Assessing curriculum development through schools' external evaluation – which referents in Portugal and England

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Abstract

Schools face an increasing demand to develop a curriculum of quality for all students. This sets the basis for accountability discourses, within the need of assessing whether their function is being fulfilled with the basic quality standards, and whether school education goals are being achieved (Clímaco, 2005; Key, 2002; Alaíz, 2003). These underlie the establishment of schools external evaluation processes and agencies, in many European countries, targeting schools' ability to provide a quality education.

Considering school's function to provide a quality curriculum and learning environment for all, it seemed relevant to study how schools evaluation referential address this part of schools' work. In this sense, within a PhD study focused on schools' external evaluation processes in Portugal and England, a research was developed to analyse, through content analysis (Krippendorf, 2003), the frameworks from the external evaluation agencies in both countries (IGEC and OFSTD, respectively), focusing on the provision of educational service domain.

It was possible to conclude that: 1) IGEC's referential covers a wide range of key points to be assessed and focus mostly on curriculum development initiatives; 2) OFSTED's referential focus mostly on teachers' posture and dedication, and on the learning environment.

Keywords: curriculum development; schools external evaluation; referential.

1 Introduction

As societies' continuously evolve, school becomes more and more a key stone as it actively contributes for the development, growth and equilibrium, by promoting the individuals full growth. This scenario, alongside with the increasing concerns with an education of quality, resulted in more attention drawn to schools' functioning, results and the work they develop. This sets the tone for accountability discourses and measures, as a response to demands of ensuring that schools meet the basic education quality standards and the goals and targets defined for school education (Clímaco, 2005; Key, 2002; Alaíz, 2003). Following this intention, some European countries chose to implement external evaluation processes as a means of assessing schools' ability of providing a quality education. This concern with quality entails a wide range of aspects inherent to schools' work, covering structural and functioning issues, but more importantly, the issues related to curriculum and pedagogical approaches, which are directly linked with schools achievement rates.

In this sense, considering both the centrality of school education in modern societies, and the attention drawn to the quality of its work, and also the implementation of external evaluation processes as a means to ensure such quality, it seems important to understand the place of the curriculum in the evaluation referential followed in Portugal and in England. So, the study focuses schools' external evaluation and self-evaluation processes in these two European countries. The choice for these countries in particular rested on the fact that both of them are targets of the same European guidelines and demands.

In this paper it is focused particularly the evaluation referential used in each of these countries by the IGEC, in Portugal, and by the OFSTED, in England, which are responsible for the external evaluation processes. Specifically the analysis focuses the curriculum and the teaching and learning process.

2 Scope

Education central part in responding to the socioeconomic and technological challenges faced by Europe, its nations and citizens in modern society (European Union Council, 2009) makes it essential to ensure a quality and effective educational service, able to reach its goals and mission, by means of adequate practices (Figueroa, 2008; Grek, et al, 2009). This need arises from the competitive and demanding features of a globalized world, that demand from societies, institutions and citizens the capacity of adaptation to a constantly changing world, by managing the best tools and practices. Being a crucial element of modern societies, schools were addressed with this same demands, which resulted in a number of measures and changes implemented in educational systems, both at a management level, as well as curriculum and teaching and learning levels. All of these situations led to development of discourses defending the implementation of processes able to assess whether schools are providing a quality educational service, meeting the goals and functions addressed to school. Hence, within the scenario of concerns with quality and efficiency in school education, and as a means for responding to the societies' development and growth, the European context has been a milieu of recommendations related to schools' evaluation. For instance, documents such as the *Quality of School Education: Sixteen Quality Indicators (2000)*; the *Qualitative assessment of school education (2001)*; the *Effective Schools Self-Evaluation Project (2001)*, and the adaptation for education of the *Common Assessment Framework (2012)*; and also other international initiatives aiming for comparison of the state of education in European countries, like the PISA program, constitute examples of measures driven by concerns with education quality.

Hence, alongside with pressures for more quality in education, the setting of basic standards for school education, and also, the belief in evaluation as a means of ensuring that quality, many European countries opt for developing and creating agencies and processes for their educational systems, focusing mainly on schools and their work.

The belief in the potential of evaluation as a promoter of higher quality and development aroused from an evolution of evaluation itself, to cover the functions of analysis and diagnosis, as well as judgement. That is, the process of evaluation covers, nowadays, a range of functions that makes it a strong ally of individuals and institutions when searching for improvement. It enables to analyse and assess the work developed and its correspondence with the goals previously defined, but it also enables to identify the main issues that influence the work's quality and the development, both by enhancing it as well as by constraining it. Furthermore, scientific research has been arguing in favour of evaluation as a useful strategy for regulating and developing institutions and services, by providing conditions for the creation and implementation of adequate measures (Reezigt & Creemers, 2005; Plowright, 2007; Sun, Creemers & Hong, 2007; Campbell & Levin, 2009; Coe, 2009; Hofman, Dijkstra & Hofman, 2009).

Thus, the process of school evaluation enables to assess how the schools work is being developed, both in what concerns to schools' management as well as to schools' results (Clímaco, 1992; 2005; Díaz, 2003; Scheerens, 2003). Is serves as an accountability measure, but mostly, it allows to collect information on the school, school environment and school reality, which allows to identify key aspects of its functioning, both positive and negative. Based on tis identification, it is possible to set some strategies and measures in order to overcome the problematic situations and, consequently, promote the school's development (Hayman & Napier, 1979; Hadji, 1994; Marchesi, 2002; Reezigt & Creemers, 2005; Coe, 2009). It also provides knowledge to identify needs and difficulties, and sets the basis for improvement actions (Campbell & Levin, 2009; Coe, 2009).

Bearing this in mind, school's external evaluation processes constitute a good ally in planning and implementing adequate measures and interventions in schools. This is particularly important when it is considered the curricula developed and taught in schools, giving that it constitutes the primary matter in teaching and learning, and it is in relation to its mastery that students are evaluated and results are settled. Therefore, it seems important to analyse how the issue of curriculum is addressed in the external evaluation processes, and how it is addressed in the referential guiding those processes. This paper presents the results of an analysis of the evaluation referential used in schools' external evaluation, in Portugal (IGEC) and England (OFSTED), focusing the issue of curriculum.

3 Methodology

As previously said, this paper presents the results of a part of a PhD study focused on schools' external evaluation and self-evaluation processes. This research contemplates a theoretical research phase with documental analysis and field work with a multicase study. For the purposes of this paper, it was selected the analysis of the evaluation referential

used by the IGEC (Portugal) and by the OFSTED (England). These documents were analysed through content analysis (Krippendorf, 2003) focused mainly in the referential domain dedicated to the provision of the educational service, which addresses curriculum issues.

4   Results and conclusions

By analysing the referential guiding the school external evaluation processes, it was possible to draw some conclusions on how the issue of curriculum is addressed in both agencies. For instance a first look upon the referential showed that the Portuguese referential is more detailed when considering the provision of educational service, in comparison to the English one. IGEC's referential presents a more detailed framework to address curriculum issues and seems to be more concerned with specific practices considered positive. OFSTED's referential has a more general approach and seems to address more the intentions and philosophy of teaching and other general concerns.

The IGEC referential presents three sub-domains to specify practices and approaches to curriculum and teaching and learning, namely: i) *Planning and articulation*, which is particularly related to curriculum issues; ii) *Teaching practices*, which, as the name indicates, focuses on teaching, but also contemplates curriculum issues, even if implicitly; and iii) *Monitoring and evaluation of teaching and learning*, which is dedicated mostly to evaluation aspects. These three sub-domains are, themselves, divided in specific indicators to be taken into account when evaluating the provision of educational service, and are considered as key aspects for assessing the state and quality of this domain. Concerning specifically the curriculum, IGEC's framework contemplates aspects of curriculum development or adaptation, in the classroom environment. For instance, in *Planning and articulation*, it's possible to find specifically interesting indicators in what concerns to curriculum a) *Curriculum articulated management*; b) *Curriculum contextualization and opening to the place*; and c) *Use of information on students school course*. These seem to assess the curriculum adaptation and development strategies used by teachers in their daily practices. It can also be found in *Teaching practices* indicators that are related to curriculum issues, such as a) *Adequacy of educational activities and teaching to students' capacities and learning rhythms* and b) *Use of active and experimental methodologies in teaching and learning*. All these indicators clearly indicate a concern of how the curriculum is developed to meet students.

The OFSTED referential addresses this domain by focusing seven general indicators covering mostly teachers' dedication, posture and teaching philosophy, and some general consideration on teaching strategies. For example, it focuses on how teaching promotes students' progress; how teachers' assess whether students effectively understand the content they taught, if teachers provide a constructive feedback able to promote students' learning, and if teachers use adequate teaching strategies to meet students' need. These are the indicators more dedicated to teaching strategies and that could be related to curriculum development. OFSTED's referential also focuses on teachers' dedication by addressing the interest and expectation teachers show towards their students; and on the learning environment by assessing whether teachers are able to establish a productive and positive learning climate. This is particularly interesting when considering that the specific name of this domain is, in fact, *Quality of teaching in the school*, which could point towards a more profound consideration of curriculum development aspects, alongside with teachers' strategies and teaching posture.

In general terms, the analysis of IGEC and OFSTED's external evaluation referential made possible to conclude that IGEC's referential covers a wide range of key points to be assessed and focus mostly on curriculum development initiatives; while OFSTED's referential focus mostly on teachers' posture and dedication, and on the learning environment, but not particularly on curriculum or curriculum development. Nevertheless, a referential focusing teaching postures and curriculum development strategies, that take into consideration the students and their characteristics, can provide an insight on the quality of such measures and point directions to be followed in order to improve it. This can culminate in better quality in schools and, particularly, in the curricula.

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