

THOUGHTS ON LEARNING CYCLE POLICIES IN BRAZIL

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Tradução: Iracema Hilário Dulley

ABSTRACT

Among educational reforms implemented in Brazil on behalf of quality in education in the last years, those introducing learning cycles are possibly the ones that have more potential for accomplishing the purpose of democratizing education. When learning cycles question and challenge the educational and social project on which compulsory schooling is dominantly based, they confront prevailing values, among which is that of accepting inequalities as a result of individual differences. As measures to prevent students from failing, learning cycles put an end to the fragmentation arising from grading. They imply changes to the conception of time, space and school culture itself, with the purpose of assuring that the great number of students who were until not long ago excluded from basic school may continue education and acquire socially relevant knowledge. This paper aims at locating learning cycles introduction policies within the context of Brazilian education. It points out the different meanings given to them by experiences in state and municipal school systems, discussing the issues that result from its implementation, and making considerations on their results and impacts. It is based on a review of academic studies on the subject, from 1990 to today.

SCHOOL CYCLES – EDUCATIONAL REFORM – TEACHING QUALITY – EDUCATIONAL POLICIES

Learning cycles, as approached by this paper, encompass basic school organization alternatives that go beyond the duration of present grades as a time

reference for teaching and learning. They are related to the intention of assuring all students that they may remain at school and have good quality teaching. In this sense, they have to do with the purpose of overcoming the artificial fragmentation of the learning process caused by grading, which has led to damages to school progression with its possibility of annual retention. But they go beyond this, as they demand changes to the conception of knowledge and learning, to the use of time and space at school, as well as to the role of school education itself, thus building a potential road for democratizing education.

The term “cycles” has already meant something else in Brazilian education, and the basic idea of learning cycles has already been used by other initiatives that were given other names.

In order to make the uses and meanings of the term evident, we are going to briefly reconsider its meanings found in the Brazilian legislation concerning institutionalized education, as well as school reorganization initiatives implemented in school systems in the Brazilian territory which manifest elements of the concept of “learning cycles” we want to approach in their outline.

LEARNING CYCLES AS STAGES OF SCHOOLING

The first Brazilian general law of education, *Lei de Diretrizes e Bases da Educação Nacional*, Act n. 4024/1996 (LDB), prescribed to the country a school structure according to which primary school, lasting four years, would be followed by secondary school, divided into two cycles: *ginásial* (equivalent to the present four last grades of primary school), with four annual grades, and *colegial* (equivalent to high school), with three annual grades.

To some extent, the original bill of this act, which took eleven years to be passed by the Congress, was inspired in the Langevin-Wallon reform, proposed for French schools after the Second World War and never made effective. According to Wallonian principles, school cycles corresponded to the students' development stages. The teaching and learning process should have different characteristics in each of these stages and base itself on principles of justice, on the student's right to full development, on the equal dignity of all jobs, on school and professional guidance, as well as on the access of all students to general culture (Almeida, Mahoney, 2003).

The use of the term cycles to name different stages of schooling, thus, encompassed grading as the mode of school organization in the Act n. 4.024/19□.

The first LDB was almost fully revoked by Act n. 5.□92/71, which established the guidelines and bases for primary education and secondary education. Although this act mingled the first four grades of primary school and *ginasial* to form a primary school lasting eight years, it basically did not alter its functioning, so that the cycles of the previous period remained perfectly identifiable, despite no longer officially marked.

Although it does not refer to learning cycles, the Primary and Secondary School Reform Act (*Lei da Reforma do Primeiro e Segundo Graus*), as it has been called, opens up the possibility for new forms of school organization when it considers the alternative of continuous advances in school progression, as well as grading.

The item I of Report 3□0/1974 of the Federal Council of Education refers to this matter as follows. The system of progressive advances implies

...fitting educational objectives to the potentialities of each student, grouping them by age, and assessing their progress based on their capacities. (...)There is no repetition. Schooling is conceived as horizontal growth; student progression is understood as vertical growth. When the progressive advance regime is adopted, student's achievement is not dependent upon schooling, that is, on the number of years the child has attended school. (Brasil, 1974, item I)

With the Federal Constitution of 1988 and the Brazilian general law of education, Act n. 9.394/199□, now effective, the extension of the right to institutionalized education for children since their first months of life is made formal by incorporating daycare centers and pre-school to educational systems. In this case, the periodization of early childhood education is also extended to the whole country: daycare centers (for children from zero to three years old) and pre-schools (for children from four to six years old).

In spite of this apparent correspondence between the ages of life and the organization of the educational system, it is necessary to take into account that these cycles, although so marked by schools, are not phenomena to which a merely biopsychological character may be attributed. They are, above all, the result of a process of historical and social construction which has been outlined since modern times in developed capitalist countries, and which has also occurred in Latin America and Brazil, even if with a certain delay.

After the expansion of wage labor, the state began to play a very important role in the regulation of the life conditions and of the subsistence of the population as a whole. The institutions in charge of supplying education, health, and social protection, such as families, churches, and private philanthropic and assistance rendering institutions, lost much of their effectiveness, as these services began to be offered by institutions supported or approved by the state, by means of regulations set forth by the legal and political apparatus.

The introduction of a universal school system that replaced the informal forms of socialization previously performed by families and other institutions was followed by the introduction of compulsory school, which implied an obligatory ordering of a life stage. Progressively, other periods of life also started to be regulated by the state by means of the massification of basic education and the expansion of high school and higher education.

The definition of childhood and youth becomes thus not only a social and cultural construction, but also an administrative category (Peralva, 1997).

A psychology, a pedagogy, and a didactics are thus produced in order to be applied to each stage of schooling corresponding to each life cycle. Different profiles of professionals who are to educate these children, adolescents, and young people are outlined, and differentiated institutions or apparatuses are created to serve them. Homogenizing consensus are thus built on how the times, spaces, and activities of these periods of life should be ordered.

Considering childhood and adolescence "times to attend school" leads to setting legal milestones that also regulate the participation of children and adolescents in the labor market. On the other hand, the pedagogical production that contributes to build this consensus, centered in general aspects of the human development considered mainly under the perspective of school life, does not, as a rule, consider the objective conditions of a considerable part of this population at all. For many segments, attending school is strongly connected with urging demands of participation in other activities related to its peculiar forms of existence.

The schooling stages which were strongly marked by legislation and named cycles suppose education for students of a given age. However, when they were institutionalized in the Brazilian education system, their students were very different from the age profile of the population they should originally serve, as students lagged behind a great deal. Together with other educational, social, cultural, and even

economic reasons, the graded structure of these cycles, inherited from the expansion of school organization from the beginning of the 19th century, has been preventing students from having adequate service. (Barretto, Sousa, 2004 a).

Based on this scenario, we propose to discuss the meanings assigned to learning cycles as one of the non-graded forms of school organization.

CYCLES AS ONE OF THE FORMS OF SCHOOL ORGANIZATION

The Brazilian experiences that have contributed to the construction of this idea of learning cycles started to arise mainly in the second half of the 20th century. From then on, many initiatives have been registered in different school systems, in different periods, circumstances, and places. Its different meanings resulting from different historical contexts, from specific impacts, and from concepts of education which have changed along time, indicate that the concept of learning cycles is to be built by the multiple initiatives that intend to change school organization in order to guarantee every citizen's right to education.

The first proposals of this nature date back to the 1960's and 1970's and base themselves on the school organization adopted in England, whose model was made known as a reference in Brazil in the middle of the last century. In the Brazilian case, they have generically been called continued progression and are characterized as intermediary stages between the graded school regime and the automatic promotion regime in force in the English system, for in the latter, student progression is not interrupted all along the compulsory school. However, Brazilian experiences of this period have been little publicized.

The use of the term learning cycle for alternatives of non-graded school organization is recent; it appeared for the first time in the mid-1980s. Since then, many different adjectives have been assigned to these cycles: basic cycles, literacy cycles, learning cycles, education cycles, and continuous progression, according to the particularities of each proposal¹.

The introduction of literacy basic cycles, which established a continuum between the former initial grades of primary school in the 1980's, inaugurated a period

¹ Measures of the same nature and with the same name – cycles - have also been adopted in many countries or regions of Latin language, such as: France, Portugal, Spain, Geneva, Belgium, and Quebec. Perrenoud (2004) qualifies this form of pedagogical organization as a pluriannual learning cycle.

of greater synergy between learning systems. Since the 1990's, many schools have adopted learning cycles in their whole primary school. Today they may either simply connect the former initial grades or reorganize all former grades in several groups.

The proposal of learning cycles concerning school democratization, as it has been stated, goes beyond striving to make student flow more regular. It incorporates more encompassing social and cultural dimensions and also a new understanding of the nature and the ways of knowing, teaching, and learning. In the most conservative formulations, even the explicit mention to grades as a basic reference for curriculum planning is kept, although the strict interval of the academic year is no longer considered the final term for students to acquire the expected knowledge. There are, however, learning cycle policies which have invested in deeper changes to school work organization, school culture, and educational practices with the purpose of reversing their exclusionary character.

Although there are differences between the meanings assigned to learning cycles in different policies, it is also possible to find common characteristics among them, such as the purpose of overcoming the selective character of schools, of making them more flexible in order to contemplate students' differences, and the purpose of making the cycle project more collaborative. The emphasis given to these elements, that is, how they are taken and translated into actions capable of changing school practices, varies in time and in the very context of a same school system.

The duration of learning cycles is also connected with the concepts of cycle. Justifications for the number of years learning cycles should last usually resort to theories of students' biopsychological and social development, to pedagogical reasons, and to factors referring to school system structure or even to combinations of them (Barretto, Sousa, 2004). However, the duration of cycles has varied greatly among school systems², just like the arrangements between grades and learning cycles vary in each school system. In view of this diversity, the particular efforts made by the school systems to fit certain stages of life in the form of learning cycles are minimized.

The reconsideration of initiatives to introduce learning cycles evidences the need to overcome the excessive tendency of psychologization of the periods marked by learning cycles in some school systems and to deepen the analysis of social and cultural

² In Brazilian school systems, the duration of learning cycles has varied from two to five years.

factors that indicate the multiple conditions of existence of the different childhoods and adolescences for different students.

HOW MANY AND WHERE ARE SCHOOLS WITH LEARNING CYCLES?

Repercussions of learning cycle policies are related to their scope and extension in Brazilian schools.

Although there was an expressive increase in the number of schools with learning cycles in the 1990's and the importance of implementing learning cycles has been acknowledged by the pedagogical discourse and by school management, this form of school organization is still a minority in Brazil.

Learning cycles were adopted by 18.9% of primary schools in 2003, and 11% of them have exclusively this form of organization. However, if we consider the number of students attending schools with learning cycles, the percentage of enrollment is much higher due to the fact that the size of schools and also of school systems varies a lot, especially when their location is considered: either urban or rural³. In 2003, about 30% of primary school students were enrolled in schools organized exclusively in learning cycles or having more than one form of organization, which is a much higher percentage than the percentage obtained by considering just the number of schools.

Learning cycle implementation, on its turn, reflects the reality of Brazilian urban schools. The majority of small rural school units are organized in multigrade classes that include students from the four initial grades of primary school and have a single teacher in charge of teaching all these students, which somehow minimizes the artificial fragmentation of contents caused by the grading system.

Besides being urban, schools with learning cycles are basically state and municipal schools. The decision on whether to adopt learning cycles or not is usually made by the state or municipal administration. Because this is one of the alternatives of school organization offered by the Brazilian legislation, administrations may also eliminate learning cycles, what has occurred quite often in the last 50 years. Private schools generally keep the traditional graded organization, but they are attended by only about 10% of primary school students.

³ Although they are more numerous than urban schools, the 97,000 Brazilian rural schools were responsible for only 18% of enrollments in 2003, while the 72,000 Brazilian urban schools have 82% of the students. About 85% of the Brazilian population lives in urban areas.

When the option for cycles is made, it is usually extended to the set of school units of an entire school system. Only exceptionally do school system managers give each school the possibility of deciding whether it adopts this kind of organization or not. This is one of the reasons why we have to understand learning cycles as a policy of school systems, according to Franco (2003), and not as isolated school policies.

The number of enrollments in schools with learning cycles is not equally distributed between the five Brazilian geographical regions. When we focus on the data available in the table below, we may notice that schools with learning cycles are concentrated in the Southeast of Brazil, where 87% of students attending Brazilian schools organized exclusively in learning cycles are concentrated – especially in the States of São Paulo and Minas Gerais. In the remaining regions, the percentage of enrollment in schools organized exclusively in learning cycles is very low: 5.75% in the Southern region and 5.2% in the Northeastern region. In the Midwestern and Northern regions this percentage is almost insignificant.

TABLE
PRIMARY SCHOOL – BRAZIL 2003
NUMBER OF ENROLLMENTS PER REGION ACCORDING TO SCHOOL
ORGANIZATION
(Attendance in millions)

Region	Primary School Enrollments							
	Total		Learning cycles and more than one form of organization					
			Total		Exclusively learning cycles		More than one form of organization	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Brazil:	34.4	100.0	12.4	100.0	7.1	100.0	5.3	100.0
North	3.3	9.6	0.2	1.5	0.0	0.7	0.1	2.5
Northeast	11.9	34.5	2.3	18.8	0.4	5.2	2.0	36.9
Southeast	12.4	36.0	8.4	67.2	2	86.7	2.2	41.3
South	4.3	12.6	0.8	6.8	0.4	5.7	0.4	8.2
Central West	2.5	7.2	0.7	5.7	0.1	1.6	0.1	11.1

Note: Enrollment numbers represent millions

Source: Brasil, MEC/Inep, 2003

However, there is a relatively large undefined area regarding the precise identification of the number of students attending learning cycle classes in schools adopting more than one form of organization, because these data are collected based on the school, and not on its students. In the whole country, 41.3% of enrollments in schools adopting mixed regimes (grades and cycles) are also located in the Southeastern region, as noticeable in its corresponding column. Among other mixed regime schools, the highest percentage of enrollments is found in the Northeastern region: 39%. That

means that although very few Northeastern schools are exclusively based on learning cycles, a very expressive number of students attends schools adopting mixed regimes.

Statistical indicators of the Brazilian Ministry of Education should strive to be more accurate in order to clear these uncertainties. Nevertheless, the available information make it possible to affirm that there is a significant movement in Brazil, which is relatively widespread among the different Brazilian regions, to change the form of organization of schools. This fact indicates interesting change trends, more than the absolute number of schools with learning cycles does.

According to the distribution observed in the table, regional development level is not a determining factor for cycle adoption policies. Learning cycles are concentrated in the richest and most populated Brazilian region – its Southeast –, and they tend to spread into a large number of schools, particularly those in the poorest Brazilian region, which is also very populated – its Northeast.

It is possible, however, to make an association between the implementation of learning cycles, poverty, and population density, as suggested by Franco's studies (2003), and by studies of other authors as well. There are proportionally more schools with learning cycles in the capitals of the states than in their respective state school systems. Brazilian capitals, in spite of having more resources than great part of the other municipalities in their state, tend to have dense pockets of poverty, differently from the widespread poverty found in the interior of the country.

Moreover, state or municipal schools with learning cycles, especially in the Southeastern region, tend to concentrate in the metropolitan regions, the most populated ones, exactly where extreme poverty and richness are found. This is the case of the Greater Sao Paulo, one of the largest urban concentrations in the world, the Greater Rio de Janeiro, and the Metropolitan Region of Belo Horizonte, in the State of Minas Gerais.

In these areas there is a large number of schools in poor neighborhoods with low-income students. In these regions there is greater violence and schools do not work as well as in other regions, which means that the conditions to implement the changes demanded by learning cycles are very adverse, both from the point of view of school culture and from the perspective of the support offered to teachers' and students' activities.

WHAT DO STUDIES ON LEARNING CYCLES TELL?

Studies on learning cycles intensified mainly after the 1990s, when there was an increase in the number of schools adopting this kind of organization. Based on a state of the art in *Learning Cycles and School Progression in Brazil*, conducted by a research group from the School of Education of the University of São Paulo (USP), which comprised academic publications from 1990 to 2002 (Sousa & Barreto, coords., 2004⁴), and considering other recent works, we are going to discuss some issues raised by the policies which introduced learning cycles.

The contributions resulting from these studies encompass not only reflections about the fundamentals and conditions for the implementation of learning cycles, which have given rise to discussions of their assumptions and practical implications, but they also take as references specific initiatives to introduce learning cycles and examine their policies as they were formulated and implemented. Most of the specific studies relate to state and municipal schools in the State and capital of São Paulo and to state and municipal schools in Minas Gerais, especially those located in its capital, Belo Horizonte. This happens not only because the Southeast region has many schools with learning cycles, but also because this region has the greater number of graduate programs in Brazil, main locus of research, which provides for the country's scientific publications.

Fundamentals and assumptions

Despite the diversity in the formulation of learning cycles, there tends to be a consensus about the political, social, pedagogical and psychological principles declared as fundamentals of the policies that propose them. Although several decades have gone by and the society, the world context and even educational systems have undergone many changes, the common substratum of the justifications for adopting learning cycles remains the same (Barreto, Mitrulis, 2001). The learning cycle principles lend themselves to different objectives. Firstly, they have the potential to contribute by guaranteeing the right to education and to democratization of teaching. Secondly, they play an important role in the preservation of the students' self-esteem, as they contribute

⁴ The following graduate students have participated in the research: Andrea Steinvasher, Ocimar Munhoz Alavarse, Paulo Henrique Arcas, Alexandre Candido de Oliveira Campos and Patricia Moulin Mendonça

to their development while respecting their differences and assuring them quality learning.

There have been some queries only regarding an alleged economy of resources. Managers say that the adoption of cycles usually results in good use of public money and reduction in the money wasted with school repetition. A current reaction among educators is to speak out against the implementation of learning cycles. They claim cycles have been adopted just because it was necessary to reduce expenditure on education, once teachers do not identify investments compatible with the possibility of improving working conditions in schools and the improvement of teaching quality, which are demanded by learning cycle policies. In spite of controversies over the economic arguments associated with the adoption of learning cycles, there are no studies available to determine their real impact on investments and on government spending, and which could be used to compare the gains originated from their introduction.

Another aspect which is greatly emphasized in these studies is that it is necessary to guarantee adequate conditions for the development of learning cycles. The most mentioned conditions are, among others, the need to involve all social actors with the proposal, the creation of adequate working conditions for their development, and teacher training. Besides objective conditions, there is also emphasis on the involvement of school actors with a critical reflection on the basis of traditional school culture. This process has the purpose of stimulating the desire for breaking up with the selective character of schools.

These data suggest the need for investment on teacher training programs that go beyond the merely technical character they usually have. They should incorporate the political dimension proposed in the reorganization of work in schools. Arroyo (1999), for example, lays great emphasis on teacher training programs that take place in the very school premises, as recommended by other contemporary studies on the subject. As learning cycles are not a finished proposal just waiting to be put into practice by schools, their implementation depends greatly on the capacity of teachers to concretize a project that just outlines a general guidance to be followed.

However, a more comprehensive reflection on learning cycles development indicates that initial teacher education should encourage future teachers to search for a new perspective for their work, such as that presumed by learning cycles.

Implementation conditions

In schools with learning cycles it is observed that their creation has been followed by the assignment or extension of collective work hours and by mechanisms that enable individual students' needs to be met. Among these mechanisms, the most frequent one has been the catch-up programs offered to students in smaller groups, either extra class or at the same time as regular classes.

Nevertheless, according to the teachers, the proposed measures and resources made available have not been sufficient or adequate to support the intended changes. This opinion is voiced with higher or lower frequency, depending on the state or municipal school system and on the effort of the management team to offer these conditions. However, it is present in all cases.

Teachers frequently do not recognize themselves as co-participants in cycle proposals, even in schools that effectively try to assure more participation of educators and a democratic management process. Teachers also feel that, with learning cycles, the responsibility for the learning success of all students tends to be mainly their responsibility. However, they believe this responsibility should be shared by all levels of the school system.

On the working conditions in schools with learning cycles and their teachers' attitude, Fernandes's research (2003) adds valuable information to the study about a school in a poor neighborhood of Niteroi, the capital of the State of Rio de Janeiro. Differently from researches which generally only focus on the micro universe, the author's doctoral thesis expands the survey to the whole nation by analyzing the questions asked to teachers pertaining to a representative sample of schools in the tests of the Brazilian Basic Education Assessment System – SAEB – 2001. The analysis of these data suggests that some relations are likely to be established between schools with learning cycles and their neighborhoods.

Functioning in particularly difficult social contexts, these schools tend to have a higher turnover of teachers. Overcrowded classrooms make it difficult to use alternative spaces for extra help to students, and therefore, this help is frequently not viable. The lack of staff is more frequent and the scarcity of pedagogical resources is more severe, what confirms the regressive character of public policies that end up affecting more seriously populations with less bargaining power. Nevertheless, even tending to move away from the conditions required for a pedagogical concept of learning cycles - which

demands the continuity of the educational work and the solidarity effort of everyone in the school -, the study suggests that it is in these schools and not in graded schools that teachers tend to be more committed to their pedagogical project and more involved with students' learning. This probably happens because the learning cycle logic itself contributes to destabilize the way schools traditionally work, even if it has not been able to radically change it.

In spite of adversities, Fernandes also points out some good results which stemmed from the adoption of learning cycles regarding students, as well as similar findings that have been present in various other studies. By eliminating repetition, learning cycles have been responsible for the increase in the time students stay in school, for the advance in school progression, and for the decrease in student absenteeism. Students take extra advantage from school because it becomes the students' socialization environment, instead of the streets, which is especially important for inhabitants of areas where violence rates are higher.

Learning cycles and curriculum

Curriculum implications stemming from the implementation of learning cycles are very little exploited in research work. Just a few studies include longer analyses of these issues.

Duran (1995), for example, points out that the deep change in literacy paradigms, which occurred during the mid-1980s in Brazil with the dissemination of Emilia Ferreiro's researches and of studies derived from sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics, found fertile ground to develop in the proposal of basic cycles.

In the 1990s one can find, in the state and municipal schools that adopted education cycles, guidelines for interdisciplinary approaches, for a curriculum integrated by means of work projects that promote participation of students with different competences, or by “thematic complexes”. They try to join the approach of issues with a strong social appeal to the way the areas of knowledge are dealt with, and to the consideration of cultural manifestations characteristic of students who come from different social backgrounds, assuring them opportunities to express themselves and be acknowledged (Alavarse, 2002; Dalben, 2000; Krug, 2001).

Among the activities developed by the Plural School – name given to the political and pedagogical project of the municipal school system of Belo Horizonte – it is worth pointing out one particular project because it proposes new approaches to literacy. It is directed at adolescents from poor neighborhoods who live in conditions of great social risk. Although they are attending the last cycle of primary school, they are not able to catch up with their age bracket concerning reading and writing. In most cases, students who fall into this category are black male teenagers, with consecutive school failures, who are much stigmatized. Various studies, among them Dubet's (2000) and Charlot's (199□) work, have shown that, like others in similar conditions, these students limit themselves to performing school rituals. In general, they refuse to get involved with school projects, or they start objecting them by means of indiscipline, violence and, most of the times, allowing others or themselves to exclude them from challenging situations from the point of view of knowledge.

The innovative practices developed with a view to teaching these teenagers how to read and write meant that several activities were done out of the school premises, that is, in other cultural facilities in the city. Workshops of painting, graffiti, origami, theater, music, and percussion were the main activities in the program. Arts and games have proved to be approaches of paramount importance so that meaningful interactions with these teenagers could be established. The willingness to listen to students helped to promote learning activities outside the school environment, which turned out to be meaningful social practices for the students. Advances in the construction of individual and group identities have created conditions to improve students' writing and reading skills. It has also led students to systematically reflect on their language while new possibilities of work were opened to teachers (Belo Horizonte, 2004).

Limited though this experience was, it does not only open up new possibilities, but it also proposes issues that can be extended to other state and municipal school systems. One of them refers to the fact that the acquisition of basic reading and writing skills by students in general is still a problem to be solved in Brazilian schools. Even when learning cycle policies are based on a consistent educational project and they are implemented in schools where most of the teachers have a university degree and work in favorable working conditions as in the Plural School, the problem remains, although in smaller proportions. This draws our attention to the poor and insufficient measures which are commonly proposed by schools with learning cycles to face the difficulties posed by literacy in many schools: little offer of individual help; catch-up programs

with less experienced teachers; boring repetition of the same approaches during extra help sessions; lack of connection with the activities originally performed in the classroom; lack of adjustment to the student's culture.

Another issue concerns the involvement of the teaching staff with literacy. Historically, primary schools have assigned teachers with secondary education or teachers holding a college degree in Education to the first four grades or the initial cycles. To teach from the 5th through the 8th grade or in the cycles that correspond to them, teachers have to hold a degree in the specific subjects they teach. However, it is well-known that teachers holding a degree in specific subjects have great difficulty in dealing with students who do not know how to read and write. Even Portuguese Language teachers, because of the training they undergo, do not feel prepared to deal with the initial teaching of the written language. Thus teachers of initial grades or cycles bear the overall responsibility for it.

With the progression of students having different competences and skills, stemming from learning cycles, teachers face the need to learn how to teach them how to read and write. Therefore, their training process must take this challenge into account, so that literacy can effectively become a reading of the world, full of relevant knowledge of the physical and social environment.

Focus on assessment in schools with learning cycles

Among curriculum practices, assessment is the one that has received more attention in publications, probably due to the resistance of teachers, students, and parents to the idea of eliminating student retention, which is usually included in the proposals of curriculum organization in learning cycles. (Sousa, Alavarse, 2003).

This has been considered the most destabilizing aspect of school work, exactly because it confronts education based on examination, which is logic that guides school routines and practices, as well as the expectancies of teachers, students, and parents. At the limit, cycles question the purpose of assessment, which has traditionally been associated to the selection and classification of students with the purpose of deciding on their promotion to the following grade or their retention.

In the regulations of school systems that have implemented cycles, the possibility of retaining students has been limited to the end of each cycle, or to the students that do not have the minimum compulsory attendance rate, which has usually

been criticized by teachers. They feel that they lose the power and the control over the situation of teaching, and they claim that it is much more difficult to deal with classes in schools with learning cycles, especially in the case of classes with older students. Retention is vindicated by a large part of the school segments as a mechanism necessary to assure learning, and these segments assign it a potential of motivation for teaching and learning.

This fact shows that the studies presented to school teachers on the individual and social disadvantages of retention have not had enough strength to encourage breaking up with the traditional purpose attributed to it in the school context. Therefore, only little impact is generated to change evaluation conceptions and practices (Sousa, 1994).

However, since state apparatuses still work much more according to the secular assumptions of school than according to the demands of a new model of education that integrates the proposals of learning cycles, it would not be fair to consider as merely conservative the opinion of teachers on the lack of control over the teaching condition generated by learning cycles.

As to parents, they tend to diverge on retention. Some admit that the suppression of retention enables students to proceed with their studies without the tensions triggered by the graded system. Others, however, are concerned about students who are promoted year after year, but who do not seem to have learned enough. They believe that some form of retention would be important to help with catch-up activities for students. But they are not the only ones to resist; the population in general also resists a concept of education where there is no external pressure to make students study. These evidences point to the need to address school culture in a more profound manner, and also its values and positions that can lead to a more inclusive education.

Scholars insist that learning cycles create the pressing need for student assessment to be an activity designed to follow-up and promote the development of students. They warn, however, that although not visible in pass-fail statistics, educational and social exclusion may be intensified by the learning cycle system whenever there are no conditions for effective learning by all students (Sousa, 2000). Also, according to Steinvascher,

“prohibiting retention” without providing the necessary follow-up of strategies and subsidies to face a selective and classificatory school culture may result in a destabilization of the school

dynamics, which used to base itself on the decision of passing/failing students, and that new rules may also be created within the same selective and excluding logi. (2003 p.57).

Besides reflecting upon student performance assessment, the bibliography indicates that cycles unleash the need for the school to be globally assessed, and the performance of students is to be analyzed in relation to the school context: teachers and other professionals, working conditions and conditions of curriculum implementation, structures, processes, relationships, and interactions. As pointed out by Freitas (2001), beyond assessment, school progression supposes redefining the other categories of the didactic process.

Evaluation of learning cycles and their impact on students' performance

Analyses about specific learning cycle policies express opinions on their historical conditions, motivations, assumptions that support them, and on the outlining of their proposals. In most cases, they also assess implementation processes, but they rarely point to the outcomes of the learning cycle system.

Most of the research in this area, generally conducted in academic theses and dissertations, uses qualitative methodologies and privilege case studies, which do not allow generalization to the whole system, unless from a naturalistic point of view. The qualitative approach enables better understanding the subjectivation processes that lead to the construction and reconstruction of meanings that educators, students, and their families attribute to the changes proposed; it allows people to understand the daily school operating conditions wherein school practices are built, and it helps revealing the degree of satisfaction of the individuals involved, thus evidencing the complexity inherent to the implementation of learning cycles. However, the fragmentation of knowledge arising from the predominance of such studies and the very approaches adopted do not help constructing a clear idea of the extension of the processes detected, neither do they make it possible to understand certain broader implications involved in balancing and executing cycle policies.

In certain of these theses and dissertations that use qualitative methodology, we find some initiatives to assess students' learning results, either by submitting some classes or schools to exams or by comparing the student flow before and after the

introduction of cycles. However, the treatment given to these data cannot be extended to all schools due to its restricted nature.

As shown in these studies, the validity of school cycle fundamentals is recognized by educators in general, but the recurring difficulties in cycle implementation are also pointed out. In this sense, texts warn us about the need to improve work organization conditions in schools in order to ensure the possibility of producing good quality education for all. They also warn us about the importance of performing a deeper analysis of the values and attitudes that may lead to inclusive schools. These writings include numerous references to improvements to the age/grade mismatch, reinsertion of students lagging behind, reduction in dropout and absenteeism rates, and differential service to students.

Studies relating to learning cycle outcomes involving large scale assessments and/or their impact on students are still extremely scarce, and the evidences they have produced do not support conclusive affirmations about their wider social and educational consequences.

Only three of the papers examined proposed to review education policies by means of evaluation researches involving representative data on schools systems.

The first paper addresses the basic cycle in the States of São Paulo and Minas Gerais, and targets the effectiveness of its proposal in respect to improvement of student flow in basic education (Silva, Davis, 1993). It adopts a quasi-experimental model that uses the flow model developed by Fletcher and Ribeiro, and bases itself on data from the demographic census (National Sample Household Survey - PNAD), and from educational censuses concerning basic education enrollments in their respective state school systems. Enrollments in the first and second grades in Rio Grande do Sul State schools are used as a control group.

By following up school progression of student cohorts between 1981 and 1989, the authors found out that the introduction of the basic cycle has not essentially altered student flow in the two States, and they started to analyze the cultural conditions and the school conditions that seemed to contribute to the failure of these measures.

The outcomes of this study suggest that school failure was not eliminated but postponed to the end of literacy cycles. This was also pointed out by surveys involving a smaller number of students, such as those by Andrade (1992), Mainardes (1995), and Zoraide Faustini Silva (1991). This may have been one of the reasons that led administrations that later extended school cycles to the whole elementary education

system to restrict the possibility of having students fail at the end of the cycles, and in some cases, even totally eliminating school repetition.

Another evaluation research conducted by the same team investigated three government programs implemented in the São Paulo State school system as to its impact on learning for students of São Paulo Metropolitan Area. These programs were: the basic cycle created in 1984; the standard work schedule for the basic cycle introduced in 1989 (six daily hours for students and 40 weekly hours for teachers); and the model school established in 1992, which, besides the basic cycle and the standard work schedule, ensured privileged general structure and operation conditions to some schools (Neubauer, Davis and Espósito, 199□).

The conclusion is that students' performance rates in model schools were significantly higher than in other schools, and that students in schools with a standard work schedule presented better performance than those in schools that did not have it. Beyond the peculiarities of cycles, the importance of general working conditions in schools to improve learning is thus evidenced. Differences in the results obtained among schools of the same type also indicate the great weight of intra-school variables to determine school performance when income levels and the cultural environment of students were controlled.

Differently from the previous ones, the external evaluation undergone by Plural School focused on implementation processes for the proposal, not on its outcomes and impacts. Carried out four years after implementation of the program, by means of a partnership between the Municipal Secretariat of Education at the Minas Gerais capital, the Ford Foundation, and the Federal University of Minas Gerais, this research intended to examine the political and pedagogical project of the reform, with the following objectives: (1) to evaluate it as to how the social actors involved in it understood it, and to analyze its implementation; (2) to support studies on educational reforms based on the data collected (Dalben, 2000).

To that end, a study of concepts on Plural School as expressed by its different actors was carried out; an extensive database with managerial and pedagogical information on municipal schools was organized and a qualitative research including multiple case studies and three ethnographic case studies was conducted.

This evaluation study recommended structuring curriculum parameters for Plural School's political and pedagogical project for the three education cycles, which can indicate cognitive skills to be developed by students. By doing so it seems to admit that

the project's great emphasis on socialization processes should not affect its concern about systematic knowledge. The research also admits the importance of parameters to establish teaching and learning evaluation references that appraise educational practices in municipal schools. It recommends the adoption of procedures or the establishment of an assessment system that contemplates the issue of knowledge and its social use, according to the principles of the proposal.

The last noteworthy recommendation to Plural School was to invest in media campaigns to inform society, and in educational projects involving the community to build a new mentality as to the sense and meanings of basic schooling. To some extent this suggestion has the purpose of confronting the criticism that emerges from the idea that seriousness and good quality of schools are identified with the possibility of student repetition.

In the 1990's, besides the Brazilian Basic Education Assessment System (SAEB), the States of São Paulo and Minas Gerais implemented their own student performance assessment systems.

External assessment of student's performance in the Minas Gerais educational system started with assessment of the basic literacy cycle, and aimed at gradually involving teachers and the school community in the implementation of evaluative actions. Students' performance assessment revealed that children are able to follow up the various learning process phases, and the critical aspects mentioned were mastering writing skills and math basics (Vianna, 1992). While comprehensive and representative of what then occurred in state schools, outcomes lacked interpretations with a broader reach concerning the set of different variables that were part of the assessment.

In the second half of the 1990's, although the States of São Paulo and Minas Gerais extended the learning cycle system to cover the eight years of primary education, establishing two continuous progression cycles of four years each in state schools, no research was found involving information from their students performance assessment systems.

The only survey that sought to establish relationships between non-retention policies and the quality of education was that conducted by Ferrão, Beltrão and Santos (2002). Using information from SAEB 1999, the purpose of this research was checking differences in performance of 4th graders studying under non-retention regimes in the Southeast through the application of multilevel regression models. Data from the States of São Paulo and Minas Gerais were submitted to thorough analysis to establish

correlations between the performance of students lagging behind and the kind of organization of the schools they attended. The regression model applied enables controlling the impact of various levels on student performance. In order to achieve it, student proficiency was adopted as a response variable. The age/grade mismatch and the school organization form (cycles or grading) were considered as main explanatory variables. The administrative subordination of schools, as well as students' and schools' socioeconomic levels were controlled.

Outcomes confirm findings of other studies of smaller scope: The higher proportion among students lagging behind is represented by low-income black male students. Next, students' proficiency level is analyzed in respect to school organization form (grades or cycles), students' socioeconomic level, and age/grade mismatch, indicating that performance is better among graded school students with higher socioeconomic level and no age/grade mismatch. However, the latter is certainly not the profile of most state and municipal school students in the two Brazilian States surveyed.

Findings also suggest that there is no prejudicial effect to the quality of education as a result of non-retention policies in state and municipal schools. That is, the performance of students with age/grade mismatch was not inferior to that of students with a proper age/grade relationship as a result of the school's choice for cycles or grades. Similarly, there is no evidence that low-income students attending schools that adopt automatic promotion policies have worse performance rates.

In short, although the press, a number of parents and many educators themselves use to claim that the introduction of learning cycles has lowered the quality of education, no evidence is brought by available research to support these statements.

Large-scale assessments of the Brazilian educational system have revealed that students' performance data are unsatisfactory in most schools, and in this case, as Franco (2003) so well argues, one cannot blame the cycle system for students' bad performance since graded schools are the majority in Brazil. Moreover, country data collected by SAEB from 1995 to 2003 indicate that primary education students' performance is systematically inferior in poorer regions and superior in more developed regions, and most non-graded schools are concentrated exactly in these last one.

This suggests that more than learning cycles, general operation conditions in schools allied to regional socioeconomic development probably have greater influence on students' general performance

However, there is evidence that allows us to state that as learning cycle policies destabilize the traditional school organization logic, they tend to drive teachers, students, and parents to build new references for teaching and learning based on new relationships and interactions in the school environment.

SOME IMPLICATIONS OF THE ADMINISTRATION OF LEARNING CYCLES

We have already pointed out implications of learning cycle implementation on administrative structures and processes along this text, both at the school level and at the school system level. We have also stressed its complexity, caused by the supposed transformations in the prevailing school culture and in the working conditions usually available.

One issue to be considered is the extension and the distribution of responsibilities between the different instances of the government regarding the fulfillment of the set of requirements for the different school levels, considering the implications they have on the amount of resources available for implementing cycles on primary school. School reorganization imposes conditions from the perspective of human resources, materials and education which, if not met, put an end to the potential cycles have to build themselves as an alternative capable of contributing for the democratization of education.

Some public school systems count on better conditions to implement cycles, but they serve a very low percentage of the school-aged population. Other systems may be characterized as mass systems which, in spite of the difficulties or of the poorer working conditions they face, strive enormously to extend their service to segments of the population which would otherwise be excluded from school. These aspects should also be weighted when considering how to distribute cycle resources.

Another aspect that should be studied more profoundly regarding the infrastructure of public school systems are the working conditions at school as determining factors for cycle implementation. The majority of Brazilian schools certainly has poor working and operational conditions. There are, however, some school systems where the best conditions of public teaching in Brazil are found, including good equipment, updated libraries and even, sometimes, computers for the students, and professionals to help them.

It is surprising, however, that even in these cases the discourse about poor working conditions remains as justification for maintaining excluding practices commonly present at school. Teachers are obviously not to be assigned alone all the responsibility for solving a problem that many educational reforms in the various instances of government were not capable of solving satisfactorily, but it seems necessary to consider the logic that determines the functioning of school devices and routines and the ethos that guides them.

As we have already seen, the creation of full-time work schedules at school for teachers with only one class may result in better student performance. However, the use of times, spaces, and criteria for student grouping, on which educational activities in schools with learning cycles are based, should be further investigated, as well as how the school deals with full-time teachers, part-time teachers, and teachers with work agreement of precarious nature.

There are public school systems adopting learning cycles where the relatively high number of hours teachers spend at school is used in a very flexible manner and in various activities. Teachers even use their time to provide specific help to students by means of varied arrangements and groups. However, in other schools with similar working conditions we observe the tendency to excessively institutionalize the use of time, and complementary help, when needed, is assigned to other professionals, or is simply eliminated. These differences seem to indicate that the school's routines could be more focused on the educational processes of students, opening up various work possibilities which would not be feasible in the graded system. Or else they indicate that they could concentrate mainly on the interests of teachers, on their need to work in more than one school, and many others. Therefore, these are really important differences!

This issue takes us back to the involvement of the different social actors with the learning cycle proposal, clearly one of the factors that demand the most institutional support for its implementation. This involvement is translated into different degrees of difficulty, taking into account the extension of school systems as well as the larger and the more scattered and heterogeneous public to be encompassed.

When unleashed, educational reforms generate multiple readings of their purposes and develop in various manners. They are reinterpreted by each segment affected by them based on specific and more general interests, which are frequently contradictory with one another, and end up receiving new meanings innumerable times.

The results produced by the reforms may change very much; therefore, even secondary or unexpected results may end up having the most impact.

It is also important to take into account that educational policies, just like other public policies, are subject to the drawbacks caused by changes in administration. Several texts point out that discontinuity in the support to learning cycle implementation, which arises from alternation in power, has compromised the consolidation of these policies, which, due to the very nature of the change intended, demand longer periods to produce the desired effects. As observed by Moreira (1999), the changes commended with the introduction of learning cycles require systematic, continuous, and long-term action. Thus, the challenges to which they intend to give answers bestow upon them characteristics of state policy much more than governmental policy.

However, the fact that the same political party may remain in power for more than one administration does not fully assure the continuity of the projects under implementation. As each leader usually tries to set his/her own mark on his/her administration, the priorities attributed to the programs of a given government tend to be placed second by the next administrators, or are replaced by others.

Even if learning cycles have been kept by successive administrations in many school systems in the last decades, there is evidence that they have lost their central position in educational policies as time passed. Under these circumstances, changes usually limit themselves to formal aspects and to school flow normalization.

Some studies show that changes to educational practices occurred when school systems were able to assure an intense mobilization and questioning process that gave way to the concerns of teachers and the school community in search for answers to the issues raised by learning cycles. On the other extreme, there was an experience of learning cycle implementation in the State of Para which ended up being extinguished after some years because the new teachers who were supposed to work with the cycles did not have the slightest idea of the reasons why they had been created, nor of their most general assumptions (Pinto, 1999).

Works such as Bonel's (1993), which analyzed the implementation of school cycles in the large school system of the State of Sao Paulo, suggest that the complex administrative apparatus of schools creates a great amount of mediation between system management authorities and what happens in the classroom. This mediation has made it

difficult to make the main information on learning cycles public. They reach the bases with meanings which are frequently very different from their original formulations.

However, this finding may not be interpreted as if schools were merely to implement a reform project defined in other instances. Actually, the complexity of the transformation supposed implies a necessary confrontation of different – and sometimes even antagonistic – positions, that have to be carefully considered during learning cycle implementation. Therefore, the support given to schools by intermediary and central agencies of school systems by means of systematic follow-up and assessment of ongoing initiatives becomes essential to maintain such a large educational innovation.

It has also been noticed that the interaction of school systems and universities seems to be an especially important factor of mobilization as it encourages the efforts of formulation and reflexion upon the roads that have been traveled and the options to be made in working with learning cycles.

Higher education does not have answers to many of the questions raised by them. On the contrary, some issues posed by learning cycles make it evident that the analytical resources and the pedagogical repertoire transmitted by universities have frequently proven to be insufficient to build and manage a school that intends to be democratic. However, the closeness and the effort towards collaboration between school systems and higher education for the implementation of this form of school organization may be decisive to build anchors that tie educational practices and policies to what is the greater purpose of learning cycles: that of inventing a school for all.

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Received in: february, 2005
Appoved for publication in: april, 2005