

External Evaluation of Schools in Portugal: effects on schools' dynamics.

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Abstract

In Portugal, concerning basic and secondary education, the demand for quality in education has justified policies regarding to external evaluation of schools (EES) among other political measures. Although the statement of these policies has emerged in mid-80s, only at the beginning of the XXI century the EES was legally defined (Law No. 31/2002). It was based on this Law that between 2006 and 2011, under the responsibility of the General Inspection of Education (GIE), took place the 1st phase of schools evaluation, in which every Portuguese basic and secondary school was evaluated. The 2nd phase of schools' evaluation started in 2012, following the same guidelines that framed the 1st phase, and taking as reference the recommendation of the National Council for Education (2010), as well as the knowledge produced.

The Portuguese model for EES, which have a formative orientation (Leite; Pacheco, 2010), allows schools to develop an improvement plan, seeking to respond to accountability demands, as well as to promote school improvement (Alaiz *et al*, 2003). In this context, and considering that the act of evaluation is directly related to the verification of results and outcomes (Davies *et al*, 2007), this communication presents the **effects that the EES generates in improving school and curricular organization**. To do so, 40% of the school evaluation reports from the 1st and 2nd phases were analyzed.

The content analysis (L'Écuyer, 1990; Bardin, 2007; Krippendorf 2003) of the reports was performed using the NVivo (v. 10) software. To perform this analysis, the following categories were considered: *organizational changes*, *curriculum and pedagogical changes* and *academic results*. This procedure enabled the identification of the effects that EES is generating in the improvement of the overall work developed in schools, and allowed to conclude that the EES is generating qualitative changes in school work and some innovation dynamics.

Keywords: External evaluation of school; quality; education.

1 Introduction

The need of implementing procedures able to promote and ensure educational quality has been recognized as a consequence of an investment in expanding the access to school education, responsible for its massification. In this sense, public policies in several countries and governments have focused on regulatory and evaluation educational systems. International organizations within OECD and UNESCO have produced recommendations concerning the search and assurance of educational quality. It was considered: the «external school evaluation is becoming well established but the culture of evaluation and improvement needs to be strengthened; the external school evaluation model embodies a number of features of best practice but there is an insufficient focus on learning and teaching; school self-evaluation requires to be strengthened» (OECD, 2012: 104-105).

In Portugal, concerning basic and secondary education, the demand for quality in education has justified policies of external evaluation of schools (EES), among other political measures. Although the statement of these policies has emerged in mid-80s, only at the beginning of the XXI century the EES was legally defined (Law No. 31/2002). It was



based on this Law that between 2006 and 2011, under the responsibility of the General Inspection of Education (GIE), took place the 1st phase of schools evaluation, in which every Portuguese basic and secondary school was evaluated. The 2nd phase of schools' evaluation started in 2012, following the same guidelines that framed the 1st phase, and taking as reference the recommendation of the National Council for Education (2010), as well as the knowledge produced.

The Portuguese model for EES, which have a formative orientation (Leite & Pacheco, 2010), follows a data collection procedure focusing: documents produced by the school, interviews in panels constituted by elements of the educational community and observation of school situations. The collected data is, then, analyzed based on a framework that focuses, among other aspects, academic achievement, curricular organization, and leadership and self-evaluation procedures followed by the school. The process ends with the production of a report systematizing the strengths and improvement areas identified. With this information, schools develop an improvement plan, to which they are committed, seeking to respond to accountability demands, as well as to promote school improvement (Alaiz *et al*, 2003).

In this context, and considering that the act of evaluation is directly related to the verification of results and outcomes (Davies *et al*, 2007), this paper aims to analyze what **effects does EES generate in improving school and curricular organization**. To do so, the school evaluation reports from the 1st and 2nd phases, concerning all schools, were analyzed.

2 External Evaluation of Schools: effects on schools' dynamics.

In Portugal, the GIE is the entity responsible for the external evaluation in primary and secondary schools and the work that is developed has the objective to promote the improvement of educational quality services and to improve schools work at different levels.

The benchmark used in this EES was based on "How good is our school?" (Clark, 2000), and focuses on aspects related to student outcomes, the educational service provision, issues of organization, management and leadership and school dynamics self-assessment. In the 1st phase of EES, this benchmark was structured around five areas, which in the 2nd phase are reduced to three: (1) results (2) educational service provision, and (3) leadership and management.

Regarding to public schools, the evaluation process is inserted in a framework of a policy measure that can not be ignored and that can drag different conceptions of education and evaluation. This same idea is conveyed by Figari (2007) that states that the meaning of the evaluation should be investigated in the context of the evolution of human and social sciences and, more specifically, science education, thus having a holistic view of all aspects that this concept represents. It implies reflecting on the epistemological status of the evaluation and to take into account that this is a subject of strong demand, both institutional and professional.

Concerning to Stufflebeam (2003), all the important aspects of the school should be evaluated in order to promote individual and collective improvement. It is with reference to this idea that we associate the evaluation of schools to promote conditions conducive to the overall development of schools. This is corroborated by Clímaco (2005) when she stated that the evaluation can contribute to the improvement or progress of what is evaluated. In the case of the fields of analysis that are focused in this study - *organizational changes, curricular and pedagogical changes* and *academic results* - it is assumed that the EES held at the 1st phase generated effects in the 2nd phase of EES.



3 Methodological Procedures

The study developed followed an interpretative orientation, based on a qualitative analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Flick, 2004) of discourses made in reports by EES teams. The analysis focused on 40% of the reports from North and Central Portugal, concerning the two evaluation phases.

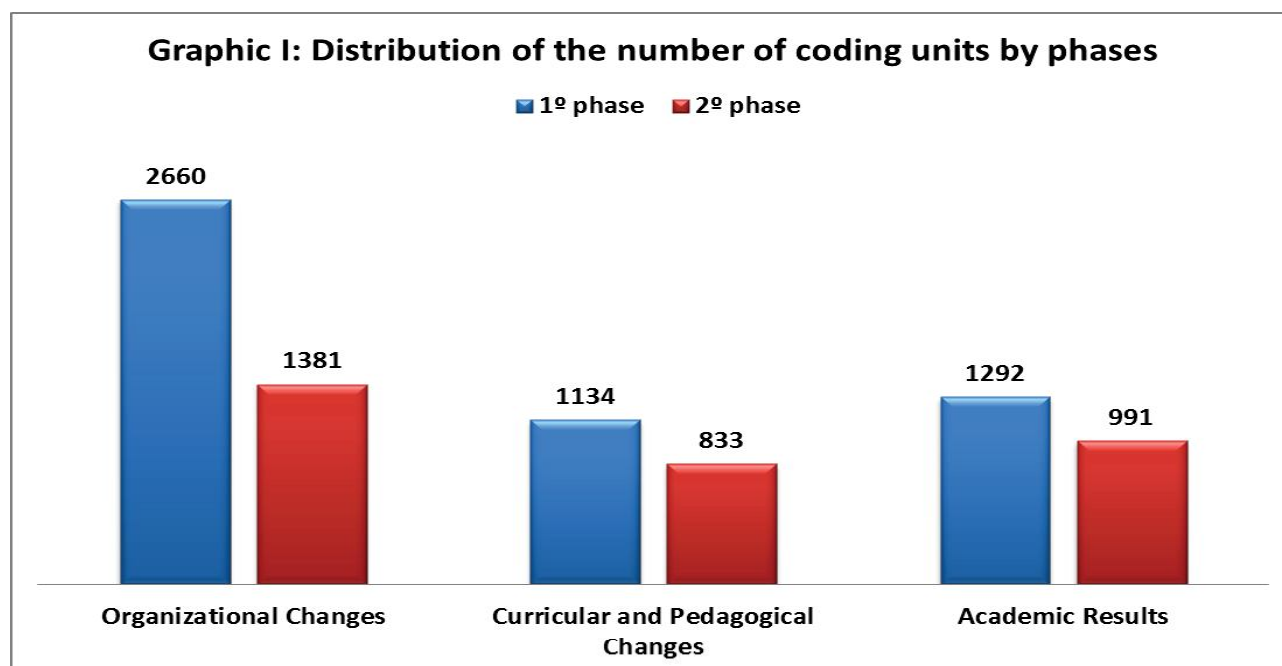
The content analysis (L'Écuyer, 1990; Bardin, 2007; Krippendorff 2003) was performed using the NVivo (v. 10) software. The coding units were sentences/clauses, although, in some circumstances, full paragraphs were also considered as units. Nevertheless, in all cases, it was the unit sense that guided the coding procedure and the rule of mutual exclusiveness of the categories **was not followed** (L'Écuyer, 1990).

To perform this analysis, the following categories were considered: *organizational changes*, *curriculum and pedagogical changes* and *academic results*. This procedure enabled the identification of the effects that EES is generating in the improvement of the overall work developed in schools. In this sense, the content analysis was based on a categorical system: (1) Organizational Changes, that includes the subcategories *institutional self-evaluation* and *administration and management leadership*; (2) Curricular and Pedagogical Changes, which considers *sequentially and curricular articulation* and *monitoring and supervision of teaching practice*; (3) Academic Results, that includes three subcategories, namely *evolution of external results by levels of schooling and discipline*, *quality of success* and *school dropout*. These categories and subcategories are also related to *strengths*, *weaknesses* and *improvement opportunities* of schools.

4 Discussion

The presentation that follows counts the references that were associated with categories and subcategories that organize the three dimensions under study. Overall, there are more coding units in the 1º phase of EES than in the 2º phase. There is a significant difference in the number of coding units in the category "organizational changes" from 1st to 2nd phase (see graphic I).

Graphic I: Distribution on the number of coding unites by phases.

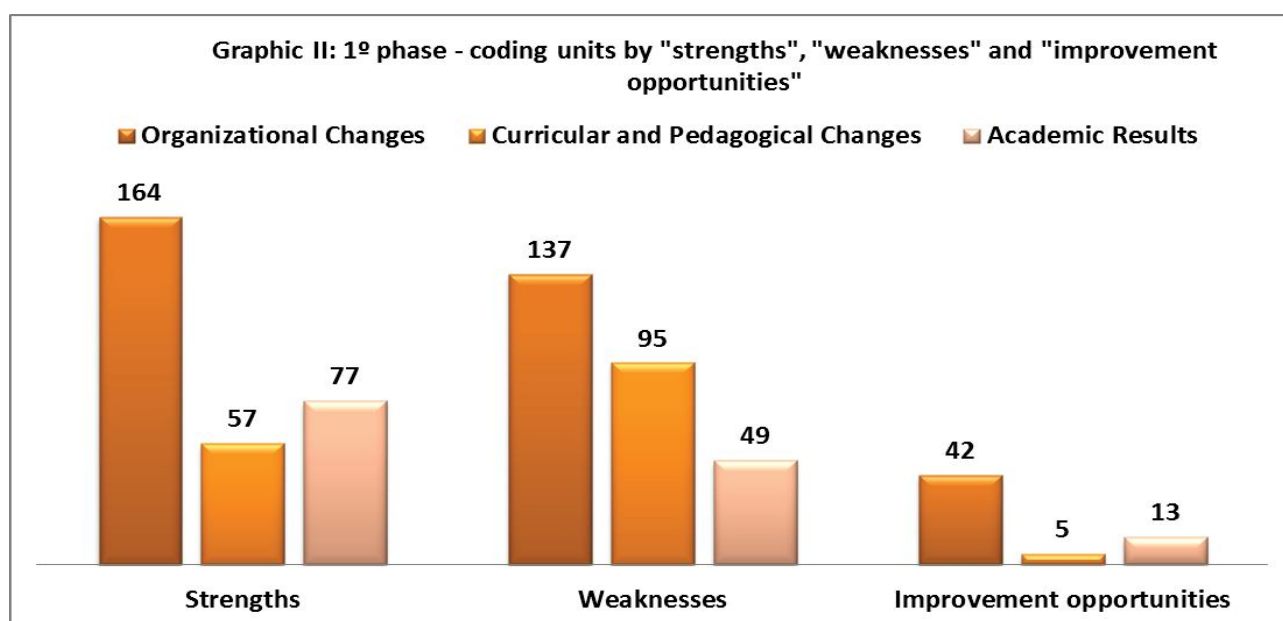


In 1st phase of EES, there are more coding units related to "organizational changes" in the *strengths*, *weaknesses* and *improvement opportunities*. The number of *weaknesses* related to "curricular and pedagogical changes" is greater



than the number of *strengths*. The number of references to *improvement opportunities* is also minor in this category. In contrast, "academic results" have more strengths than *weaknesses* (see graphic II).

Graphic II: Coding units by "strengths", "weaknesses" and "improvement opportunities" in 1st phase of EES



Here are some examples of extracts taken from EES reports in the 1st phase.

Strengths:

- «Motivation and commitment of executive leadership for the improvement of school organization» (in organizational changes)
- «Improving outcomes for pupils with educational needs and multiple disabilities» (in curricular and pedagogical changes)
- «Stability in the four years 2003/07, rates of completion / transition of the 1st and 2nd cycles (above 95%)» (in academic results)

Weaknesses:

- «No assumption of the educational project as an identification of the whole community and as an educational tool for sustainable development of the organization» (in organizational changes)
- «Poor articulation of the work between the study cycles and levels of education and teaching, which does not favor the sequentially of learning» (in curricular and pedagogical changes)
- «Significant decrease over the three cycles of study of student outcomes in 2006/07, the external proofs of Mathematics - levels tests and examinations (down 14.7 percentage points from the 4th to the 6th year and 31.6 points from 6th to 9th grade) » (in academic results)

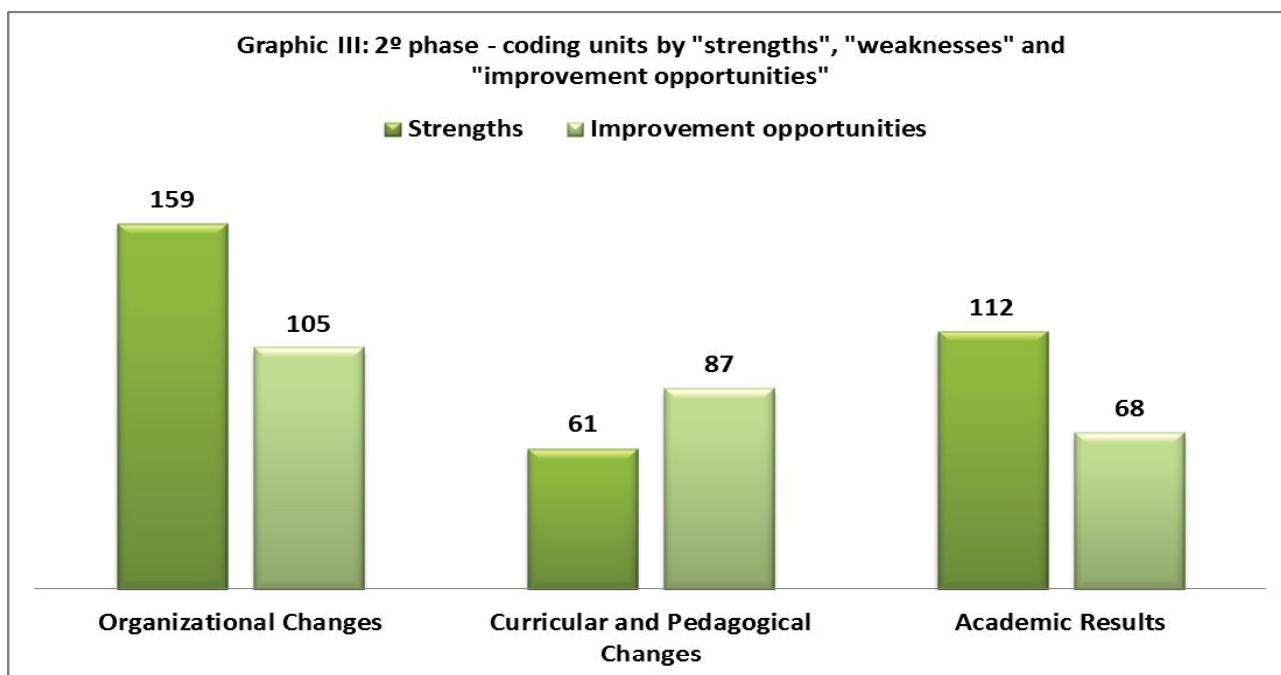
Improvement Opportunities:

- «Deepening of the process of self-assessment, with the implementation of a monitoring and evaluation plan for improve schools' actions and set the extension to other areas of performance» (in organizational changes)
- «Extension of training alternatives in order to respond to the needs of students» (in curricular and pedagogical changes)
- «Lack of indicators for internal evaluation of the success of the students» (in academic results)



In 2nd phase of EES, the *weaknesses* were transformed into *improvement opportunities*. In the three categories, only in "curricular and pedagogical changes" the numbers of improvement opportunities are greater (see graphic III).

Graphic III: Coding units by "strengths", "weaknesses" and "improvement opportunities" in 2nd phase of EES



Here are some examples of extracts taken from EES reports in the 2nd phase.

Strengths:

«Cooperation with the City Council and celebration of partnerships and agreements with other entities, with positive impact on the educational service» (in organizational changes)

«Diversity and expression of activities designed to encourage student participation, with a positive impact on the level of education for citizenship and the learning» (in curricular and pedagogical changes)

«Results obtained by the students in national examinations in 9^o and 12^o year in the discipline of Portuguese / Portuguese and Mathematics» (in academic results)

Improvement Opportunities:

«Monitoring the work of the technical assistants and operational, as well as strengthening the training provided to these professionals, in order to raise their self-esteem and level of work motivation » (in organizational changes)

«The definition and implementation of strategic plans to promote the development of students with learning capabilities above average» (in curricular and pedagogical changes)

«Maintenance and strengthening measures implemented to combat indiscipline in school-based, in order to ensure an environment of tranquility and respect in classrooms» (in academic results)



Within each of these categories, the subcategories were also analyzed. Table 1 lists these units.

Table I: Coding units by “strengths”, “weaknesses” and “improvement opportunities” in 1st and 2nd phase.

Organizational Changes	1 st phase	Stre.	Weak.	Imp. Opp.	2 nd phase	Stre.	Imp. Opp.
Institutional Self-Evaluation	54	7	39	8	52	12	40
Administration and Management Leadership	182	101	75	7	115	75	40
Curricular and Pedagogical Changes	1 st phase	Stre.	Weak.	Imp. Opp.	2 nd phase	Stre.	Imp. Opp.
Sequentially and Curricular Articulation	44	4	37	3	36	11	25
Monitoring and Supervision of Teaching Practice	37	1	36	0	42	1	41
Academic Results	1 st phase	Stre.	Weak.	Imp. Opp.	2 nd phase	Stre.	Imp. Opp.
Evolution of external results by levels of schooling and discipline	29	9	20	0	47	17	30
Quality of success	33	14	16	3	21	11	10
School dropout	23	18	4	1	31	26	5

Concerning to *organizational changes*, there are more coding units related to “institutional self-evaluation” in 1st phase, with the majority relating to *weaknesses*. Regarding to *improvement opportunities*, the number is similar in the 2nd phase. The coding units related to “administration and management leadership” are higher in the 1st phase. Both in 1st and 2nd phase, the coding units related do *strengths* are superior.

In *curricular and pedagogical changes*, and regarding to “sequentially and curricular articulation” there are more coding units in 1st phase of EES. The *weaknesses* are superior in the 1st phase and the *improvement opportunities* in 2nd phase. In “monitoring and supervision of teaching practice”, there are more coding units in the 2nd phase and the *strengths* are superior.

At last, in Academic Results, and about “evolution of external results by levels of schooling and discipline”, there are more coding units in the 2nd phase, which most concerns to *improvement opportunities*. In “quality of success”, there are more coding units in the 1st phase and the *weaknesses* are higher. In the 2nd phase, although not very significant, the *strengths* outweigh the *improvement opportunities*. In “school dropout”, there are more coding units in 2nd phase, in which the majority is *strengths*, keeping up the trend of the 1st phase.

5 Concluding Remarks

As it was said, this study aimed to analyze what ***effects does generate EES in improving school and curricular organization***. From the treated data it is possible to state that EES is an external factor of school change. Broadly one can conclude that in an organizational perspective Schools are more aware of the importance of self-evaluation and this topic is still an opportunity to improve, namely among schools that were poorly evaluated by GIE reports.

Regarding curricular and pedagogical issues, the look of GIE was a factor of changing practices related to curriculum sequence and articulation. Again, this is a topic that GIE evaluators recommend to improvement. Therefore, one can conclude that the EES is generating qualitative changes in school work and some innovation dynamics.

Among pedagogical issues, teaching supervision was the main topic that was considered a weakness and an opportunity to improve. From 1st to 2nd phase under analysis GIE gave more attention to this particular issue. Concerning to academic results, the descriptor that is more impressive is the evolution of external results. Again GIE evaluators seem to attribute higher attention to the topic at the 2nd phase, which relates with more improved opportunities registered.



Therefore, one can conclude that there is a changing nature of GIE attention in schools evaluation purposes. This could be explained by trends that shape European schools evaluation, to a more external and centralized control of schools action and performance (Kuiper, 2008).

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