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Contributing for an innovative school assessment: the school auto-evaluation

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Introduction

In Porto (Portugal) a research team from Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences (FPCE-UP) is developing a Project called *Auto-evaluation in Schools: its relation with quality and improvement in education* ("Auto-Avaliação em Escolas: Relação com Qualidade e Melhoria em Educação" – ARQME). Besides the University of Porto team, a larger group of teachers from the partners schools is engaged within this Project.

Currently, in Portugal IGE (General Inspectorate of Education), a governmental entity which depends on Ministry of Education, is responsible for schools' evaluation, through a program called Schools' External Evaluation. This evaluation is carried on by external teams and is based not only in information each team collect but also in information previously asked to each school. The results are essential to teachers' chances of career progress; for this reason, external evaluation engages and conditions all teachers work.

External evaluation is based on control of school's educational work, covering several dimensions: results, educational services supply, organization and scholar management, leadership and schools' auto regulation and improvement ability. The grade in each of the abovementioned categories is deeply influenced by students' scholar results. In what concerns the relationship established between IGE and each school, teachers play a subordinated role, not having the chance to express an opinion regarding the data to be collected nor, what is more, concerning to the data analyse. Thus, teachers merely wait the final decision in respect to their school which indirectly becomes a decision regarding their own professional performance. Teachers depend on an evaluation process which controls their educational work, despite not allowing any reflection on how to increase and improve work's quality.

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Therefore, teachers act as minor agents, playing a subsidiary role which does not correspond to what is expected from intellectual professionals with high academic skills as teachers actually are.

In contrast, this Project seeks to renew teachers' role as important agents within the school's evaluation process, actively participating in its conception and implementation. Evaluation is understood not exclusively as a control process, but essentially as an opportunity to reflect on the educational work as a whole. Furthermore, evaluation can also be a unique chance to develop original strategies enabling the improvement of the educational service provided by school, by taking into consideration people and contexts' specificities.

ARQME Project

After two post-graduated programs and some external evaluation studies carried out in and by the University of Porto, a research team composed namely by University's teachers and by post-graduated former students have decided to apply for a funding to a project in order to study the external evaluation of educational systems. The FCT⁴'s approval for a three years period granted us the chance to develop the grounds of a complex evaluation model, which we named "Institutional Evaluation" (Terrasêca, 2002). Such opportunity came forth as mandatory education schools asked for support in the auto-evaluation process in accordance to rules and policies recommended by IGE, which simultaneously was responsible for school's external evaluation.

ARQME Project seeks to: a) the deepening and renewing of the knowledge about the subject of auto-evaluation in schools and its relation to the quality and improvement on schools and education; b) conceiving methodological procedures relevant to produce evaluation and counselling in the context of schools; c) reflexion about the auto-evaluation effects and its articulation with the change of professional identities of teachers; d) reflexion about the relation between schools auto-evaluation and their organizational life-cycle's dynamics.

In the research field, FPCE-UP team follows-up each partner school auto-evaluation team. Such monitoring is inspired in clinical approach assumptions, namely proximity and special attention to agents' singularities. It covers not only training resulting from such interaction, but data collection and analyse as well. Work/training meetings promote cooperation between teams (both FPCE-UP team and each school auto-evaluation team). Such reunions aim to construct (or even reconstruct) a particular

⁴ Science and Technology Foundation – the Portuguese official entity responsible for funding R&D projects.

understanding and development of auto-evaluation, also contributing to promotion of a auto-evaluation exigency and responsibility culture in order to improve teaching, school and education quality.

There are already important consequences from this process regarding team member training, mainly in two levels: a) to deepen knowledge on evaluation models and quality management models; b) getting a deeper understanding of each school, its mission, its educational project and liaison to its social economic and cultural environment.

To enhance the discussion between teams and to deep theoretical issues about schools' evaluation, in ARQME Project we are doing workshops (1 for each year of the project), which promote the dissemination of scientific work, where recognized members of the international scientific community and the project's teams meet to analyze and reflect on the work that is being developed. In addition, a site for information, discussion and training (www.fpce.up.pt/argme) has been published and we have scheduled the publication of two books about ARQME Project and the model that is developed in it.

With the development of this project we contributed to the development of the scientific community, involving young researchers in the team's research project. We also got a multiplier effect of its research potential due to merging with individual projects of advanced training (Masters and PhD) of some of the researchers involved.

Evaluation of Schools in a Global World

The positive aspects of a global world are, among others, the communication between peoples, the inter-knowledge, the knowledge of other realities or the contact with other ways of living life and other values. However, this conception of the world contains, implicitly, the idea of convergence, i.e., the discursive praise of diversity and specific but coexist whit a construction of the homogeneity and the dilution of singularities.

Globalization, more evident in the so-called Western world – which, by now, is not a geographical reference, but a political and economic one –, is characterized by competition, the maximum productivity, the total quality, principles that in themselves lead to greed, the desire to be in the forefront, the seat of power over others, power more than the other ...

In this context, the evaluation of educational systems can't avoid the strong influence to ensure the conformity of standards and educational policy decisions, giving them the opportunity to occupy a leading role in the competitive game. In this logic of competition, evaluation, rather than provide a strategy to improve the educational service, becomes an end in itself.

This competition empire is built establishing comparisons which are based in an homogeneity built from diverse realities made identical due to the use of similar categories of analysis specifically designed for this purpose. Only what is similar, what has points in common, is compared. In this sense we can say that comparisons not only require but lead to homogeneity. Comparison is thus made on a standardized basis, where what is closest to the standard is more valued, and what deviates from the standard tend to be excluded, excluding therefore, also the right to be different. Another problem that arises with these comparisons is the way they are presented to the general public. The dissemination in large scale is done highlighting results, rather than focusing in essential key issues for the understanding and interpretation of those results. Thus, the great complexity of the comparisons renders in products that are a simplistic and simplified version of these compared studies. Large scale dissemination origins different rankings about educational systems, such as the way students learn the mathematics or their mother language, among others. Nevertheless, rankings give a very accurate information about the place of an institution in a given scale, but provide little clarification on the educational work it promotes or how the quality of its work can be improved or maintained...

What we want to emphasize here is that the evaluation – when taken as an exercise in verification, as a control and as an orthopaedic regulation – poses to the service of this simplistic and catalogue vision.

We propose to debate here an evaluation model that leaves out control and verification functions that evaluation also has, in order to rehabilitate its educational dimensions. In this model, evaluation's regulatory function doesn't work according to an external normativity, but in accordance with principles that arise from the actor's discussion of ideas and interpellations. From this perspective, social actors are not mere executors but people capable of taking rational decisions.

Auto-Evaluation of schools following the model of "Institutional Evaluation" (Terrasêca, 2002)

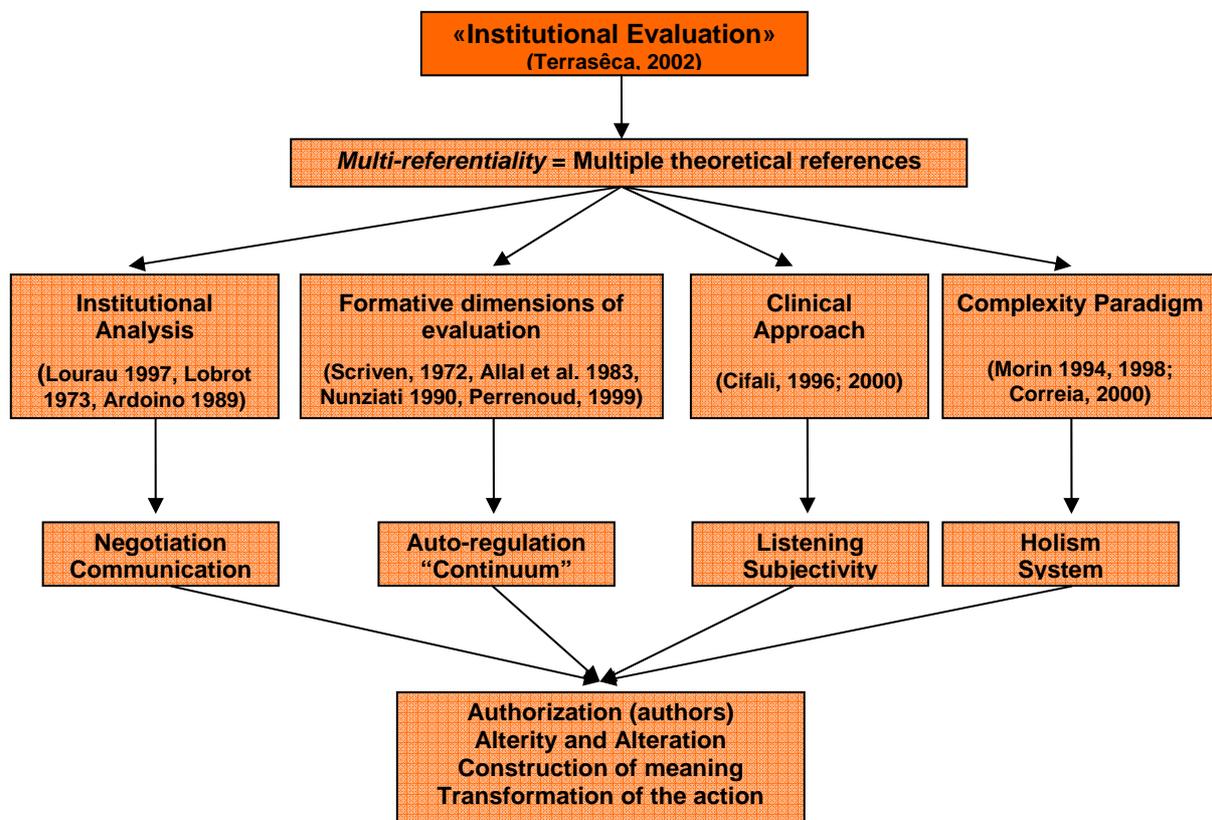
What we call "institutional evaluation" (Terrasêca 2002) is an evaluation model that assumes the importance and the need to confront the mono-referential⁵ ways as technical and specialized languages equate reality. As a composite model, "institutional evaluation" is characterized by its multi-referentiality⁶ which is «the way to analyse an object recognized as complex, involved, time-history, whose theoretical and/or practical intelligence comes from plural reading, depending on various

⁵ Concept used in Portuguese and French (mono-référentiel), meaning, approximately *unique theoretical reference*.

⁶ Concept used in Portuguese and French (multi-référentialité), meaning, approximately *multiple theoretical references*.

benchmarks (psychological, sociological, psychosocial, economic, organizational, institutional, etc.), explicitly conceived as heterogeneous between them.» (Ardoino and Berger, 1989: 213). Thus, the "institutional evaluation" model is built from different scientific/disciplinary contributions, while complementary, namely the institutional analysis, formative evaluation, the clinical approach and the paradigm of complexity (see Figure 1).

Fig. 1: «Institutional Evaluation» (Terrasêca, 2002) – theoretical framework



Fundamental principles of "institutional evaluation"

The theoretical framework of the model origins, as a result, the adoption of a set of principles for the evaluation action: a) *negotiation*; b) *the evaluation political dimension*; c) *systemic and holistic view of the process under evaluation*. However, these principles do not correspond to the prior definition of specific procedures, independent from the contexts and specific circumstances of its deployment, although it has effects in terms of logic of action of the evaluators.

- a) **NEGOTIATION** – a structuring principle and transverse to the inherent characteristics of the “institutional evaluation”. Negotiation, seen as a transformer movement, contributes to the collective construction of actors as partners in a work process, and to clarify the arguments that justify the actions. Thus, it is a way to produce another understanding about the developed action.

In the evaluation studies that members of this team have already developed under the inspiration of this model, this construction appears, for example, on a commercial logic that is behind the study order. The first – and most important – task of the evaluation team is, precisely, to transform this contract based logic in a communicational logic to negotiate the evaluation study. This presupposes that the object of evaluation is built and reconfigured throughout the negotiation process, while defined as an relational object, constructed in the relation between actors, which become thereby members of the same team. Thus, the evaluation object is not bound to rigid definitions of independent and closed territories – of the evaluated and the evaluators – but it opens an area across the two. Therefore, based on a potentially democratic regulation, this process shakes the boundaries between internal and external actors, looking for deconstruction/reconstruction of meaning for the actions under evaluation.

Commercial like negotiations follow pre-defined terms and focus on products and hierarchical controls exercised by the entity that orders the study. In this model, negotiation involves friendliness between points of view and different and/or divergent interests, namely, integrating the heterogeneity and contradiction as dynamic elements in the evaluation process which is developed either in a temporal continuity, either through mutual questioning of the involved actors. This temporal characteristic and this questioning are the elements that allow the conditions for auto-regulation. Unlike other evaluation models, this auto-regulation no longer is exclusively exercised from external references, but, essentially, in terms of contextual conditions of the evaluated action.

Another consequence of this evaluation principle is reflected in the return procedures during the evaluation process. Indeed, these return procedures do not occur in the form of an accountability, but have rather relevant functions: by one side, those functions that are inseparable from the principle of negotiation itself and the communicational logic cited above; by other, they assume some kind of an operating nature because they allow temporary agreements and heterogeneity integration in the arguments making for the evaluation action.

Furthermore, the return allows the system to feedback while operating and, thus, it allows the evaluation action to be tuned. Accordingly, the return procedures have a strong regulatory component of

the evaluation, just as they «ensure, as much as possible, the accuracy and reflection around various bias and subjectivities, which, when asked, give us more reliable evaluations» (Terrasêca, 2002:57).

Consequently, the recovery of communication processes, negotiation and democratic relationship, allow, within the model, to gradate the dichotomization between those who evaluate and those who are evaluated; it also allows the articulation of their visions and give back more complexity to relations between rigor and objectivity. In this sense, rigor does not come from objectivity, but is built through inter-subjective discussion of perspectives and different sensitivities.

- b) **EVALUATION POLITICAL DIMENSION.** Despite not being a principle for itself it constitutes however, a distinctive characteristic of “institutional evaluation” model. Evaluation is a social practice as well as it is a political act. Therefore, evaluation organizes some perspectives of the world and represents an instrument of democratic intervention, even if only hypothetically. Thus, this principle regards to relations between evaluation and political dimension, with effects both epistemological and methodological.

To evaluation there are being attributed several uses which, on one hand give evaluation larger notoriety, public exposition and political relevance. Though, on the other hand, such notoriety does not promote a conceptual clarification which could specify its nature. It is controversial that proliferation of evaluation requests and acts corresponds to democracy exercise that can be hypothetically attributed to evaluation. Cochart (1993) states that the use of evaluation is more intensive as centralizing political powers need to legitimate their resolutions and acts.

From our perspective, the notion of evaluation gathers several contradictions; consequently, it allows emergence of a world understanding which is grounded in dichotomies based on the multiple exclusion principle, as agent-object; evaluator-evaluated; evaluation-control; subjectivity-objectivity. As “institutional evaluation” model emphasises the political dimension, it integrates the abovementioned dichotomies, also considering them as productive elements within knowledge process. “Institutional evaluation” model does not consider agent and object relation as a dyad, i.e., as a relation based on two elements governed by identity principle. In contrast, such model stresses the main role of third included; moreover, it considers agent and object as concepts which are defined for the permanent relations they enter into as a whole. Political dimension enables evaluation process to contribute to restitution of a meaning to their actions by the different agents.

- c) **SYSTEMATIC AND HOLISTIC UNDERSTANDING OF PROCESS UNDER EVALUATION.** Institutional evaluation is inspired in a systemic approach. So, it focuses the system as a whole, considering its own complexity and dynamic (Rosnay, 1977). In opposition to an analytic point of view, systemic perspective faces the system as an ensemble of elements which interact in such a way so that any change regarding on of those elements will revert on other elements' relations both between them selves and over themselves. Hence, this principle has obvious consequences to the way evaluation work and actions and/or evaluated entities are conceived.

Regarding evaluated processes, institutional evaluation stresses the dynamic and evolutive characteristics of those processes; furthermore, it is noted the processes inscription in an uninterrupted time period. As systemic approach, institutional evaluation also emphasises the interdependency between the parties constituting the system, more than the parties as individually considered.

As to evaluation as a process, this model considers the steps in evaluation work as inter-dependents, therefore not being possible to reduce them to a sum of hierarchised and isolated procedures. "Institutional evaluation" includes the understanding of evaluated actions in a temporality which is extended to constraints, motivations and political and strategies options which conditions its conception and achievement.

Model's innovative dimensions: ARQME Project in school's auto-evaluation

As we have been expressing so far, the theoretic grounds of this model provide it a range of characteristics with consequences at two levels: methodological and epistemological. The abovementioned qualities have consequences in what concerns evaluation actions, as they involve principles and methodological processes' choice. Furthermore, they have consequences regarding evaluation decisions, which involve a specific understanding of social reality. Evaluation judgement is based on these levels relation, stressing meaning more than control; also, evaluation technical axel is subject to evaluation ethical axel.

This model is innovative due both to its conception and its multi-references and to the consequences it implies.

Amongst innovative characteristics, we would like to stress:

- the main role played by a communicational logic which pays attention to expressing and listening of subjectivities, also incorporating a process based on discussion, from which results evaluation's object;

- its insertion within a time period understood as organic, constantly subject to auto-control;
- the holistic and systematic understanding of evaluation process and of process under evaluation.

Actually, these characteristics have assumed great importance when ARQME Project started to follow-up in the field teachers' teams responsible for their schools' auto-evaluation.

External evaluation promoted by IGE is based on a prior definition of evaluation object. Such model is widely criticised by teachers. Rejecting this prior definition has led to a deep debate regarding mission of scholar education, teachers' professional identity and education quality, in order to understand how school and educative project's goals match to these relevant ideas.

This process of deepening the reflection about a reality that teachers naturalize, because they know it very well from their daily life and experience, was only possible because it was progressively established, little by little, a climate of intense communication and a process of negotiation. In this juncture, teachers had to act and had the opportunity to take justified options. Through this process, the evaluation object is built, without losing sight of the holistic approach of the school as a system, which is another of the innovative features of the model, which we want to underline.

Used to work in a chronological and "sliced" time, the entry of the evaluation in an organic time proved to be very instructive for teachers, after the overcome of much criticism and initial resistance. Indeed, the organic conception of time means the abandonment of the regular rhythms of work, governed by the school calendar outside the own pace of development of the team (from Porto University and the school). Slowly, we were aware that the path is being traversed, with advances and setbacks, recognizing that certain setbacks provided the basis of considerable advances, which would be impossible to achieve if there was no deepening of reflection about each school and about the educational service each school should promote.

These issues here highlighted are only some that we can present as new features of the model. Its innovative nature doesn't come only from the differences in terms of its *modus operandi* against other models. As we said at the beginning of the text, the model of "institutional evaluation" refuses the centrality of control in evaluation, rather investing in its formative ability. This is what is truly the most innovative dimension: the ability to establish a model that may transform the actors and the actions they take part.

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