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SCHOOL EXTERNAL EVALUATION

Challenges and opportunities for school improvement

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After reading the School External Evaluation three-year (2006-09) reports, we focused our analysis on the domains and factors that were low rated and where the weakest points were identified. Drawn on this analysis and on the knowledge gained through direct contact with schools, three considerations were made:

1. Institutional self-evaluation has not yet been assumed as a need, due to difficulties brought about by its technical, political and ethical nature.

2. The prevailing school culture, which is built upon individualism, does not promote collaboration, flexibility and reflection in and on practices, which are necessary for the articulation among boards and structures.

3. The way leadership is assumed by school heads, boards and school guidance structures have conditioned school organization, management and dynamics.

These considerations are important indicators in domains where schools have to improve their work, that is to say self-evaluation, school culture and leadership. Bearing in mind the mission of the University of Évora in the Alentejo region and the role in teacher training it has had, we are now working out a project aimed at "Improvement and development of schools", undertaken by a multidisciplinary team that provides technical and scientific support and self-evaluation services – Support to School Self-Evaluation Programme – in articulation with scientific support in collaborative and leadership practices.

The Support to School Self-Evaluation Programme
The implementation of a self-evaluation Programme implies the development of a consistent information system, organized around the school development project, based on indicators designed to control the quality of the educational provision.

The experience built on 19 School External Evaluations and on the role of external evaluator in Lisbon and the Alentejo regions, has made us aware of school difficulties when self-evaluation is concerned and of the weaknesses of many existing processes.

Aims of the Programme:

- To contribute to the improvement of school self-evaluation processes
- To make available direct technical and scientific support to schools
- To make available relevant updated information, dealing with school evaluation issues
- To facilitate the access to tools and a diversity of frameworks, underpinned by scientific knowledge and successful practices
- To monitor the use of devices aimed at supporting school self-evaluation
- To collaborate in setting up development plans
- To contribute for the development of a self-evaluation culture within schools
- To apply meta-evaluation methodologies
- To ensure that school is performing in a reliable way

The Programme is focused on each school reality, aimed at meeting both school and the system regulation needs, with regard to their individual characteristics.

The Programme will be implemented in seven phases

PHASE	ACTIVITIES
1. Preparation	Collection of information about the school context and identification of needs, in order to prepare a diagnosis. (1)
2. Information and negotiation	Providing information about models and self-evaluation processes. Discussing and defining, the model that the school will adopt and designing a support plan together with the self-evaluation team.
3. Planning	Designing evaluation, by defining the procedures, sources, criteria and indicators for the domains that will be evaluated, scheduling tasks and building up evaluation tools.
4. Data collection	Application of data collection tools.
5. Processing and analyzing data	Processing data, supported by informatics, analyzing data and preparing reports with the self-evaluation conclusions: whole (about the evaluation cycle) and partial (about each of the evaluated domains).

6. Reflection on data and decision-taking	Analysis of the reports in the school boards and structures, in order to prepare action plans to solve problems and overcome difficulties, correct weaknesses and to consolidate strengths.
7. Meta-evaluation	Analysis of the self-evaluation process, supported by specific tools.

(1) The diagnosis, before the beginning of self-evaluation, is of the most importance for the selection of the domains that will be evaluated. The selection must encompass not only the weak ones, but also the successful domains, where attention shall be paid, in order to ensure continuous improvement.

Training on team work techniques

Each school has its own culture, its ethos. Its environment, the relationship between individuals, the dynamics brought by such relationship, the level of motivation, their needs and perceptions of the reality, these are factors that have to be taken into account when designing the school self-evaluation process.

Sharing and group engagement, increasing reflection and setting collaboration mechanisms, are major factors for teacher professional development with impact on the quality of teaching and on the quality of the organizations. However, this is not the prevailing culture in many schools. Therefore, a set of actions will be developed in order to promote team work, collaborative and flexible practices, stimulating the active participation in curricular management, intra and inter department articulation, valuing resources and processes.

At that moment, the basic conditions for change will be created, as the school documents for educational guidance (School Development Project, School Curricular Project, Class Curricular Project, Annual Plan of Activities) require team work, thus increasing the frequency and the importance of the interactions between the school educational players, enabling to overcome teachers' traditional culture built on individualism.

The priority given to training on teamwork responds to the actual need to improve social and professional interactions, so that they may contribute to change, towards a better provision. This is a core issue and has to be taken into account, because "There are no school changes if teachers do no change their cultures and their professional practices", as Barroso, a Portuguese researcher, underlines (2008, p.179).

Training on Leadership

We are aware that school provision depends on external factors such as socio-economical and cultural students' background and family expectations, but on internal factors as well. These can be, for instance, the type of leadership, the work of the school boards and guidance structures, teachers' motivation and engagement.

In the current organizational school model, leadership has a role of the utmost importance for change and innovation in teachers' work. However, the success of leadership will be enhanced when the educational community shares a culture of collaboration. Fullan stresses the need to widen school leaderships, stating, "As teachers' leadership maximizes school capacity beyond the director team, it shall contribute to set the conditions and give each teacher the skills to become a leader"

Therefore, the training aim will be to promote "transforming leadership", understood by Leithwood (1994) as a model for re-structuring school, entitling schools to face the current challenges. The transformational leader is the one that overcomes school technical problems, promoting a collaborative school culture favouring teachers' commitment.

A school founded in the community and strategically run is on the way to a quality school. To follow this path schools have to foster a collaborative culture and put on place self-evaluation processes, allowing systematic feedbacks and correct possible bias.