment results, identifying the schools’ strengths and weaknesses.

In the second phase, the selection of priorities for the school action is carried out, transforming them into specific targets, and defining strategies and criteria to achieve them. The implementation of a development plan constitutes the third phase; it must secure that the plan is followed and that the actions proposed are being developed. The fourth phase evaluates the success of the measures implemented, and recommendations are proposed for changes in the plan or for the construction of a new project. It seems relevant to emphasize that the evaluation must occur along the plan development process, in a proactive, educational, and reflexive perspective enabling the introduction of the necessary adjustments during its implementation.

To sum up, the elaboration of a school institutional development plan should include the following procedures:

- Respect for the social context, considering the education policy guidelines, the school pedagogical project, the school community characteristics, and the needed and available resources;
- Consultation and decision about the priorities, elaborating the plan in a collective, democratic, and negotiated way;
- Writing and dissemination of the plan, clarifying its articulation with the school objectives and purposes, justifying the selection of priorities and the methodology or resources involved.

The institutional development plan, however, is not an end in itself; it is an operational document, a guide for the school action in its improvement process. Its elaboration also becomes an opportunity for the school and its professional team to develop because:

- It is centered in the school objectives, mainly the teaching and learning processes;
- It enables an integrated approach to all the school dimensions, namely, curriculum, learning, evaluation, teaching, management, organization, internal context, external context, learning outcomes, and the school external assessment results;
- It provides a view to the school future, in the long run, in which short term specific objectives are framed, representing the priorities of the institutional development plan.
- It helps to overcome the teachers' anxiety, because they can better control the change instead of being controlled by it.
- It allows greater valorization and recognition of the teachers' work and of the teachers' performance in the promotion of change.
- It improves the quality of the institution and of those working for it, because the collective reflections, discussions, and decisions, on the one hand, help the school to work more efficiently and, on the other hand, help the teachers to acquire knowledges and competencies as part of their professional development.
- It strengthens the interpersonal relationships at the school, mainly those between the management team and the teachers.
- It improves substantially the quality of the education process and the school management.

Finally, the institutional development plan is the school strategic document since it allows the institution to look critically at itself, that is, at the concretization of its main objectives and the educational purposes related to teaching and learning. And, as a contextualized document, it allows the institution to interpret the internal dynamics and integrate them in its life and culture.

Final Remarks

The theoretical reflections presented in this paper focused on the school assessment and the institutional development, that is, the relation between assessment at/of the school and the education quality. We aimed to elaborate theoretically issues related to the basic school institutional assessment, emphasizing the school self-assessment.

We discussed the education assessment in the contemporaneity, situating the scientific debate about its objects of analysis and theoretical-methodological postures.

We believe that this study is fundamental to both highlighting the importance of education assessment for the concretization of the education and the school purposes and raising awareness of the interdependence of the multiple objects of analysis of the education assessment and its structure levels— micro, meso, macro, and megasociological – to implement an assessment process at the school level.

The importance of the school professionals' understanding that an assessment process developed in a critical posture is essential to capture the school institutional movement and contribute to its institutional development became evident in the dialogues with the authors chosen and with the theoretical reflections promoted.

The analysis of the theoretical-methodological characteristics and approaches to the institutional self-assessment process evidenced that the school that goes through an assessment process adopting a critical posture becomes more aware of its identity and follows its own institutional dynamics.

We expect that the literature review presented points out new paths to both the development of new studies and the implementation of assessment processes in schools, mainly institutional self-assessment. If this process is developed in association with the school subjects, it creates possibilities of self-knowledge and actions towards the institutional development, making sense and producing meanings to both the education processes and the school community.

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