

Nuances of “Evaluation” as a Quality Indicator in Curricular Documents for Brazilian High School

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Abstract: This article analyzes the role of national curricular documents established from the educational reform of the 1990s and the impact of evaluation on Brazilian Basic Education. The analysis focuses on Law 13.415/17 (BRAZIL, 2017) and the National Common Curricular Base for High School (BNCCEM) (BRAZIL, 2017), using “evaluation” as the central category. The research considers the curricular documents in their prescriptive form, identifying factual and contextual information. The hypothesis is that the reorientation of evaluation, introduced in the curricular reform of the 1990s, was a primary strategy to incorporate the Theory of Competencies, reflecting economic influences in the educational field. The BNCCEM establishes guidelines for increasing the workload and organizing formative itineraries, discursively encouraging school autonomy. The analysis highlights the overvaluation of classificatory mechanisms and competition, criticizing the reduction of education to an economic activity. The reorientation of evaluation promoted meritocracy and ranking, contradicting the democratic discourse of collective construction of curricular policy. This focus limits the integral development of individuals, emphasizing the need to rethink educational policies to balance the pursuit of academic excellence with the promotion of humanitarian and democratic values.

Key words: evaluation, curriculum, competencies, basic education

1. Introduction

This text aims to present analyses regarding the role of national curricular documents proposed from the educational reform of the 1990s and the impact produced from the perspective of the role played by evaluation in Brazilian Basic Education. For the analysis, we selected the curricular documents in their prescriptive form, considering them as instances of formation, expressed in explicit educational objectives and institutionalized, structured, and systematic intentional action.

The documents involved in this analysis are: Law 13.415/17 (BRAZIL, 2017) and the National Common Curricular Base for High School - BNCCEM (BRAZIL, 2018). From these documents, “evaluation” is taken as a category of analysis, aiming to identify the nuances of official curricular discourse production.

Documental analysis, according to Ludke and André (1986, p. 38), seeks to identify factual information in the documents based on questions or hypotheses of interest. This analysis allows for studies and analyses of documents to identify related circumstances (social, economic, political, cultural) (Freitas, 2003). According to

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Cellard (2008, p. 299), documental analysis must include the study of the context of document production, including the author, the social actors involved, the reliability of the document, its nature, and internal logic.

We hypothesize that, starting from the curricular reform of the 1990s, the reorientation of evaluation represented one of the main ways to incorporate the Theory of Competencies, recontextualizing the influence of economic assumptions in the educational field.

2. Evaluation in the Perspective of Curricular Documents

The guidelines for the schooling process present in Law 13.415/17 (BRAZIL, 2017) indicate reforms that prioritize the improvement of student performance in large-scale assessments. According to Article 6, the Union will establish performance standards that will serve as references in national assessment processes, guided by the propositions of the National Common Curricular Base (BRAZIL, 2017).

It is up to the educational networks to organize processual and formative evaluation processes, managing the contents considered valid and the methodologies, through theoretical and practical activities, written and oral exams, seminars, projects, and online activities, so that upon completing high school, the student demonstrates mastery of the scientific and technological principles that underpin modern production, as well as contemporary forms of language (BRAZIL, 2017).

The evaluation assumptions for the schooling process consolidate in a context where there is an overvaluation of classificatory mechanisms (rankings), which serve to reinforce the principles of competition within and among the institutions themselves, widely defended by economic agents. Therefore, one of the main justifications used in defense of conservative restoration is the supposed need to reverse the stagnation in the Basic Education Development Index (IDEB) scores.

The National Common Curricular Base for High School (BNCCEM) (BRAZIL, 2018) organizes the schooling process by establishing the minimum workload for daytime and nighttime high school. It proposes that the daytime high school journey be extended from 2,400 hours to 3,000 hours by the beginning of the 2022 school year. However, in nighttime high school, students face more acute dilemmas related to permanence and success, dealing with issues of commuting and employment. To address these demands, the pedagogical proposal suggests extending the course for more than three years, with a lower daily and annual workload, ensuring a minimum total of 2,400 hours until 2021 and 3,000 hours from the 2022 school year, as defined by the National Curricular Guidelines for High School (DCNEM) (BRAZIL, 2012).

The BNCCEM proposal encourages schools and educational networks to exercise their autonomy to systematize their formative itineraries, making it mandatory for each school to offer at least one itinerary. To ensure equal opportunities for students, each municipality must offer at least two itineraries. The structuring of the itineraries, a function assigned by the DCNEM, is defined by the Ministry of Education (MEC) after the Base is voted on by the National Education Council (CNE) and the document is approved, which provides an implementation guide.

Discursively, the diversification of formative itineraries responds to the demands of student heterogeneity and plurality, enabling their needs to be met (BRAZIL, 2018). The itineraries are considered strategic elements for curricular flexibility, as provided by law (BRAZIL, 2018). The new curricular structure highlights youth protagonism, offering spaces for action and choice through the formative itineraries, which align with the perspective of flexible curricula, replacing the single curriculum model.

As mentioned previously, according to the text itself, the BNCC does not constitute the high school curriculum but defines the essential learnings to be guaranteed to all students and guides the (re)elaboration of curricula and pedagogical proposals, both in relation to the specific scope of the BNCC and concerning the organization and proposal of formative itineraries (BRAZIL, 2018, p. 471).

With these guidelines in hand, the educational systems and school units are responsible for constructing curricula and pedagogical proposals, recognizing local peculiarities. However, the curricular organization based on the BNCC remains in: “I – languages and their technologies; II – mathematics and its technologies; III – natural sciences and their technologies; IV – applied human and social sciences; and, V – technical and professional training” (BRAZIL, 2018, p. 467).

Among the possibilities for operationalizing the high school schooling process, it is foreseen that educational networks offer part of the teaching in a distance learning modality, but this depends on the State Education Council, responsible for articulating discussions and approving the proposal, as well as ensuring the existence of necessary material conditions (such as technological and pedagogical support).

Most classes remain being taught in person. In daytime high school, the limit for distance learning is up to 20% of the total hours and is preferably adopted in formative itineraries. If the total hours reach 3,000, 600 can be taught at a distance. In nighttime high school, the limit extends to up to 30%, but reaching 3,000 hours, 900 hours can be authorized at a distance.

It is worth mentioning that the approval of the BNCCEM at the end of 2018 implies changes in the National High School Exam (ENEM), with announcements based on changes for the 2021 school year. Additionally, the evaluation process remains with a duration of two days, with the first day reserved for evaluating competencies and skills in the four curricular organization areas (languages, mathematics, natural sciences, and human sciences), and the second day dedicated to evaluating the formative itineraries.

3. Evaluation as a Quality Indicator

According to Oliveira (2009), in recent decades, educational reforms and policies implemented in Brazil have focused on increasing the educational level of the workforce and improving the quality of education in educational institutions. The primary goal of these initiatives is to meet the demands of the market and productive capital, promoting competitiveness, efficiency, and productivity. This approach reveals a market-based criterion of educational quality, expressed in the concept of total quality (Oliveira, 2009, p. 241).

The classifications resulting from evaluation tests express the power relations involved in defining what is or is not considered legitimate. In evaluations, specifically in their results, there is the power to label with or without “quality”. Quality is discussed in terms of position on the scale, in ranking lists (Sacristán, 2011, p. 21).

It is undeniable that the choice of the concept of competence represents an interesting step towards seeking more complete, acceptable, and precise indicators that reflect relevant educational effects. This choice indicates a decisive change in the external evaluations of educational systems. Firstly, diagnostics have more informative value about the processes, but they must submit to their operationalization. Secondly, when dealing with qualities, or traits that become the quality of individuals, they are not directly observable; this, then, makes it more problematic to develop tests and apply general research on educational systems. The contradiction arises between wanting to gain complexity in planning to respond to general complexity without abandoning the positivist assumptions that only what is measured counts (Sacristán, 2011, p. 24).

We consider it incoherent to discuss the quality of knowledge only because it can be evaluated. The concept of quality was neither defined nor explicitly explained in more depth in the curricular texts. It is not merely a technical issue but a political one; the notion of quality cannot be separated from power relations, interests, and domination, as it is tied to the adoption of economic and social policies that address the root causes of inferior educational performances of excluded and marginalized groups.

The analysis of the documents corroborates the hypothesis that the reorientation of evaluation processes has become one of the main strategies to incorporate the Theory of Competencies into the curriculum field, which in turn translates economic ideals into the educational field. The notion of competence, central in curricular prescriptions, is closely related to the concepts of competition and competitiveness. The ideas of the Theory of Competencies gained prominence in the elaboration of national curricular documents in the 1990s, but it was through evaluation processes that the notion of competence became central in discussions about quality, especially with exams like the National High School Exam (ENEM).

Theoretically, evaluation should be a consequence of knowledge construction. However, the established logic promotes evaluation as a matrix for organizing pedagogical work, reinforcing meritocratic and ranking logics, contradicting the democratic discourse of collective construction of curricular policy. Hargreaves (2003) highlights the worrying trend of prioritizing academic results over humanitarian and democratic values, pointing to a reality where educational reform policies focus excessively on quantifiable aspects, neglecting civic education and the holistic development of individuals.

This limited focus reflects a model that values academic success as the sole indicator of educational effectiveness, relegating crucial aspects such as the promotion of humanitarian values, the exercise of democracy, and active participation in public life. Hargreaves criticizes this reductionist view, showing how it omits the essence of education: forming critical, conscious citizens prepared to contribute significantly to society. This observation invites us to question the type of society we are building with an education so focused on quantitative results and detached from values that sustain social cohesion and progress, revealing the urgent need to rethink educational policies.

According to Oliveira (2009, p. 242), evaluation has taken on a more classificatory purpose and is less focused on formative diagnosis, aiming to encourage competition and improve performance through financial incentives. The curriculum was directed towards developing the skills and abilities necessary for a versatile and flexible worker, resulting in greater individualization and responsibility for success or failure in their school and professional trajectories. Management incorporated principles, values, and techniques from the private sector, such as efficiency, productivity, and work control, adopting a school-business profile, where the primary concern is performance, management, control, and results.

Educational funding was decentralized, redistributed, and used as a regulation mechanism for educational systems and school work production. Teachers became more directly accountable for student performance, with their pedagogical activities being more regulated and controlled, and their performance more linked to the idea of competency certification and financial incentives or punishments.

The national evaluation policy, which elected large-scale test results as the criterion for ranking and quality parameter for schools and educational networks, highlighted the pressure and control exerted on these institutions. According to Apple (2005, pp. 40–41), there is a “constant pressure for ‘performance’ to occur in our educational institutions according to imposed and generally reductionist standards.” These factors are the effects that this escalation of constant pressures has provoked in the field of education.

Measurement tests were taken as verification instruments for educational policies and the funding allocated to them, regarding failure, success, management, school foundation, state control, and private administration. “Unfortunately, it is very frequent that the most used forms to evaluate the ‘success’ of educational reforms are standardized test results. This simply does not serve.” (APPLE, 2003, p. 92).

Standardized evaluations end up contradicting the founding premise for organizing curricular documents provided in the Federal Constitution of 1988, to integrate a national common base with the specificities of diversified art, since it is practically impossible to formulate a single evaluation that can be fair to all regions of the country. This triggers a broad process of massification and flawed measurement of curricular knowledge. However, unified evaluations do not contemplate regional, theoretical diversities, among others.

4. Summarizing

The propositions in the documents initiate a discussion about evaluation aimed at improving the quality of schooling. The various forms provided for operationalizing the evaluation processes aim to achieve “good” quality indicators. These indicators, pursuing the development of competencies and skills, are based on a core set of content at all stages of the teaching-learning process, as well as at different levels of curricular implementation. Evaluation becomes indispensable to affirm common endpoints in all schools.

The challenge lies in balancing the pursuit of academic excellence with the formation of humanitarian and democratic values. This implies recognizing education as a holistic process that not only transfers knowledge but also promotes critical thinking and encourages active participation in public life. Only in this way can we ensure that education fulfills its fundamental role of preparing individuals not only for personal success but also to contribute to the construction of a more just, equitable, and democratic society.

In the tightening link between results and quality measurement, evaluations have lost their social dimension and aligned with productivist principles, which ultimately guided the forging of educational policies. Standardized evaluations contradict the foundational premise for organizing curricular documents provided in the Federal Constitution of 1988, to integrate a national common base with the specificities of diversified art, as it was practically impossible to formulate a single evaluation that could be fair to all regions of the country. This triggered a broad process of massification and flawed measurement of curricular knowledge since unified evaluations do not contemplate regional, theoretical diversities, among others.

The autonomy of the federal entities was challenged, mainly with national evaluation policies, which required alignment with official propositions. A national-scale evaluation made it impractical to consider elements of the diversified part, which ends up being devalued in the network’s proposals.

Discourses present in the curricular documents, such as the valorization of competencies, integrated curriculum, decentralized school management, and evaluation as a guarantee of quality (LOPES, 2004), imprinted on the quality of national education, were not produced by educators but by so-called managerialists (economists, administrators, executives, among others), aiming at governance control.

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