

# Evaluation, cycles and quality of the fundamental school: a relationship to be established

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**T**HE POLICIES of cycle-based learning that were implemented with great intensity in Brazil at the beginning of the 1990s represented a new logic of organization for school work and were presented as a proposal for democratization of teaching, seeking to impact on school student retention and improvement of school performance.

For their realization they imposed a redirecting of traditionally dominant school conceptions and a reordering of practices. In this process evaluation gained the spotlight from among those school activities, since its involvement with expectations of changes in ends and means presented the greatest visibility.

In the development of this text the proposal is to analyze how we see this relationship being built, or rather, how the expectations solidified, with respect to the results of surveys that sought to characterize and consider the implementation of the cycles in various national contexts, highlighting the contributions that brought forth elements for the comprehension of possible transformations that have occurred in evaluative proposals and practices.

I make reference to previous instances of my own work (Sousa, 1994, 2000) concerning the dominant tendencies in the practice of school evaluation and contributions present in the literature that can be seen to contribute in that direction. These references show a delineation in the seating of cycle's policies, so that we can explore the intricate relations between cycles and evaluation. Prior to such considerations, we present some data that allow us to assay how schools are distributed and show cycle enrollments throughout the nation.

## **Cycles: encompassing the nation**

Data presented in tables 1 and 2 allow positing how the introduction of cycles within the Fundamental School has come about in Brazil, indicating their regional distribution, taking into account the number of schools as well as enrollments. It is noticeable that schools and enrollees are distinguished by cycles, "grades" and, in some cases, as a combination of cycles and grades,

which usually occurs when the cycles are exclusive in the first years of the Fundamental School's.

Table 1 – Fundamental School – schools in state and municipal systems by type of organization / Brazil and regions/2005

	Total	Cycles		Cycles/ Grades		Grades	
	n	n	%	n	%	n	%
Brazil	143,991	17,603	12.2	12,253	8.5	114,135	79.3
North	22,839	148	0.6	540	2.4	22,151	97
Northeast	68,363	2,614	3.8	2,185	3.2	63,564	93
Southeast	29,673	12,913	43.5	7,774	26.2	8986	30.3
South	16,589	1,378	8.3	1,068	6.4	14,143	85.3
Center-West	6,527	550	8.4	686	10.5	5,291	81.1

Source: MEC/INEP (data collected by Alavarse, 2007).

This data allows us to affirm that nearly the entirety of the public schools continued in a graded manner, corresponding to nearly 80% of established schools. The North and Northeast regions with 97% and 93% of the schools, respectively, are nearly all of the schools having this kind of organization. Also expressive is the percentage of grade schools in the South and Center-West.

By contrast we can see a predominance of schools in cycles and a combination of cycles/grades in the Southeast Region (from 20,687 schools) corresponding to approximately 70% of the schools in the country with this type of school organization (29,856). On the other hand, a predominance of schools organized in a combination in cycles/grades is noticeable in the Southeast Region (20.687 schools) that represents approximately 70% of the country's schools thus organized (29.856 establishments). It is important to point out that this Southeast Region configuration is the dominant configuration in the states of São Paulo and Minas Gerais, representing approximately 80% of the educational institutions which are organized in cycles or in combination of cycles/grades. The total number of public schools in São Paulo is 10,212, and of these 8,281 are organized by cycles and 283 in a combination of grades and cycles, in other words, only 16% of the institutions remain unchanged in all or part of their organization. Minas Gerais has 11,656 schools, of which 3,740 are organized in cycles, 3,773 in cycles and grades and 4,143 in grades, which is equivalent to 36% of the schools that have not implemented cycles.

**The enrollment data presented in Table 2, as expected, reiterates this observation.**

This data corroborates what is already known concerning the predominance of graded schools in Brazil and, once again, their high

percentage in the North and Northeast Regions, followed by the South and Center-West Regions. It is in the Southeast Region that we find a large number of non-graded schools, where 80% of the registration is in cycles or cycles/ grades combinations.

It is also noticeable that in spite of the large number of students enrolled in graded schools, the percentage of enrollments in this system is significantly reduced when compared to the percentage of graded schools, as shown in Table 1. While the number of graded schools represented 79,2% of the total number of schools in the country, grade enrollments represent 61,4%.

Table 2 – Fundamental School –Registration in state and municipal systems by type of organization / Brazil and Regions/ 2005

	Total		Cycles		Cycles/ Grades		Grades	
	n		n	%	n	%	n	%
Brazil	30,132,064		6,443,038	21.4	5,190,459	17.2	18,498,567	61.4
North	3,241,546		63,178	1.9	370,275	11.4	2,808,093	86.7
Northeast	10,185,782		451,767	4.4	893,670	8.8	8,840,345	86.8
Southeast	10,739,468		5,382,941	50.1	3,305,598	30.8	2,050,929	19.1
South	3,879,791		370,926	9.6	295,544	7.6	3,213,321	82.8
Center-West	2,147,207		174,226	8.1	327,255	15.2	1,645,726	76.7

Source: MEC/INEP (data collected by Alavarse, 2007).

In Table 3 there is data that allows us to determine the number of schools by administrative dominion, considering all of the country's Fundamental Schools.

Table 3 –Fundamental School– schools by administrative dominion and form of organization / Brazil / 2005

	Forms of organization							
	Total of schools		Grades		Cycles		Cycles and Grades	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Administrative Dominion								
Federal	42	0	39	92.9	3	7.1	0	0
State	29,639	18.2	16,930	57.1	7,256	24.5	5,453	18.4
Municipal	113,950	70.0	96,803	85.0	10,347	9.1	6,800	6.0
Private	19,096	11.7	18,658	97.7	384	2.0	54	0.3
TOTAL	162,727	----	132,430	81.4	17,990	11.1	12,307	7.6

Source: MEC/INEP (data collected by Alavarse, 2007).

As seen, the inclusion of data relative to the federal and private schools does not alter the previous observation that graded schools are predominant in the country which is why in nearly its entirety we do not see a pattern of

cycles being adopted. Also indicated is a predominant concentration of the Fundamental School in public facilities that, for the most part are municipal systems. However, when we try to identify where the regimen of cycles or cycle/ grades has been adopted, it is primarily in the state systems.

In Table 4, following, data is presented with reference to attendance in the Fundamental School in relation to administrative dominion, considering registration by grades, cycles, and grades/cycles.

Table 4 – Fundamental School– Registrations by administrative dominion and type of organization / Brazil/2005

	Types of organization							
	Total of schools		Grades		Cycles		Cycles and Grades	
Administrative Dependency Unit	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Federal	25.728	0,1	24.254	94,3	1.474	5,7	0	0
State	12.145.494	36,2	5.965.710	49,1	3.428.075	28,2	2.751.709	22,7
Municipal	17.986.570	53,6	12.532.857	69,7	3.014.963	16,8	2.438.750	13,6
Private	3.376.769	10,1	3.220.602	95,4	143.393	4,2	12.774	0,4
TOTAL	33.534.561	----	21.743.423	64,8	6.587.905	19,7	5.203.233	15,5

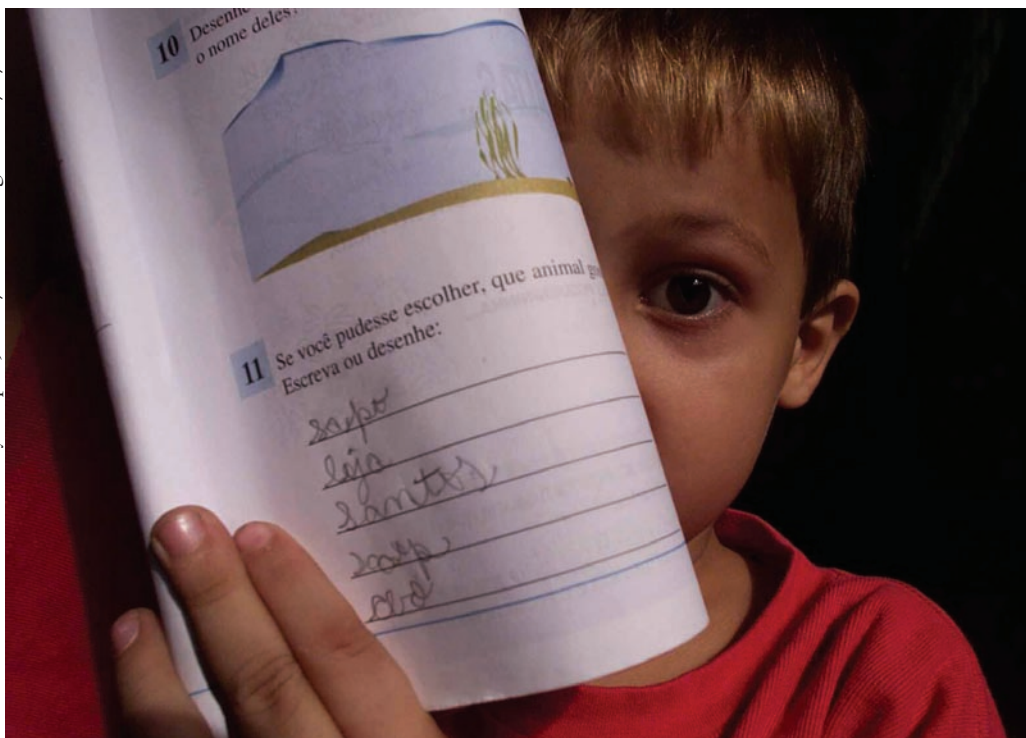
Source: MEC/INEP (data collected by Alavarse, 2007).

At the same time that the enrollment data reiterates a predominance of graded attendance, particularly in federal and private schools, it also indicates that the percentage of students attending in cycles and in cycles/grades combination is greater than the number of school establishments, certainly due to the size of the state schools that adopt cycles, which accept a larger contingent of students. Observing the total number of registrations in cycles and in cycle/ grades in the state and municipal systems, we have, respectively, 6,179,784 and 5,453,713 enrollments, which confirm that the municipal schools are smaller in size than state schools.

This data certainly would deserve different analytical nuance in the event diverse proposals were to be considered under the designation of cycles in the states and municipalities. As explored in Sousa & Alavarse (2003), cycles is an in-progress concept and a more detailed analysis indicates variations in the way they are understood, as well as in the way the policies have been conducted in the school systems that have implemented them.

### **Dominant characteristics in the practice of evaluation**

Since the publication of the Coleman Report (1966), a study conducted with thousands of North-Americans students, which emphasized the socio-economic and cultural characteristics in school performance, that are conducive to low valuation of factors internal to the school as conditions in



*A student from the city of Santos (SP) shows words that he tried to write with the help of his mother.*



*A student uses a pencil to write down dictated words in a public school class in São Paulo.*



relation to this performance, many other studies have been conducted with the intention of investigating the schools, seeking to conceive of proposals and practices that could contribute to making more relative for school outcome the weight of external variables.

For besides understanding the weight of socio-economic conditioning, of the socio-cultural environment, there is the recognition that school failure is also an expression of how the school is structured and organized, which imposes a critical eye on its rules, its rituals, its practices; finally, the sum of relations and interactions that are established within it.

In Brazil, particularly beginning in the 1980s, a movement began within educational research toward enhancement of the value of knowledge concerning the internal functioning of the school, seeking to uncover its internal mechanisms in the belief that by expressing relations of dominance possibilities of emancipation from it would be displayed.

This was inserted into surveys conducted in different Brazilian states and contexts, oriented toward characterizing and analyzing how learning evaluation functions within the school, with a goal of clarifying its significance, aiming to contribute to the proposition of viable alternatives of action for school democratization.<sup>1</sup>

In analyzing the information and considerations presented in these studies great consistency in the conclusions was observed, which allowed us the authority to speak of an “evaluative culture” strongly impregnated in school organization, directing the expectations and practices of teachers and other educational professionals, the students and the parents.

An accusation was recurrent that in its customary usage evaluation confuses measuring procedures with verification of school outcome, resulting in the attribution of a conception of or a score for the student being used as a point of reference for making the decision concerning promotion to the next grade or cycle. The results observed by means of testing procedures are not interpreted with a view toward generating possible changes or redirections in work proposals, nor of therefore being able to be translated into decisions and practices that are viable for creating excellence in school work.

The pass /fail system has taken central position in the relationship between teachers, students and parents, with the focus of their preoccupations not on learning but on grades obtained, number of points or grades necessary “to pass.” These results, by not being integrated into the teaching process so that they can provide assistance in defining directives and procedures for action, can be characterized as the product that, in spite of the large part of school work time they take up, is an unproductive ritual from a pedagogical point of view.

It is worth observing that evaluation, as a rule, has been used as an instrument for student control and adaptation of the student to educational and social conduct. Under the pretense of maintaining a favorable learning

environment, we work with the student in terms of submission and adequacy to standards and norms of behavior, punishing the “disobedient” student with a low grade, which could result in his failure to pass or even to convince him that he is incapable of adapting to school.

What was shown through the evaluation practices is that school, rather than making content more significant and, consequently interesting for the students, is organized from the standpoint of expectations that ignore its characteristics as a social entity, serving to exclude those originating from the worker class since they are more distanced from established norms and rules. Thus, under an apparently technical selection a social selection with consequences for the student’s self-image and self-esteem is conducted. Evaluation as an instrument used for discrimination becomes pedagogically unproductive and socially unfair.

Proposals for evaluation correspond to these objections, backed up by conceptions potentially capable of contributing to facing the challenge of democratization of the school.

The commitment addressed in these proposals is that of building a quality school for all, which essentially presupposes the commitment of its members to children remaining in school following their enrollment, and to their developmental process; the organization of work that both makes feasible and stimulates the acquisition and the building of knowledge and the development of a social subject; the establishment of shared power relationships weighted toward collective and cooperative work among school professionals, students and the community.

### **Perspectives aiming toward re-signification of evaluation**

With this understanding of quality of school work as the horizon, there are proposed perspectives for assessment that conceive of the school as a means of generating information about the educational process, supporting decisions about the interventions and necessary redirections for solidifying the pedagogical process.

Evaluation is configured as a practice of investigating the educational process, as a means of transforming the school reality. The needs, priorities and proposals for action are established by the subjects involved in the work process based on observation, on analysis, on critical reflection about reality. Therefore the educational dimension of the evaluation itself continually generates new evidence, challenges and needs in relation to the school context.

Evaluating the school context is beyond appreciation of the student’s performance, which should be analyzed in relation to the teacher’s performance and conditions of the school. In other words, it is necessary to build a systematic practice of evaluation of the various organizational subjects and components, such as the interaction of the teacher and of other

professionals, the contents and processes of the school; the conditions, dynamics and work relations; the physical resources and materials available; the integration of the school with the community and even the evaluation system itself. In other words, institutional evaluation should be implemented with the institutional pedagogical project as a point of reference.

With such a reach, student evaluation makes possible identification of difficulties, successes and failures, supporting paths and decisions about necessary actions to be taken, whether of a pedagogical, administrative or structural nature.

Within the evaluation of student learning a developmental dimension is stressed, directed toward diagnosing and stimulating the advance of knowledge. Therefore its results should serve orientation of learning, accomplishing an eminently educational end, breaking with the false dichotomy between teaching and evaluation.

Such a concept of evaluation, since the middle of the 1980s, has been continually gaining more space in the field's literature as well as being debated by educational professionals active in the school. However, studies have shown that such production has not been influential in redirecting the dominant tendency of the conception and practices of evaluation in our school institutions.

The construction of a new standard for evaluation necessarily imposes integration with a movement toward the constitution of a new school, which presupposes:

Involvement with the production of innovations that can contribute to establishing a rupture with the invariant organization of school establishments as expressed by standardized modes and organization of spaces (the classroom), time (a 50 minute class), subject matter (fields), groupings of students (the class) and the teacher's work (individual and solitary). These unchangeable induce highly internalized modes of action resting on beliefs that begin with a process of "naturalization" of the school institution, which makes the reality familiar, making critical questioning difficult. This "naturalized" vision of the school has tended to hide the fact that school organization as we know it corresponds to a historical "invention" that allows different possible futures. (Canário, 1999, p.278-9)

By implementing different forms of organization of school work that point toward a break with the idea of grade sequences which are at the root of the school tradition, questions of modes, relations and dynamics impregnated in the conceptions and practices of school agents are posed which express values that nurture school work. In order to be viable the politics of cycles demand, besides objective work conditions, a confrontation with the *dominant culture* of the institutions. It is within this framework that any intentions concerning the transformation of the ends and procedures of the school evaluation are situated.



## Cycles and evaluation

The implementation of cycles in Brazil as a reorganization for the Fundamental School has been backed up by arguments that cite it as an alternative that increases the potential for school democratization, despite identifiable differences in the school system structures in which they have been implemented. Even school organization by grades does not necessarily result in an exclusionary school conception, which with its origins and dynamics deeply-rooted in conceptions of the school agents, and in the practices that occur within the school systems, contribute to classificatory, selective and ingrained processes of inequality that do not coincide with the proposition of democratization.

The implementation of cycles, anticipating the organizing of school work on a new basis, assumes treating knowledge as a process and therefore as an experience which is coincident not with the idea of interruption, but rather of construction, in which the student, as the subject of the action, is continually being prepared, or better, preparing himself, constructing meanings that have as their base the relations that he establishes with the world and with other human beings.

The dynamic nature of relative and plural knowledge gaining centrality as opposed to the notion of knowledge as something static, which translates itself into a simple list of content and abilities to be mastered by the students, in a given time, in a cumulative mode, without consideration for the individual and socio-cultural differences of the students, has historically resulted in the exclusion and selectivity in our teaching system of a significant portion of those entering the system.

What is in question is the constitution of a school whose agenda by commitment with both school and social inclusion of all, breaks with the traditionally assimilated notion that its function is to transmit given bodies of information that need to be assimilated by all students, but who, “as already known,” do not all have the conditions to master them (self-fulfilling prophecies), in the pre-established times and conditions, thus continuing with the high and persistent indices of school failure.

Certainly, within all the school practices and routines, that which is most directly “weakened” by the implementation of cycles is evaluation, since its re-signification in the school practice is necessary for making reorganization of the school process a reality. The challenge is to put evaluation to the service of school democratization, assuming it to be a process capable of contributing to the advance of knowledge about the context through analysis, informing about reality, revealing intentions, demonstrating practical tendencies, producing assistance for the construction of responses and proposals for intervention that can make more concrete the potential reality of a school for all.

The vision that is imposed by cycles is the construction of a quality school for all, for which a new organization of school work is also imposed, capable of provoking a transformation in the classificatory and selective culture that is dominant in the school system today.

It seems however to be the school that is resisting transformation. Even in school systems that organize their curricula in cycles breaking with annual grades organization, usually adopting new regulations concerning student evaluation, contemplating the idea of a school path progression under different nomenclature still seems to be dominant, even though the practice of evaluation with a selective and classificatory end is inconsistent with its own notion of cycles and progression. In response to the comment about school quality and students remaining in public school Beisiegel (2005, p.164), referring to the São Paulo public systems, points out that

the reactions contrary to the new approach have been very strong among teachers, parents of the students, journalists and politicians, including opposition parties. The impossibility of failure has been presented as one of the main reasons for this resistance.

The behavior is surely paradoxical. There is a need for improvement in the quality of teaching, combating exclusion of lower-classes, but at the same time, a refusal of the validity of an approach to the organization of studies which ensures that the student will remain in the course. [...] It is definitely easier to not allow the student to pass to the next level and to exclude the student who has learning difficulties than to learn how to work with him [...] Democratization is defended, but its consequences are denied. And among these consequences that are intrinsic to democratization, above all, is the presence in itself of children and youth from the lower-classes in school.

Contributions from other studies conducted in Brazil suggest that such observations can be extrapolated to other teaching systems that implement cycles. Looking for elements in the studies that are being developed in different contexts and school systems helps in understanding the interactions that have been constructed by the schools with the cycle policies while at the same time assisting with recommendations in the direction of proposals and practices that contribute to realizing a school consistent with making viable the right of all to education.

In this regard, we take as principal reference the *current state of knowledge* entitled *Ciclos e progressão escolar no Brasil (Cycles and School Progression in Brazil)* (Sousa & Barretto, 2004),<sup>2</sup> relative to academic works published between 1990 and 2002. The research encompasses different points of focus for mapping and analyzing of the theme; however in this text we will limit ourselves to considerations concerning evaluation.

A first aspect to highlight is that, of the 108 texts that were summarized<sup>3</sup> and that comprise the research report, corresponding to 117

titles published during the period, 54% make explicit reference to the theme of evaluation of learning. This observation provides us with evidence of the central position assumed by the transformation of evaluation as a condition for making real the perspective of an inclusive school that is woven into the policies of cycles.

In consulting the thoughts and observations concerning learning assessment in the context of cycles that emanate from released studies we note recurrent themes in these following highlights:

- organization of school in cycles confronts complex processes of reproduction of the logic and politics of exclusion, which runs throughout all social institutions such as school, and demands alterations in the school system and in various dimensions of the didactic processes, within which reside our evaluation processes and our mechanisms of retention and failure;
- evaluation is singled out as one of the principal factors in producing school repetition, constituting the principal means of legitimizing school failure;
- changing the ends that evaluation has been serving– to discriminate, classify, select – is a condition for overcoming the regimen of organization by grade; the challenge is experienced as a developing process that assists in decision making and in improvement of the quality of the school; evaluation should be ongoing, providing information about the student's progress in relation to his learning and to the proposed objectives, also encompassing an appreciation of work developed in conjunction with the school; evaluation should be perceived as an investigatory process in order to reorient the school, help the student to know himself and help the school to execute its pedagogical policy project;
- families tend to have difficulty understanding the non-grade mode of school organization and manifest fear that their children will go through school without learning; they consider that a program without failure indicates disregard by the school toward their children, which reveals a lack of comprehension of the logic in the evaluation of the proposal;
- the absence of school failure generated(s) a lack of motivation for studies in students;
- the discourse by teachers usually expresses a position contrary to successive failures, indicating a defense of ongoing and developmental evaluation; however, they resent the ending of grades and the possibility of failure at the end of the grade unit which, as they understand it, removes discipline and student performance from the teacher's control; the existence of a feeling of lessened value of the school and of the teacher is registered as due to the

difficulties raised by working without the power of control that the possibility of failure permits;

- resistance of the teachers is understood, in part, from the loss of evaluation from the implementation of cycles, interpreted as a measure the purpose of which is reduction of costs and of the indices of drop-out and failure;
- there are references to which the treatment given to evaluation of learning in the organization of the school in cycles in documents elaborated by Education Boards tend to emphasize the “how to evaluate,” exploring with lesser intensity the bases for qualifying learning;
- there are manifestations in the sense of recognizing that the conception of grades was not modified, having in practice not had substantive change, but simply facilitating the students’ travel on the school road; also, there are records that indicate techniques that can be found in the aim of the school to “dribble” organization into a non-grade alternative, such as: unofficial transfer of the student from one class to another; formation of classes by level of performance, denominated as weak, average and strong; characterizing school failure as abandonment or excessive student absence;
- grades continue to be the principal reference point in the teacher-student-parent relationship.

The aspects that are considered here concerning cycles and evaluation suggest that there is still much further to go in making a non-graded school a reality, as well as a perspective of evaluation that is in the service of development of all students. Major advances in implementing the policy of cycles necessarily presuppose comparison of the idea that everyone has the right to school and to learning, with school failure as “natural,” expressed in the acceptance of the idea persistent in school and in society that not all who enter school are capable of development.

Although the tendency of the studies is rather to demonstrate that little has been done in the effective implementation of the proposal, there are references in the research to movements containing positive aspects that are being forged in the school: improvement of student self-concept by eliminating the label of “repeater,” mobilization of school professionals for discussing alternatives that show greater adjustment to the accomplishment of work; more students staying in school, and regularization of the school flow.

Regularization of the flow and increase in the contingent of students who finish Fundamental School are some of the aspects that have raised tensions in the debate. There are authors who express their concern that school selectivity persists, even if this is not concretely demonstrated by school failure or drop out, but by access of the students to knowledge.

Demo (1998) takes a stance against the suppression of failure, observing that it runs the risk of promoting students without the necessary

learning, causing the public school to be recognized as something poor for the poor. Vasconcellos (1999) warns that the end of repetition is an advance, but that it is fundamental that the teacher's commitment to the development of his students exists, since the contrary could represent a "dismissal of the teacher," distancing him from the task of teaching. Steinvasher (2000) comments that, in spite of the change in the indices of failure and regularization of student flow, implementation of continued progression did not restructure the school organization so as to guarantee student learning, which could generate new forms of exclusion within the school. Freitas (2004), by analyzing the policy of cycles, comments on the possibility of this policy of deepening social and cultural inequalities to the extent that the students, marked by discrimination and exclusion, would go through school without solid and significant learning. The interpretation of Weisz (2000) walks in the same direction, suggesting that, with continued progression, the classes would continue being divided between "those who go" and "those who don't go," but with a small difference: before they were those who were "going to learn and pass the year and those who would neither learn nor pass the year," while today all "pass the year," however only some "are going" to learn.

Evaluation in this process of perpetuating selectivity occupies the spotlight and, in the event it will not be assumed in its constitutive sense, in other words, in supporting the development of the student, it can be assumed in the name of democratization of the school, the purpose always declared within the policies of cycles, that it continues to further disqualify substantial contingents of the Brazilian population (Sousa, 2000).

The few studies with an orientation toward analysis of the relations between quality of teaching and cycles, with a focus on their eventual relations with student performance, however, provide no evidence of damage having been caused in school performance that could be attributed to their implementation, if for no other reasons, possibly because even in the systems that had implemented cycles many traces of organization by grades still persisted.

Ferrão et al. (2002), in research that sought to explore relations between policies of non-repeating and quality of education, with evidence obtained from the beginning of the modeling of SAEB-99's 4<sup>th</sup> grade data, affirmed that:

The results suggest there is no existence of a qualitatively degrading educational effect that is attributable to the policies of non-repeating in public schools. In other words, no evidence was detected that academic performance of students with deficiencies is inferior to the performance of students of an appropriate age as a consequence of the type of school organization that is active in the schools they attend. Also, no evidence was found that students who were disadvantaged from a socio-economic point of view, studying in schools with automatic promotion, had performance inferior to their colleagues.

Having as reference studies about student performance, Franco (2004, p.38) presented the following affirmation as one of his conclusions:



Available evidence does not contradict the affliction of politicians and the sectors of society that tend to associate cycles with the deterioration of quality. Primarily, because school organization in cycles still has minor representation for making a difference in Brazil as a whole, for better or worse. Secondly, because the deterioration of quality occurring in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade was not concentrated in the section of the educational system organized in cycles. Thirdly, because research that tried to directly measure the effect of school organization concerning proficiency (Ferrão, Beltrão & Santos, 2002) – which needs to be considered with caution, in the face of the enormous limitations in the data available –, does not contradict the association between the manner of organization and decline in proficiency. Finally, because the research that sought to map the social context of the schools organized in cycles (Fernandes, 2003) indicates that cycled schools were implemented in particularly complicated social contexts with expressed deficiencies, even in relation to the resources directly connected to the conception inherent in cycle education, as in the example of team teaching stability.

Alavarse (2007), in an investigation that sought to explore the evidence regarding the impact of cycles on student performance, explored the results of “Prova Brasil”, formally known as the National Evaluation of School Results and the National Basic Education Evaluation System (SAEB). In relation to the results of “Prova Brasil” 2005, the author comments:

In cycle systems in which, even when there has not been a great transformation with respect to grade, toward reduction of failure, these gains have been made with little age-grade distortion and with little drop-out. This means that, unfortunately, at the level of low graduation, schools in cycles tend to less exclusion and, in reverse, the schools in grades, in which the levels of exclusion are greater, within the framework of discussion that they would prevent a decline in quality, what could be intuited is that with fewer students – or with a social cost due to failure– the results do not seem to sustain such selective practices. (ibid, p.176)

Regarding to SAEB, from the data analyzed, Alavarse (2007, p.180) comes to a similar conclusion, affirming that “there are no indicators that demonstrate that cycles, or at least not having failure, have produced an erosion in the quality of the teaching.”

Finishing his exploration of the data from “Prova Brasil” and SAEB, Alavarse (2007, p.180) concluded that:

There are no indicators that demonstrate that cycles, or at least absence of failure, have produced erosion in the quality of teaching. The question cycles or grades? raises, from the extant data, is to relocate the problem, understood as the establishment of performance benchmarks of democratization of teaching, is still within the pattern. . .

It seems that, taking into account the contributions made by these studies, organization by cycles has had an impact on students remaining in school and resulted in less age-grade distortion; however, the greater frequency with which students remain in school has not had corresponding gains in the learning of *all* the students, that are revealed by improvement in school performance. Confronting student selectivity goes beyond making possible a greater number of children and young people remaining in school, presupposing furthering the possibilities of promotion and development of all students.

In reality, the available evidence suggests that the cycles proposals, in their implementation, have not provoked substantive alterations in the logic of organization of school work, among those being assessed, as reflected in educational practices,.

The way that the evaluation is being experienced tends to reiterate conceptions and practices that have been dominant in the school and, in this manner, has contributed little to the construction of an inclusive school. What the studies analyzing the ongoing experiments reveal is that, in essence, the ends and means of evaluation are little changed, even when the aim has not been the decision of passing/failing the students. It continues to be a challenge to realize an evaluative practice that is put to the service of teaching quality, the intention of which is the promotion of learning of *all* students. These same studies, however, inform that the base in which traditionally evaluation is settled is shaken up, raising debates and shocks within the school. This process, one hopes, perhaps can provoke more substantive transformations. As Arcas (2003) says:

We have still not identified a more significant change of evaluation, we observe that it is becoming the center of the debates within the school, making it possible, perhaps, that conceptions and practices can be, at least little by little, transformed. In that regard, we cannot leave off considering that the conditions of work and learning need to be improved, for which a more evolved assessment can be effective.

What we want to stress are the potentialities generated by the cycles, affirming that it might be a step backwards in terms of school democratization to return to the grade system. In this sense, reiterating Freitas's understanding (2004, p.22):

With all its problems continued progression and the cycles are a clear advance in relation to the conservative vision of the grade system. It is still preferable to have a student who, even without learning, remains on the inside to denounce a school that denies him his promised liberal citizenship, than to have this student excluded from the school and silenced. We should force the system in the direction of the cycles.

In this same sense, we have the position of Sousa & Barretto (2004), in their affirmation that among the educational reforms implemented in the

name of educational quality in recent years, the ones that introduced cycles, quite possibly represent the greatest potential for reinforcing this proposition, stating that:

Putting in question and in tension the dominant educational and social vision in which it is seated, public education, , the cycles provoke a confrontation with values in both the school and in society, among them, acceptance of inequalities due to individual differences. They address a conception of school work that has as a belief the possibility of development of all the students and as a commitment to combatting school failure.

The challenge that the implementation of cycles creates is the fulfillment of the proposition of school democratization, proclaimed in governmental plans as well as in school plans. In the school plan transformations are implied in the logic of its organization, which has been in large part sustained by the significance usually assumed by evaluation. It is worth remembering the expression used by Perrenoud (1999, p.173), “changing evaluation probably means changing the school.” And the author adds: “Don’t mess with my evaluation! It is our cry as soon as we perceive that is enough to pulling from point of evaluation is to unravel the tangled ball...”

Without doubt, a destabilizing process of the traditional practices of learning assessment already has been triggered in the school systems that have implemented cycles; what remains is to construct alternatives of action that demonstrate capability of promoting school quality, not only within the realm of the schools but also within educational policies,. As Mainardes (2001, p.51) says:

Without the combined efforts from the educational system managers, from the school units, from the educators and other professionals involved, tied to clarifications made to the parents and to the students, changes as radical as the organization in cycles could weaken even more the structure and the functioning of the schools, causing very serious damage to the processes of learning and constitution of subjects.

From this perspective Sousa & Barretto (2004) suggest that in order to guarantee that so potentially valuable a measure for assuring democratization of the school as the introduction of cycles does not cause a break in commitment to the learning process, it is vital to introduce into the debate about reorganization of the school an analysis of the role and function that has been performed by governmental attempts toward public school reconstruction that goes beyond analyses of schools’ internal conditions. In other words, since it is the directors that guide educational policies, positive conditions that can support a reorganization of school work demand an analysis offering a comprehensive vision of the movement for reconstructing the bases on which the foundation of the school work lies, and of the processes of adhesion and resistance to the vision of democratization of education.

## Notes

- 1 In relation to the years 1980 to 1990, see Sousa (1994); in relation to the year 1990, see Barretto & Pinto (2001).
- 2 The Research relied on the participation of the following education post-graduate students of FeUSP: Ocimar Munhoz Alavarse, Andréa Steinvasher, Paulo Henrique Arcas, Alexandre Cândido de Oliveira Campos e Patrícia Moulin Mendonça.
- 3 In the case of texts that were released by the author in more than one compilation with similar content, the decision was to elaborate a single summary, with an explanation of not having 117, but 108 summaries.

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*ABSTRACT* – The text focuses on the implications of learning assessment on cycle-based schooling organization aimed at democratizing education. The analysis is based on typical elements of dominant tendencies in learning assessment practices and on contributions from the literature on the theme. In order to contextualize the range of the implantation of cycles in Brazilian territory, it presents data that allows us to weigh the distribution of schools and enrollments in these cycles as a function of administrative dependence.

*KEYWORDS* – Basic Education, Cycle, Evaluation, Education Democratization.

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