

Analysing curriculum development through schools' external evaluation – the guidelines in Portugal and England

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Abstract

The establishment of basic standards for school education in Europe, since the end of the 20th century, alongside with a movement for school autonomy, in the late 80's (Eurydice, 2007), raised concerns with the quality of schools management and educational service, curriculum included (Clímaco, 2005; Key, 2002; Alaíz, Góis, & Gonçalves 2003). As a result, many countries created accountability and quality assurance systems, such as school evaluation (SE) processes. This paper aims to answer the question of how SE processes, particularly school external evaluation (SEE) address curriculum planning and development, in Portugal and England, by analysing the SEE framework used in both countries, and identifying key indicators for assessing the curriculum. The main conclusions are: 1) Portugal's SEE framework covers a wide range of indicators and targets mostly curriculum development initiatives; 2) England's SEE framework focuses mostly on teachers' posture and dedication, and on the learning environment.

Keywords: curriculum development; schools external evaluation; frameworks.

Introduction

It is of common knowledge that education is a key part of every society, being the process, *par excellence*, through which every individual grows into a citizen, develops the social skills and personal competences to actively participate in society, (European Union Council, 2009). This is why a quality school education, with better and fairer opportunities for access and success, is a right of all citizens, as supported by the “*education for all*” movement and by the ‘World Declaration on Education for All: Meeting Basic Learning Needs’ (UNESCO, 1990). At the same time, school education should prepare citizens for entering the labour market, providing them with the opportunities to acquire the necessary skills, competences and knowledge to answer to market demands, which makes schools central pieces to social cohesion and for societies' progress. This scenario made imperative to ensure the quality of school education, and gave place to a number of measures aiming to promote such

quality in educational systems, all across Europe. With this goal in mind, since the late 80's (Eurydice, 2007), many countries travelled from a centralized governing of schools to a decentralization of power and the assignment of more responsibilities to schools, that is, of more autonomy. This movement, based on the belief that a certain amount of pedagogical autonomy – within a national standardized curriculum – would most likely be able to meet the quality goals as it enabled to address specific issues in a more appropriate and effective way (Alaíz, Góis, & Gonçalves 2003; Devos & Verhoeven, 2003; Sheerens, 2003; Reezigt & Creemers, 2005; Eurydice, 2007; Figueroa, 2008; Grek et al., 2009; Coe, 2009; Gorad, 2010; Schildkamp et al., 2012) resulted in more decision making for schools in terms of management, but mostly, in terms of planning and developing the teaching and learning process and the curriculum. Also, as the phenomenon of globalization was settled, the economy evolved, and the market thinking spread across Europe, it became essential to ensure high standards for education to respond to the demands of industry, science, research and technology (The Economic and Social Committee, 2000). As a result, demands for higher efficiency filled the discourses, drawing more attention to the quality of services and the achievements in every social field, education included. Last, but not least, the issue of *accountability* (Afonso, 2009) gained a place in a context of decentralization of power. If, on the one hand, schools became a central pillar of modern societies, became more autonomous regarding in management and pedagogical aspects in order to promote quality and efficiency, and basic quality standards were defined for all schools to reach, aiming to encourage more quality, on the other hand it became essential to ensure that school work lived up to the expectations. In other words, accountability measures emerged as an alternative to centralized governance and as a response to the need of ensuring that schools were working to meet the goals set for education. As a result, many European countries developed and implemented quality assurance systems for education, many of those in the form of school evaluation processes (Faubert, 2009). These systems aim to: 1) ensure that schools achieve the quality and efficiency requirements in terms of the educational service provided – pedagogical practices, teaching and learning environment, curriculum development; 2) ensure that schools reach the goals settled for school education in terms of students' results; 3) ensure that schools are able to efficiently manage human, material and financial resources; and 4) find ways of improving educational systems by understanding what is being done in schools, and what needs to be adjusted and improved (Figueroa, 2008; Grek, et al., 2009; Hadji, 1994; Dupriez & Maroy, 2003; Wrigley, 2003; West, Mattei, & Roberts, 2011; Ehren & Swanborn, 2012).

The school evaluation processes across Europe present a variety of modalities and forms, but they are generally school self-evaluation processes, school external evaluation processes, or both (Faubert, 2009). A look upon what is being done in terms of school evaluation in Europe shows that SE processes have, mainly, three focus: on the procedures, concerning a verification of at what extent are schools' work in compliance with regulations; on outcomes, concerning the results achieved by schools in general and students in particular; or on both procedures and outcomes, concerning all aspects of school work, from management to the provision of educational service (*ibidem*). This last one is of

particular relevance, once the «evaluation and assessment frameworks have no value if they do not lead to the improvement of classroom practice and student learning» (OECD, s/d). Since classroom practices are directly linked with curriculum development, it is relevant to understand how curriculum, and specifically the curriculum development, is addressed in school external evaluation processes, and if SE is capable of producing effective changes and improvements in schools educational service.

This paper can constitute a first step in addressing this question, as it aims to understand how the issue of curriculum planning and development is considered in school external evaluation processes. The work and conclusions presented in this paper are part of a wider research on SE processes, both external and self-evaluation, and their effects in schools' functioning, focused on school evaluation processes developed in Portugal and England. The two countries were selected due to their similar journey in SE. Both Portugal and England are good examples of the school autonomy movement, having travelled from a centralized educational governance towards a more decentralized organization during the final years of the 80's and 90's and, as a result, both engaged in accountability systems with the same basic characteristics where the authorities in education «... most frequently through the inspectorates... became responsible for evaluating schools in the context of autonomy» (Eurydice, 2007, p. 39). In addition the SE model used in Portugal and England has its basis on the one from Scotland, *How Good is our School*. Finally, both are European countries, influenced by the same international and European recommendations, but are located in different geographical areas of Europe. For all this, it seemed interesting to explore the SE processes of Portugal and England, in their similarities and differences and is based on some first conclusions from this approach that this paper is built on. The conclusions present an analysis of the external evaluation framework used by the agencies responsible for SEE, in Portugal and England (IGEC and OFSTD, respectively), focused particularly on the domain "provision of educational service", and identifies the key factors and indicators used to assess curriculum development.

A theoretical perspective on school evaluation

As the concept of evaluation gained new features, functions and meaning throughout time, it also acquired a different place in society. It stopped being just a form of performance judgement, to also become a tool for diagnosis and for analysis. Evaluation started to be seen as a potential promoter of quality, efficiency and an indicator to define improvement and, therefore, it became a strong ally for individuals and institutions (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Leite, Rodrigues, & Fernandes, 2006). Scientific research in the last years has been arguing in favour of evaluation as a useful strategy for the regulation and development of institutions and services, such as schools, as it provides information and creates conditions for action (Reezigt & Creemers, 2005; Plowright, 2007; Sun, Creemers, & Hong, 2007; Campbell & Levin, 2009; Coe, 2009; Hofman, Dijkstra, & Hofman, 2009). The process of evaluation lies on gathering and analysing information, aiming to identify the main aspects of what is being evaluated, both positive and negative, to understand what "went wrong" and what was most successful and why, and more importantly, to find

alternatives and ways for solving problems (Hayman & Napier, 1979; Reezigt & Creemers, 2005; Coe, 2009). It is precisely due to this feature that SE becomes essential. It enables to analyse and assess the work developed and its correspondence with the goals previously defined, but it also identifies the main issues that influence the quality of the educational service provided and school management, both by enhancing it as well as by constraining it (Clímaco, 1992; 2005; Díaz, 2003; Scheerens, 2003). SE allows to collect information on school, school environment and school reality, based on which is possible to design some strategies and measures in order to overcome the problematic situations and, consequently, to 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). It is possible, then, to state that SE creates opportunities for knowledge production on schools functioning, concerning students' learning results, curricular processes, pedagogical approaches, teachers' work, educational management, etc., and for identifying school's strengths and weaknesses, making possible to define improvement strategies and the development of schools and, at a major scale, the improvement of educational systems. Furthermore, school evaluation serves another important purpose, the one of accountability. A number of social and political circumstances arising from the expansion of economic principles to all sectors of modern societies led to the need of verifying the quality of the social services provided, amongst which is school education, and the accomplishment of basic goals and standards (Wrigley, 2003; West, Mattei, & Roberts, 2011; Ehren & Swanborn, 2012; Hadji, 1994; Dupriez & Maroy, 2003). Also, it became necessary to inform all those with interest in the social services, *stakeholders*, on the quality of such services and their functioning. In what concerns to school education, and within this scenario, SE process appeared as a solution. By providing information about the school's functioning in terms of results and success, but also in terms of management, SE became an asset for schools' own regulation and development and for responding to accountability demands.

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, as it constitutes the cornerstone for 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 grasped in the framework guiding those processes. For this reason, this paper presents the results of an analysis of the evaluation framework used in schools' external evaluation, in Portugal (General Inspectorate of Education and Science – IGEC) and England (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills – OFSTED), focusing on the issue of curriculum.

School external evaluation in Europe – why?

When studying school evaluation in Europe, a first question to be considered is simply: *Why?* What lies in the basis of school evaluation, regardless of its nature – self or external? As evaluation processes deeply enter

in schools and impact on schools' functioning, it is relevant to comprehend the motivations underneath such a measure and its wide spreading across European countries. It is possible to find four major aspects that could justify SE: 1) the belief that evaluation processes have the potential to actively contribute to school regulation and development – which was already explored in; 2) the tension between the socioeconomic and cultural development and school education centrality; 3) the concerns with quality and efficiency; and 4) the issues of autonomy and accountability. The first aspect was already explored in the section 2, where the theoretical was discussed. For this reason, this section will contemplate mostly the remaining three aspects.

2) The tension between the socioeconomic and cultural development and school education centrality

In Europe, school education is growing as a social and political concern, becoming a central feature of debate, driven by concerns with quality and efficiency. School education acts as catalyst for children to develop and grow into active, responsible, critical thinker and successful citizens, and is a privileged moment for learning. School education is, also, the place where young people learn subjects and contents considered essential, and acquire knowledge and develop the skills necessary for a future place in the work market. There has been a rise in arguments focusing on the need to prepare students for an active life in society, and provide them the conditions to develop a set of skills and competencies to live and contribute to society (European Parliament and Council, 2001; European Parliament and Council, 2006; Commission of the European Communities, 2007). In addition, the past three decades have been fruitful in social challenges, in Europe, many of them associated with economic issues, which impact directly on the work market and, consequently, it is necessary to look at education in this perspective and the tension it can create. More and more, societies demand different skills from citizens, and the ability to find innovative ways of approaching problems and situations. This evolution happens at an impressive rate, resulting in constantly changing demands addressed to schools and school education. Schools are currently bound to provide students with the conditions to develop the necessary skills and competences required by society. The current labour market needs not only skilled professionals, qualified and specialized for a particular job, but also, as stated by Toner (2011, p. 32) workers presenting «... 'functional flexibility' in that their greater stock of knowledge increases the rate at which they learn and develop higher order problem solving skills». There is no doubt about the essential part that schools and school education play in the development of such skilled workers. However, it seems that school education has not been able to keep up with social evolution, and change, leading to a mismatch between what is taught in schools during students' formation, and what is needed in the work market, in the societies (Marchesi, 2002; European Commission, 2012).

It is in this sense that school evaluation is justified. Through SE it is possible to follow schools evolution and the educational service provided, and to identify the aspects in need for intervention, in order to better match the real demands. In sum, school evaluation helps to ensure that schools are responding

to societal needs and preparing children for their future life as active citizens and skilled and versatile professionals.

3) *The concerns with quality and efficiency*

The inevitable changes, resulting from scientific, technologic, societal and economical demands, places school education in the front line of demands for higher quality and for ways of ensuring the quality of school education. School evaluation processes emerge in this scenario, as a means of assessing the quality of schools work in terms of their organization, their functioning, and the results achieved in relation to the goals and standards set for school education. Through schools' evaluation it is possible to understand how this level of quality is being ensured (Faubert, 2009), especially regarding the quality of the classroom work, which is directly linked to students' outcomes and to school quality. So, it is clear that schools are vital for responding to socioeconomic and technological challenges faced by European nations (European Union Council, 2009). It is, therefore, crucial to ensure the quality and effectiveness of the educational service, and to ensure that schools and educational systems are able to reach the goals set for them, by means of adequate practices (Figueroa, 2008; Grek et al., 2009). European recommendations stress that European nations should use «... quality assurance and evaluation systems in assessing their quality and becoming more effective in what they deliver; to ensure the best use of resources available to them; and to direct investment in human and financial terms where it will be most useful» (Commission of the European Communities, 2001, p. 5).

Also, due to the competitive and demanding features of a globalized world (Dias Sobrinho, 2012), schools are constantly facing comparisons between themselves, nationally and internationally. For instance, the *PISA programme*, 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)* are clear examples of attempts to compare school education among European nations. This setting creates tension, especially when the comparison falls mostly on school outcomes and on students' learning outcomes. However there are also other aspects taken into consideration, related with school management and, more importantly, with pedagogical and curricular matters. The comparison focuses on ensuring school quality, at all educational levels, regardless of the differences between nations (European Parliament and Council, 2001).

In Europe, the pursuit for quality of educational systems and schools led to the creation and implementation of quality assurance systems. These are believed to be able to provide information and feedback on the work developed by schools (Cedefop, 2011), that could contribute for their improvement (Leite, Rodrigues, & Fernandes, 2006; Leite & Fernandes, 2014). Evaluation processes are the centerpiece of quality assurance systems, and it is believed that even though «... school evaluation systems vary in their characteristics, they share a common global purpose of improving teaching and learning» (Faubert, 2009, p. 6). In fact, there is no point in developing such systems if their goal is not to improve the quality of the school work.

Evaluation processes are rich in gathering information on the overall school functioning, on teachers and other school professionals' performance, on students' success, and on the adequateness of resources' use. Therefore it helps schools to look at themselves critically and to identify strengths, weaknesses and needs (Commission of the European Communities, 2007). As stated by the Commission of the European Communities (2001, p. 13), when referring to the potential of quality assurance systems, «... their application leads to the increase in quality not just in the administrative areas of school life, but in the quality of the learning experience provided to young people and thereby the overall impression that the local community has of a school».

When analyzing schools evaluation processes it is important to distinguish between self-evaluation and external evaluation. It is common knowledge that self-evaluation is developed by the school and school staff, and external evaluation is developed by professional bodies or specialized professionals. Despite the nature of the evaluation process, it is important to recognize that it provides valid and useful information on school functioning, able to serve both the purpose of accountability (Faubert, 2009) – as will be further explored hereafter –, and to support improvement measures and contribute to fight school problems (European Parliament and Council, 2001). But, in order to ensure that quality systems and evaluation processes have an effective and positive impact on schools, it is essential to pay attention to what happens in the *classroom*. Therefore, it is important to recognize that «... effective links to classroom practice is a key policy challenge in the design of evaluation and assessment framework» (OECD, s/d, p. 2), such as the one analysed in this paper, concerning the curriculum.

4) The issues of autonomy and accountability

Since the 1990's, the European context experienced a transfer and a decentralization of power and responsibilities from the state to public organisms, like schools. This process resulted in more autonomy granted to schools and an increase of school responsibilities (Eurydice, 2007). It seems that, in Europe, greater school autonomy is seen as a potential «... tool to be used to improve the quality of education (...) Greater attention is paid to pedagogic autonomy which seems more closely linked to raising achievement at school» (Eurydice, 2007, p. 12). By granting more autonomy in terms of pedagogical practices and curriculum development, a range of possibilities appears for schools to better address their students' specific needs, and to find the best means and practices to promote learning. At the same time, it enables schools to rearrange their resources and knowledge so that they are able to meet the real needs and situations. In Europe there has been a trend to provide more autonomy to schools, in what concerns to management, as well as to pedagogical practices and curriculum development (Faubert, 2009). But school autonomy also raises other issues. If, on one hand, more autonomy allows schools to adapt and design contextualized strategies to meet their reality; on the other hand, it raises issues related with the efficiency of schools' work, in terms of students' achievement rates, and resource management. This is where quality assurance systems and evaluation processes appear. In fact, there seems to be an increase of school evaluation processes as

school's governance in European nations becomes more decentralized and extra autonomy is granted to schools.

It becomes essential to ensure that schools develop a quality work; that they are able to reach the educational goals; and that they adequately manage their financial, material and human resources. That is, «this increased autonomy has been balanced by the strengthening of accountability through the setting of outcome assessments and national standards that all schools should meet» (Faubert, 2009, p. 7).

In sum, the demands of higher quality addressed to schools, the greater autonomy granted to them and concerns with accountability, justify actions and initiatives for quality assessment (Leite, Morgado and Seabra, 2014). The literature presents a wide range of studies proving that school evaluation processes are rooted on these concerns, as well as on the belief that evaluation has the potential to provide valid information on the quality of the work developed (Reezigt & Creemers, 2005; Plowright, 2007; Sun, Creemers, & Hong, 2007; Campbell & Levin, 2009; Coe, 2009; Hofman, Dijkstra, & Hofman, 2009), guaranteeing a solid foundation for intervention and action aimed at improvement (Hayman & Napier, 1979; Hadji, 1994; Marchesi, 2002; Reezigt & Creemers, 2005; Campbell & Levin, 2009; Coe, 2009). In this vein, many European countries opted for developing and creating agencies and processes to evaluate their educational systems, focusing mainly on school work and students success rate.

Methodological approach

As previously mentioned, this paper presents the results of a part of a research focused on schools' external evaluation and self-evaluation processes, in Portugal and England. This research contemplates a theoretical research phase with documental analysis and field work with a multicase study. This text arises from the first phase, of documental analysis of key documents for understanding the school evaluation processes in these two countries.

The theoretical phase and the documental analysis followed a set of steps composed by: 1) the search for relevant literature on school evaluation, aiming to better understand the phenomenon both theoretically as well as concerning the research that has been developed in recent years – which formed the basis of section 2 of this paper; 2) the search for political documents – Portuguese, English and European policies – that could help frame the evaluation processes in study – explored in the section 3 of this paper; and, finally, 3) the search for key documents that frame the school evaluation processes developed in Portugal by the IGEC, and in England by the OFSTED, which constitute the focus of the analysis presented in section 'Results and conclusions'. These documents are, mainly, school evaluation frameworks, school evaluation general guidelines, school evaluation guidelines for evaluators, and other documents related with school evaluation.

After selecting and gathering the IGEC and OFSTED documents, they were target of a process of content analysis (Krippendorf, 2003), following the structure in figure 1.

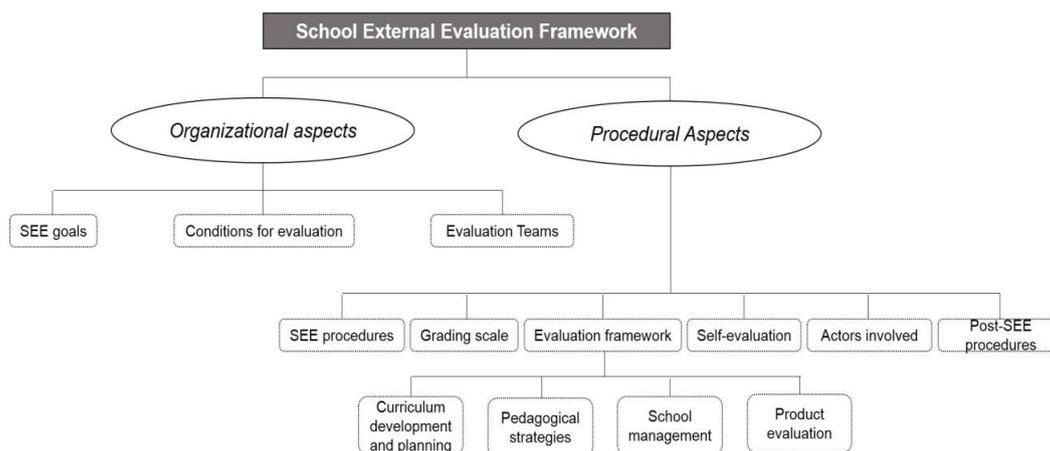


Figure 1 - Analysis structure

Through this process it was possible to identify main trends that frame the evaluation processes, the motivations and intentions underneath the implementation of school evaluation and to deeply explore the evaluation framework.

This paper presents the conclusions regarding Portugal and England's SEE frameworks, focusing particularly on *Procedural Aspects*, namely on the *Evaluation framework*, and particularly focusing the aspects related to *curriculum development and planning*, and *pedagogical strategies*, which are somewhat correlated, and focusing on how SE addresses and contemplated the different approaches. All these aspects are mainly present, in the external evaluation frameworks, in the domain dedicated to the provision of the educational service. Hence, the analysis presented in this paper is focused on this domain of each framework, with extra attention to how the evaluation frameworks address the curriculum.

Results and conclusions

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

The IGEC guidelines 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 the sub-domain *Planning and articulation*, it's possible to find specifically interesting indicators in what concerns to curriculum, such as: a) *Curriculum articulated management* and b) *Curriculum contextualization and opening to the place*, which refer to how the national curriculum is adapted to meet students, to become closer to students' life and experiences and, consequently, more meaningful to them. Such contextualization practices are also believed to promote students learning, as they help to reach all students, despite their different characteristics, and they grant more meaning and significance to the abstract curriculum (Fernandes et al., 2013). Also related to curriculum is the aspect c) *Use of information on students' school course*. Again, this aspect concerns to how the classroom environment and the learning process is enriched by students' previous knowledge and experiences and, once again, adapt the curriculum based on these factors. It seems that, in sub-domain 1. *Planning and articulation*, the issue of curriculum is assess through the adaptation and development strategies used in order to promote meaning and bring the disciplinary contents closer to the students.

Within the sub-domain *Teaching practices* it is also possible to identify some indicators related to curriculum issues, such as the a) *Adequacy of educational activities and teaching to students' capacities and learning rhythms*, which clearly points towards how the prescribed curriculum is translated in teachers' planning of learning activities, and how these activities respect and acknowledge students. These indicators are more related to curriculum management and, even, curriculum development, respecting the autonomy conferred to schools, in order to better reach students, as well as the b) *Use of active and experimental methodologies in teaching and learning*. All these indicators clearly reveal a concern of how the curriculum is developed to meet students' characteristics.

OFSTED's guidelines addresses the domain related to the provision of educational service by focusing several general indicators covering mostly teachers' dedication and posture, and some general consideration on teaching strategies to meet all students equally. For example, OFSTED inspectors should pay attention to which i) *teaching engages and includes all pupils with work that is challenging enough and that meets the pupils' needs as identified by teachers*; ii) *teachers monitor pupils' responses in lessons and adapt their approach accordingly; also, whether they monitor pupils' progress over time and use the information well to adapt their planning*; and iii) *information at transition points between schools is used effectively so that teachers plan to meet pupils' needs in all lessons from the outset*. These aspects are, to some extent, similar to IGEC's guidelines related with curriculum adaptation and development, as they assess how teachers plan and develop their lessons and how the curriculum is translated in order to reach all students, acknowledging and respecting their individual characteristics. Related to the teaching strategies, that is, to ways of working the curricular contents, we can find how iv) *teachers set homework in line with the*

school's policy and that challenges all pupils, especially the most able; v) assessment is frequent and accurate and is used to set challenging work that builds on prior knowledge, understanding and skills. OFSTED's guidelines also focus on teachers' dedication by addressing the interest and expectation teachers show towards their students, assessing whether vi) *teachers have high expectations of all pupils.* As well as teachers' posture in searching for the best teaching possible by focusing on whether vii) *teachers seek to assess the effectiveness of their own teaching and adapt accordingly;* and if viii) *teaching helps to develop a culture and ethos of Scholastic excellence.* Even though OFSTED inspection framework seems to not focus the curriculum explicitly, it is possible to identify the curriculum's implicit presence in the assessment of teachers' lesson planning and dedication in establishing a productive and positive learning climate.

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

Notes

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