

Assessment of schools in Brazil: some reflections

Ana Canen

Department of Educational Studies, Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ),
acanen@globo.com

Abstract

This article provides an overview of how the challenges of assessing pupils' outcomes and schools' performances have been tackled in Brazil, through the analysis of assessment policies and legislation of basic (primary and secondary) education. It then discusses those policies in the light of a multicultural theoretical perspective. It argues for the need for a framework for assessment of education based on multicultural and ecological dimensions that recognizes cultural diversity and the complexity of educational factors that impinge on pupils' academic outcomes, in Brazil and elsewhere.

Key words: assessment of schools, Brazil, multicultural and ecological perspectives, comparative national case study.

Introduction

Assessment is a contentious theme, as it involves the judging of the value of actions and practices, based on philosophically and politically embedded criteria. Assessment of education, both at school and higher education levels, implies choices and challenges involving criteria, emphasis and the focus of the evaluation process, in order to judge the extent to which educational systems have been contributing to the preparation of citizens for a globalized, highly technologized and yet culturally diverse world.

This article will firstly provide a contextual overview of how those challenges have lately been tackled in Brazil, through the analysis of assessment policies and legislation of basic (primary and secondary) education. It then will discuss those policies in the light of a multicultural theoretical perspective, arguing for the need for a framework for assessment of education based on multicultural and ecological dimensions that recognizes cultural diversity and the complexity of educational factors that impinge on pupils' academic outcomes, in Brazil and elsewhere.

Assessment of schools in Brazil: an overview

Assessment of schools and higher education in Brazil has been increasingly highlighted as a government policy from the 1990s onwards. Following the democratization process at the end of the 1980s, the Brazilian constitution of 1988 (Brazil, 1988) and the Brazilian Law for National Education in 1996 (Brazil, 1996) have stressed the importance of assessing educational systems in order to promote efficient and yet democratic and equitable education for Brazilian students.

Being part of an increasingly globalised world, successive democratic governments in Brazil, from the 1990s onwards, participated in international large-scale assessment initiatives that showed that Brazilian students, when compared to other countries, need to have their competencies and abilities boosted, both in language and mathematics. Likewise, studies in Brazil evidenced that pupils spent a long time in school but still left without acquiring those skills, challenging a hitherto view that early drop-outs were

responsible for that situation. Furthermore, even though economic growth in Brazil has been attained up to now, an even better qualified workforce needs to be fostered by a sound educational system.

Such factors have fed the rationale for what constitutes assessment of schools in Brazil today, with a move towards central government policies that place a strong emphasis on standardized assessment systems.

It should be noted that Brazil is a big and culturally diverse country, being the fifth largest country in the world and the biggest in South America, with a population of 190 million people. It is divided into 26 states, and one federal district (Brasilia), each of which are divided into several districts or municipalities. The public educational system is characterised by three levels: federal schools, consisting of technical and application (academic?) schools generally linked to higher education institutions, state schools providing secondary education, and municipal schools, responsible for child and primary education. In years of study, primary education in Brazil takes 9 years, secondary education 3 years, and higher education varies between undergraduate courses, - ranging between 4 and 7 years, depending on the profession - and short technological courses, ranging between two and three academic years. Primary and secondary schooling have been called **Basic Education**.

In order to assess Basic Education, successive governments in Brazil, from the 1990s onwards, have instituted large scale standard-based assessment initiatives that have evolved to the ones that are in place at present. In that sense, as from 1995 onwards Brazilian government has been using the **SAEB** (*Sistema de Avaliação da Educação Básica*) - **the system of assessment of Basic Education** (Brazil, 2011a), which is a large scale, standardized assessment exam administered by the Ministry of Education, and supported by committees of educational specialists, which assesses a sample of pupils of the 5th and 9th grades of primary schools and the 3rd grade of secondary education, the sample including public and private schools, both in urban and rural areas.

The relevance attributed to standardized evaluation led the government to decide that the **SAEB** should be applied to all primary school pupils, thus calling it **Prova Brasil** (Brazil Exam) (Brazil, 2011b), which is in its fourth edition now, having been first applied in 2005. **Prova Brasil** assesses all pupils of 5th and 9th grades from urban public schools in Brazil; as for the rural and private sectors, **Prova Brasil** has been applied only to a sample of pupils, with the same methodology as the **SAEB**.

As explained in government websites (<http://portal.mec.gov.br>), both the **SAEB** and the **Prova Brasil** have been developed based on federal, state and municipal curricular guidelines, from which a “reference matrix” has been developed that is far from encompassing the whole school curriculum, but nevertheless contains competencies and abilities derived from it, expressed in the format of descriptors. These exams assess Portuguese language and Mathematics in Portuguese, the emphasis in the former being on abilities in reading (with 15 descriptors for the 5th grade and 21 for the 9th grade), and in Maths the emphasis being on abilities related to problem solving, ideas of space and shape, numbers and operations, and measurements and information interpretations (with 28 descriptors for the 5th grade and 37 for the 9th grade).

As expressed in the government documentation (Brazil, 2011a, b), the aim is not to assess each student, but the system itself. The result is provided and publicized to each school through the government site, providing a grade in which the abilities mastered by pupils are highlighted, as well as those which need to be boosted by the schools. Likewise, each school has access to the results of both the state and the municipality average results, and is therefore able to compare its performance relative to those, as well as in relation to its own performance in previous academic years.

The *Prova Brasil* and the *SAEB* are considered as diagnostic assessment instruments developed by the *Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais Anísio Teixeira (Inep/MEC)* – National Institute of Educational Studies and Research Anísio Teixeira, with the objective of assessing the quality of education offered by the Brazilian educational system. In order to take into account social, cultural and economic diversity, socioeconomic questionnaires have also been applied in which pupils provide contextual information that would likely be associated with their performance. Teachers and school administrators also respond to questionnaires, so that the evaluation system can detect school diversity as well, particularly concerning demographic data, professional profiles and working conditions.

As explained in government documentation, *SAEB* and *Prova Brasil* are therefore complementary assessment instruments. Based on the information provided by them, the Ministry of Education and the state and municipal educational authorities can better define actions towards improving quality education and minimise existing inequalities, applying their financial and technical resources in ways that address failures and define priorities for improvement strategies.

In fact, the *Prova Brasil* and the *SAEB* are part of a package by which government constructs an assessment index that provides a “final grade” for each school in every assessment period (namely every two years), called *IDEB – Índice de Desenvolvimento da Educação Básica* (Index of the Development of Basic Education). That index was created in 2007 in order to measure the overall quality of each school in the Brazilian system, to foster municipal and state systems to undertake and attain goals in order to improve their performance.

The *IDEB* index provides the school grade, ranging from 0 to 10. It is based on a mathematical equation that incorporates variables related to that quality as perceived by government rationale. That way, the *IDEB* of a school or of a system will show whether pupils have mastered abilities and competencies deemed necessary relative to national curricular guidelines and expressed in the *SAEB* and in the *Prova Brasil* results. Also, the *IDEB* will reflect whether pupils have or have not succeeded in passing the academic year, that is, the index will show whether they have not failed or repeated the year, as well as whether they have or have not dropped out of school before concluding basic education. In that way, assessment instruments provided by the Ministry of Education to be filled in by schools all over Brazil should arguably show the extent to which school management has been committed both to ensure pupils’ attendance and avoidance of dropping out, as well as how effectively it has engendered a school climate propitious to efficient curriculum development, all of those to be reflected in the *IDEB*, thereby generating the school final grade.

According to the government documentation (<http://portal.mec.gov.br>), the *IDEB* of a school or a system (state, municipal) should be higher if and when pupils effectively learn; do not fail (that is, if they do not repeat the year); and if they do not drop out of school. It should be noted that the Brazil *Plano de Desenvolvimento da Educação (PDE)* – Educational Development Plan for Basic Education (2012 – 2022), which has been finalized and is being discussed by Brazilian Congress, has established the grade

6.0 as the main goal for the *Brazil IDEB* by 2022, that grade being considered as representing a good quality educational system, comparable to most developed countries.

Concerning secondary education, apart from the *SAEB*, government has been applying the *ENEM* - *Exame Nacional do Ensino Médio* (National Exam of Secondary Education) (Brazil, 2011c), another large scale exam for students who wish to sit it at the exit point of secondary education (therefore the *ENEM* has a voluntary perspective, not being mandatory for students or schools). Whereas it had been created in order for government to assess the quality of secondary schooling, it has been twisted into a source for a schools' league table, published in newspapers, intended to inform parents about the quality of schools. But this somehow oversimplifies the view concerning the meaning of that quality, since such a partial assessment of secondary education reflects solely the extent to which secondary students perform well in competencies and abilities of a reference matrix which is far from representing the complexities and richness of the secondary school curriculum within a culturally diverse context such as the Brazilian one.

It should be pointed out that many higher education (HE) institutions in Brazil - both private and public ones - have been opting to incorporate students' grades in the *ENEM*, either partially or as a sole assessment basis for admission to their courses. In fact, government has been encouraging HE institutions towards adopting the *ENEM* as their only criteria for HE access, at their discretion, since legislation guarantees HE autonomy in determining their access policies. It should be pointed out that one of the biggest and most important Universities in Brazil – the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro - has just decided to embark on that decision relative to incorporating the results of the *ENEM* as the sole entrance exam for the 2012 students' admission process, instead of providing its hitherto own entry exams.

Government documentation contends that by adopting the *ENEM*, Federal Universities in Brazil should arguably be contributing to equality of educational opportunities of access to HE. That is due to the fact that a single *ENEM* exam for all the institutions in Brazil that opted to incorporate it (as opposed to the varied exams each HE institution used to apply in order to decide which students were deemed fit to be admitted to their courses) means that students can list their preferred HE institution and, depending on their results in the exam, effectively be admitted to those HE institutions whose vacancies have not been filled, even outside of their own municipalities or states.

In the same perspective as *Prova Brasil* and the *SAEB*, the *ENEM* exam has had its construction based on a reference matrix formed by cognitive abilities (that underlie all areas of knowledge), language competencies, critical reasoning abilities, problem solving, understanding of natural phenomena, and capacity to advance projects and innovative proposals. However, as *ENEM* has grown from its initial goal of assessing secondary education towards representing an admission exam for HE, including the very prestigious Federal Universities, it could be influenced by those universities' views on standards for entry, which may change its reference matrix towards a more content-based approach. However, it should be noted that not all of HE institutions in Brazil have decided to adopt the *ENEM* as the only entrance criteria, but that trend has been more and more prevalent in HE in Brazil.

Making sense of assessment policies: towards a multicultural, ecological perspective

The assessment policies in Brazil, as described above, can be viewed from many angles and perspectives. In fact, assessment is far from being a neutral process. It has been acquiring different connotations and

emphases throughout its history, either enhancing a pseudo-objectivist perspective or highlighting the political and even the subjective nature of assessment processes (Guba & Lincoln, 2003). In a multicultural perspective, assessment should arguably balance instruments that assess more universalized aspects with other more diverse, singular instruments and indicators that take the cultural diversity of students, educational institutions, schools and systems into account (Canen, 2004, 2005, 2009; Canen & Canen, 2005, 2008, 2010).

In fact, when considering assessment policies, it is important to note the extent to which they can channel practices and meanings into some common, homogenized approaches that may constrain school climate and cultural diversity if not accompanied by other assessment instruments that value plural schools and students' identities. In the Brazilian case, it is interesting to point out that homogenized exams have been applied together with socio-economic questionnaires that are intended, together, to address school and pupils' diversity and their impact on pupils' outcomes, as discussed in the last section, thus attempting to balance the universal with culturally diverse perspectives in assessment. Diversity and flexibility are also highlighted in such Brazilian policies, inasmuch as states and municipalities are free to develop their own curricular designs and teacher-training programmes in order to meet the required standards.

However, assessment instruments and the rewards (and punishments) associated with their results may likely end up making homogenization a stronger message than would be expected in a multiculturally oriented assessment perspective (Canen, 2005, 2009; Canen & Peters, 2005; Canen & Canen, 2005, 2008, 2010), if the standard-based large scale assessment is the only means to evaluate schools. As contended by McDonnell (2009), policy influences the context in which learning occurs. A model needs to be thought out in which not only policy characteristics (as described in the last section with reference to policy assessment in Brazil), but also institutional structures and rules, as well as interpretive effects, should be borne in mind in order to evaluate the real implications of such policies, particularly bearing in mind that pupils' actual learning should be the main measuring stick for assessing the success or failure of those policies.

Considering standards-based accountability (SBA) approaches to assessment, federal centralization of policies stem from the assumption that

states [and in our cases also municipalities] would establish rigorous content and performance standards for all students and then align major state policies affecting teaching and learning regarding curriculum and instructional materials, teacher training and assessment to those standards. (McDonnell, 2009: 421).

However, other internal aspects related to school climate, teachers' morale and the extent to which school actors support, or do not support, those policies should also be considered.

In fact, as contended by Lee (2010: 649), interdependence across levels in systems, including educational ones, seems to reinforce the case for understanding assessment in an ecological system perspective. According to that model, microlevels of context (defined as settings where the educational actors routinely operate), the mesolevels (relationships among those settings), the exolevels (settings where significant members that educate pupils operate, including, for example, caregivers of children), and the macrolevels (broader, societal-level beliefs and ideologies, including policies and institutions) "are all interdependent and intertwined" (Lee, 2010: 649),

In the case of assessment policies in Brazil, the ecological approach may be illustrated when looking at the interfering variables posed by the way in which those policies have been understood and indeed supported (or not) by educational actors, as gleaned from their interpretive effects in terms of reactions, perspectives, resistances and meanings attributed to them. Those interpretive effects may contribute either to foster or indeed jeopardize initial intentions embedded in those policies. In that vein, for instance, as shown by Canen & Canen (2008), when monocultural leaders, imbued by ideological perspectives that shun innovation and cultural diversity, are mediators of those policies, school climate, and also higher education institutions environments, may sour.

Also, such policies may be resisted by educational actors on the basis that they do not address the complexities of ecological systems that are prevalent in schools, for example, when such policies are perceived by educational actors as being oblivious to school constraints, such as poor infra-structure, poor economic resources and low school budget, low teachers' wages, challenges and burdens affecting teachers' morale, and teachers' depression and burn-out problems, among others.

As an aside, it is interesting to note that Jennings and Greenberg (2009) suggest that the development of teacher social and emotional competence should be central to a school organizational framework, since it has strong impacts on students and classroom outcomes. When teachers lack such preparation, the classroom climate deteriorates, triggering teachers' burn-out problems and stress, which adversely interfere with pupils' performance. As contended by Ramalho and Silva (2010), in the Brazilian case, those questions become crucial, particularly with reference to the public schooling system, as students who attend them "are often not as well prepared as those who can afford private education" (Ramalho & Silva, 2010: 97), which means teachers have to tackle cultural disparities with an open spirit that often is lacking under the duress of conditions they face in their school routines.

Such views seem to be reinforced by the Brazilian assessment policies already discussed. As perceived by the above policies, democratization and equity of access and the valuing of diversity seems to underlie their issuing, based on the assumption that the standard-based assessment will increase quality teaching for all and that the *ENEM*, for instance, may be the basis for a broader and more equity-oriented access of students from culturally and socially diverse backgrounds into higher education. However the emphasis on a homogenized, standards-based approach may constrain such goals if they are not followed by other assessment criteria and indeed by other measures that take on board the plurality inherent in Brazilian schools and their singular projects. In addition to those, measures should be devised in order to boost teachers' morale, to improve their competencies in dealing with cultural differences, enhance their financial value and contribute to allocating more resources to school infrastructures, in a multiculturally and ecologically embedded perspective.

In fact, looking at some implications of such policies may be useful here. On the one hand, those assessment policies such as *SAEB*, *Prova Brasil* and *ENEM* have been moving state and municipal educational authorities to develop partnerships with higher education institutions in order to develop their curricular guidelines and teacher training programmes to enhance teachers' competencies in preparing pupils to perform well – which can be considered some of the good effects of those policies. On the other hand, states and municipalities have been keen to develop assessment instruments similar to *Prova Brasil*

and **SAEB** to be applied to schools every two months, with strong resistance from teachers, who feel deprived of their autonomy to decide how and when to develop curricular topics and pedagogical strategies with their pupils.

It should be noted that recent strikes by teachers' unions in some of Brazilian states and municipalities have ensued as a result of those policies. Such reactions cannot be interpreted in a simplistic way, as they sometimes represent a resistance to any sort of proposed assessment altogether (which is arguably not in line with a view of the responsibility of schools towards society); other times, they seem to be a reflection of political parties' directives to teachers' unions, with electoral motives (which also arguably deflects educators from their real educational goals). However, in other instances, such interpretive effects truly reflect reactions generated by assessment policies that homogenize educational standards to the detriment of respecting schools plurality and teachers' autonomy, in addition to falling short of implementing other measures that could address ecological factors affecting school climate, teachers' morale and pupils' effective learning.

From the above, there seems to be an urgent need to complement assessment in a standards-based approach with another alternative ecological, multicultural assessment model that would take on the challenges of working dialectically objective and subjective assessment criteria, by understanding schools as multicultural organisations (Canen & Canen, 2005, 2010). An ecologically and multiculturally focused framework might therefore arguably contribute to viewing assessment as a multilayered process, which should go hand in hand with other initiatives that value diversity of schools, pupils, teachers, school administrators, school systems and school communities, so that the goal of improving learning and performance results could be achieved, both in Brazil and in other multicultural countries.

Conclusions

This paper discussed assessment in the light of recent educational policies in Brazil. It showed that even though an equity-oriented approach seems to imbue educational views concerning assessment, the standards-based approach inherent in the instruments used to implement such views may contribute to a homogenization of school practices which are detrimental to a multicultural perspective.

The paper contended that assessment should be part of other initiatives that could enhance school climate and teachers' morale, among other factors affecting school performance, therefore both tackling the complex ecological systems that surround students' outcomes, and understanding schools as multicultural organizations.

Complexity and ecological dimension should be borne in mind when studying assessment in education as developed in multicultural contexts such as Brazil. The article has illustrated challenges of assessment geared towards both boosting academic excellence and social justice and inclusion, as pursued by Brazil. By attempting to balance both perspectives, Brazil's continuing process of constructing assessment policies could arguably be enriched by a multicultural, ecological approach, beyond the trend for a standardized assessment perspective, and therefore more likely to contribute in future to fresh outlooks on educational assessment policies in multicultural countries worldwide.

References

- BRAZIL, PRESIDÊNCIA DA REPÚBLICA. 1988. Constituição da República Federativa do Brasil, <http://www.planalto.gov.br>.
- BRAZIL, MINISTÉRIO DA EDUCAÇÃO (MEC). 1996. Lei de Diretrizes e Bases da Educação Nacional, Lei n. 9.394, 20 December 1996, <http://portal.mec.gov.br/arquivos/pdf/ldb.pdf>
- BRAZIL, MINISTÉRIO DA EDUCAÇÃO (MEC). 2011a. Prova Brasil, <http://www.mec.gov.br/>
- BRAZIL, MINISTÉRIO DA EDUCAÇÃO (MEC). 2011b. SAEB, <http://www.mec.gov.br/>
- BRAZIL, MINISTÉRIO DE EDUCAÇÃO (MEC). 2011c. ENEM, <http://www.mec.gov.br/>
- CANEN, A. 2004. Institutional Evaluation, Knowledge and Multiculturalism: some ways ahead in Brazilian higher education. *Current Issues in Comparative Education*, Teachers College, Columbia University, 6 (1) (on line).
- CANEN, A. 2005. Avaliando a Avaliação a Partir de uma Perspectiva Multicultural. *Educação Brasileira*, 27, (54)-: 95 – 114.
- CANEN, A. 2009. *Teacher Education and Competence in an Intercultural Perspective: some reflections in Brazil and the UK*. Köln, Germany: Lambert Academic Publishing.
- CANEN, A. & PETERS, M. 2005. Editorial: Issues and Dilemmas of Multicultural Education: theories, policies and practices. *Policy Futures in Education*^{JCR}, Oxford, 3 (4): 309-313
- CANEN, A. & CANEN, A. G. 2010. Breaking Up Curricular Borders in Higher Education: opportunities of a multicultural perspective for social inclusion. In: POPOV, N.; WOLHUTER, C.; LEUTWYLER, B.; MIHOVA, M. & OGUNLEYE, J. (eds.) , *Comparative Education, Teacher Training, Education Policy, School Leadership and Social Inclusion*. 8: 411 – 415. Sofia: Bureau for Educational Services.
- CANEN, A. G. & CANEN, A. 2005. *Organizações multiculturais*. Rio de Janeiro: Ed. Ciência Moderna.
- CANEN, A. G. & CANEN, A. 2008. Multicultural Leadership: the costs of its absence in organizational conflict management. *International Journal of Conflict Management*, 19(1):: 4 – 19.
- GUBA, E. & LINCOLN, Y. 2003. Uma abordagem Naturalística para a Avaliação: o amadurecimento da avaliação. In: SANDERS, J. (ed.), *Introdução à Avaliação de Programas Sociais*. São Paulo: Instituto Fonte para o Desenvolvimento Social.
- JENNINGS, P. A. & GREENBERG, M. T. 2009. The Prosocial Classroom: teacher social and emotional competence in relation to student and classroom outcomes. *Review of Educational Research*, 79 (1), March : 491 – 525.
- LEE, C. D. 2010. Soaring Above the Clouds, Delving the Ocean's Depths: understanding the ecologies of human learning and the challenge for education science. *Educational Researcher*, 39 (9) Dec. 643 – 655.
- MCDONNELL, L. M. 2009. Repositioning Politics in Education's Circle of Knowledge. *Educational Researcher*, 38 (6): 417 – 427.
- RAMALHO, E. M. & DA SILVA, M. A. L. D. 2011. Multicultural Efforts and Affirmative Actions in Brazil: policies influencing education in the Americas. *World Journal of Education*, 1 (1): 92 – 101.