

Beliefs on assessment and grade repetition among teachers in Portugal

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Abstract

The present research aims to understand which conceptions and beliefs Portuguese teachers have about assessment in compulsory school, and whether if their beliefs are in line with the guidelines on national education policy. Moreover, it aims to understand why Portuguese teachers use grade repetition as a common resource when it is not scientifically recommended. To do so, a focus group was conducted, and a survey carried out with a sample of Portuguese teachers' population, with a 95% confidence level and a margin of error of 2.3%. Those procedures led to the conclusion that Portuguese teachers have personal beliefs towards assessment and grade repetition that have an impact on their practice and succeed in superimposing themselves on national educational policies and scientific recommendations.

Keywords: Assessment. Grade repetition. Teacher's beliefs and practices. Teacher's decision-making.

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Crenças sobre a avaliação e retenção escolar nos professores portugueses

Resumo

A presente pesquisa tem como objetivo compreender quais são as concepções e crenças dos professores portugueses em relação à avaliação na escolaridade obrigatória, e se essas crenças estão em linha com as políticas públicas nacionais. Para além disso, pretende ainda compreender porque motivo os professores portugueses utilizam a retenção escolar (repetição de ano ou nível) de forma recorrente, quando não é cientificamente recomendada. Para tal, foi realizado um grupo focal e um inquérito a uma amostra da população docente em Portugal, com um grau de confiança de 95% e uma margem de erro de 2.3%. Estes procedimentos permitiram concluir que os professores portugueses têm crenças pessoais em relação à avaliação que interferem na sua atividade docente e que se sobrepõem às políticas educativas e recomendações científicas.

Palavras-chave: Avaliação. Retenção escolar. Crenças e práticas do professor. Tomada de decisão do professor.

Creencias acerca de la evaluación y repetición de curso en profesores portugueses

Resumen

La presente investigación tiene como objetivo comprender cuáles son las concepciones y creencias que los profesores portugueses tienen sobre la evaluación en la escuela obligatoria, y si están en línea con las políticas públicas nacionales. Además, también tiene la intención de entender por qué los profesores portugueses usan la repetición de curso como un recurso común cuando no se recomienda científicamente. Para ello, se realizó un grupo focal y una encuesta de una muestra de la población docente en Portugal, con un nivel de confianza del 95% y un margen de error del 2.3%. Estos procedimientos nos permitieron concluir que los profesores portugueses tienen creencias personales hacia la evaluación, que interfieren con la actividad docente y logran superponerse a las políticas educativas y las recomendaciones científicas.

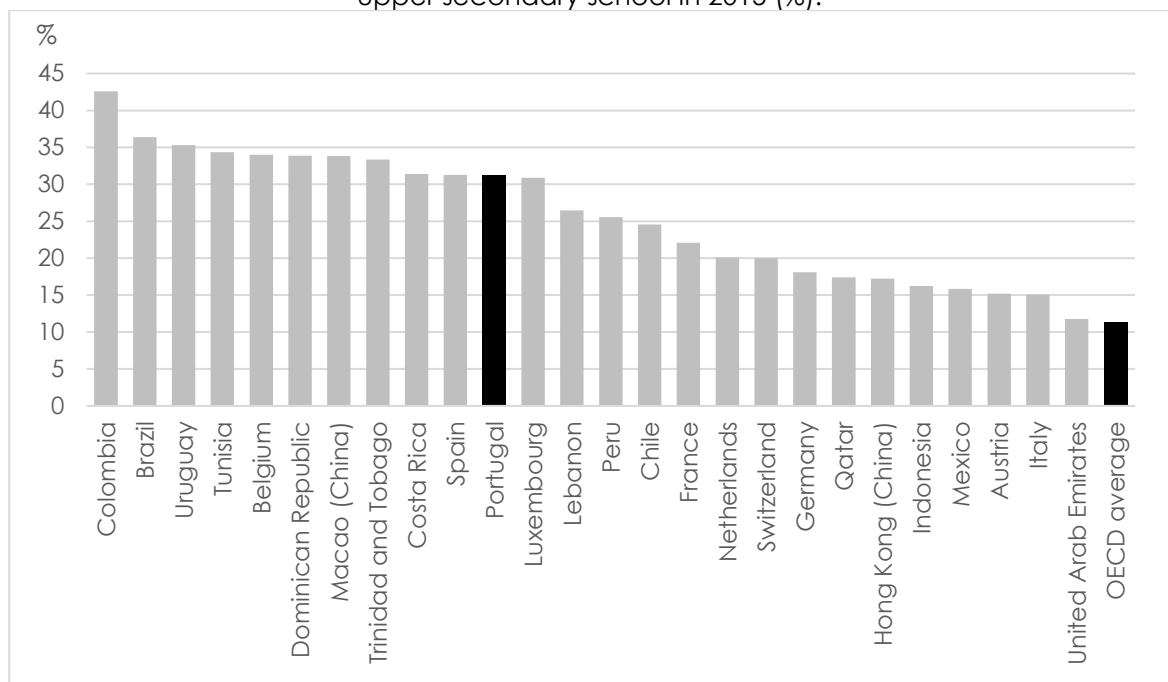
Palabras clave: Evaluación. Repetición de curso. Creencias y prácticas del profesor. Toma de decisiones del profesor.

Introduction

In 2009, with the passing of the Portuguese law nº 85/2009, the extension of compulsory education for all children until the 12th grade or until the age of eighteen years old was approved in Portugal. Aiming to have all children in school and to increase the level of qualifications of the Portuguese population (RODRIGUES, 2015), this extension brought new challenges to the Portuguese educational system. Several studies have shown that ensuring access to education does not automatically result in the enhancement of social and racial equality (BRANDEN; AVERMAET; HOUTTE, 2010). It was clear by then that it was not enough to force children to be in an educational system until they are eighteen; it was necessary to ensure they had opportunities to achieve success in this system (MATA, 2015; MARTINS; SEBASTIÃO; ABRANTES; RODRIGUES, 2018).

In Figure 1, data from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (ORGANISATION FOR ECONOMIC CO-OPERATION AND DEVELOPMENT, 2016) shows that, among other countries, Portugal has high levels of grade repetition in its educational system when compared to other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) members.

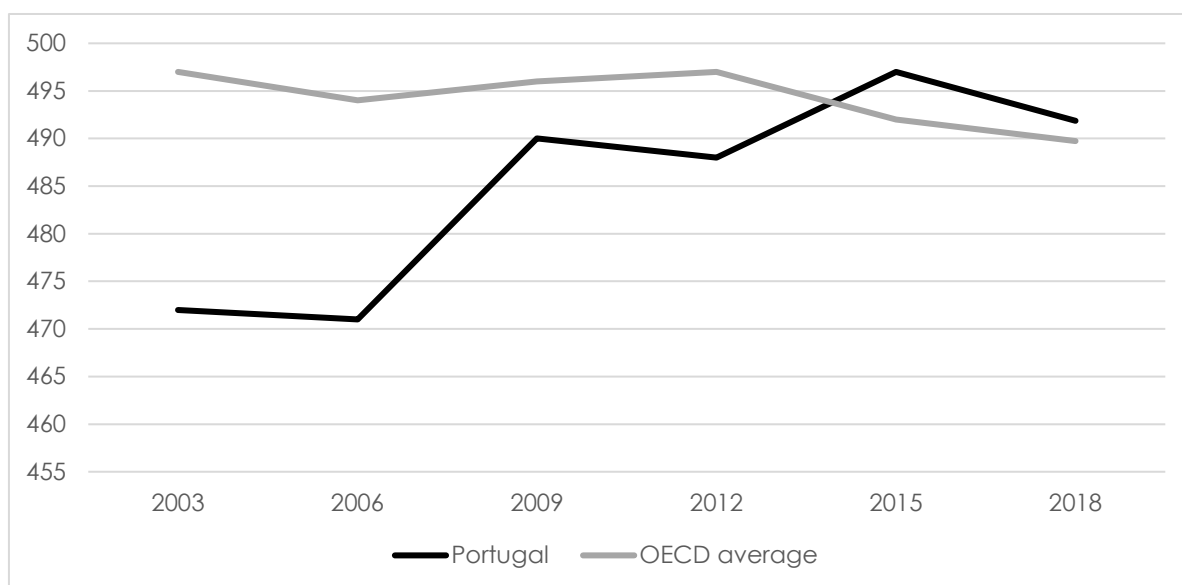
Figure 1. Percentage of students who had repeated a grade in primary, lower secondary or upper secondary school in 2015 (%).



Source: ORGANISATION FOR ECONOMIC CO-OPERATION AND DEVELOPMENT (2016).

Despite such high levels of grade repetition, Figure 2 reveals that Portugal has continuously improved its overall average in matters of success in PISA, converging towards the OECD average. In 2015 and 2018, for the first time, Portuguese students were even able to score above the OECD average in PISA results in terms of overall success on mathematics, reading and science.

Figure 2 – Averages for PISA overall on mathematics, reading and science scales, 2003-2018 (scale ranges from 0 to 1000).



Source: ORGANISATION FOR ECONOMIC CO-OPERATION AND DEVELOPMENT (2019).

If, on the one hand, Portuguese students still have more grade repetition than the OECD average, on the other hand, they have now a better performance than the OECD average. It can be reasonable to consider that the improvement of Portuguese students' performance is a consequence of high rates of grade repetition. However, it has been shown that there is no relation between the use of grade repetition and the improvement of students' skills (MARTINS, 2017; CARVALHO; SANTOS; CHRISPINO, 2020). Moreover, it has been very evident that repeating a school year has negative effects on academic achievement (JIMERSON, 2001) and any positive short-term effect tend to disappear over time (ALLEN; QI; WILLSON; HUGHES, 2009; NUNES; REIS; SEABRA, 2018).

So, why do Portuguese teachers use the repetition of school year as an educational tool, above the OECD average, although their students perform better than the OECD average?

Theoretical framework

Assessment in the Portuguese compulsory educational system

The Portuguese Educational Law establishes that education is universal to all children and has to promote equity and inclusion of all students. To do so, school programmes should be flexible and personalized using a large number of measures and resources expressed in the law (Decree 54/2018).

Accordingly, the Implementing order 98-A/92 says that assessment of a student aims to direct the intervention of the teacher towards the students. This should help teachers and students to formulate or reformulate decisions that can positively influence the promotion of their own educational process. In addition, it improves the quality of the educational system by the introduction of curricular changes or procedures that may prove necessary (Implementing order 98-A/92). It is clear that the Portuguese compulsory educational system legislation has a formative perspective towards assessment, aiming to continuously assess and adapt a general school system to an internal context of each school and to the needs of each student in particular. Assessment is not an end in itself, but a tool to improve teaching and learning quality.

Assessment in Portuguese schools

The Portuguese compulsory educational system is structured in basic and secondary schools. The basic education is composed of three cycles: the first cycle, or primary education, which includes grades 1 to 4 (lower ISCED 1); the second cycle, or middle education, which includes grades 5 and 6 (upper ISCED 1); and the third cycle, or lower secondary education, which includes grades 7 to 9 (ISCED 2). The secondary education includes grades 10 to 12 (ISCED 3). The basic education is characterized by a common path for all students adapted to the profile and characteristics of students. Different paths are only available at upper secondary education and it is organised into different forms according to different objectives, either focusing on access to further studies or preparation for working life.

The Portuguese legislation also specifies that grade repetition in basic education should happen preferably at the end of a cycle of studies, and it should only occur in the middle of a cycle under exceptional circumstances. Despite those legal recommendations, Table 1 shows that grade repetition is not an exceptional

procedure in the middle of a cycle, but a quite common and generalized practice through every cycle of studies.

Table 1 - Grade repetition and school dropping rates in Portugal from 2009 until 2019 (%).

Year	ISCED 1						ISCED 2			ISCED 3		
	Basic Education									Secondary education		
	First Cycle			Second Cycle		Third Cycle						
Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 6	Grade 7	Grade 8	Grade 9	Grade 10	Grade 11	Grade 12	
2009	0.0	7.0	3.1	4.0	7.6	7.6	17.1	11.3	13.2	17.4	10.7	30.6
2010	0.0	6.9	3.2	4.3	7.1	8.3	16.2	11.1	13.6	18.3	10.4	30.4
2011	0.0	6.5	2.6	3.9	7.4	7.4	15.4	10.3	13.8	18.0	11.0	34.3
2012	0.0	8.4	3.9	5.0	9.4	12.9	17.2	12.6	16.9	16.0	11.6	33.8
2013	0.0	9.5	5.2	4.3	10.1	14.8	16.5	13.7	17.7	13.4	10.9	34.5
2014	0.0	10.4	5.2	3.6	11.0	11.8	17.0	13.3	15.1	13.0	9.9	34.0
2015	0.0	9.3	4.1	2.5	8.5	8.7	15.4	10.3	10.7	12.5	8.6	29.9
2016	0.0	8.9	3.0	2.5	6.8	6.7	12.6	8.0	9.0	12.9	7.1	28.2
2017	0.0	7.4	2.2	2.1	6.1	5.6	11.4	6.7	7.0	12.6	7.1	26.2
2018	0.0	6.6	2.2	2.0	5.6	5.0	9.8	6.8	6.5	11.1	7.0	24.5
2019	0.0	4.9	1.5	1.7	4.0	3.7	7.0	4.7	5.5	10.7	6.7	22.6

Source: PORTUGAL (2020).

Evidence shows that systematic practices of formative internal assessment are clearly associated with very significant improvements in the learning process of all students (FERNANDES, 2014). They also show that those who benefit the most from these practices are students who are usually considered to have "learning difficulties". Internal formative assessment processes have better results than external evaluation (national exams), but it also shows that it has limitations regarding reliability and credibility. Public policies tend to invest in external evaluation processes because they have strong acceptance in society and they are perceived as moments of accuracy, quality, control and accountability of the educational system. Although there is no scientific evidence that increasing the number of external evaluation procedures improves what students learn, public education policies in a number of countries, including Portugal, have always used external evaluation procedures based on a variety of reasons: to shape internal assessment, to ensure that teachers teach the curriculum, to monitor students and schools' outcomes, to contribute to equality and a fair assessment (BROWN, 2008;

FERNANDES, 2014). Nevertheless, whatever the structure and motivation that commands assessment may be, it will never be free from tension and dilemmas (VIEIRA; BASTO, 2013).

It is, however, important to remark that those public policies towards internal and external assessment have an impact on teachers' activity. Teachers tend to organize their teaching methods accordingly to the assessment process established by public policies and not the other way around (CARDOSO, 2006). If public policies establish several external evaluation moments, teachers tend to prepare their students for the exams. If public policies establish formative internal assessment as a priority, teachers tend to focus on each individual learning process.

Teachers beliefs towards assessment

Among the teaching class there are many different conceptions of assessment and its purposes (LEVY-VERED; ALHIJA, 2018) and, therefore, there is a big diversity of demands, weighing and measuring to assess students that varies from teacher to teacher (CRAHAY, 1996).

To adjust their conceptions to the contextual factors that they are confronted with, teachers appeal to common stereotypes. For example, the assignment of students to different tracks is regarded as an established fact for teachers and school directors. Their assessment of students starts from the stereotype that lower-track students will not be as successful as the others. Teachers believe that certain groups of students will make little improvement at school. Even before they have met their students, they have built a strong image of their academic abilities (HOUTTE, 2011). The problem is that these images and stereotypes of teachers create effects on students' own learning and performance (BRESSOUX, 2009; FRIEDRICH; FLUNGER; NAGENGAST; JONKMANN; TRAUTWEIN, 2015).

Those conceptions and stereotypes about assessment and grade repetition are passed on from generation to generation because, according to younger teachers, it is from the senior colleagues that you 'learn how to act in the institution', i.e., what you are supposed to do, to think and to say about the community and about the classroom with regard to the central educational policy. The activity of older teachers in relation to the youngest ones gets mixed with the institution itself, establishing an organizational culture. Moreover, younger teachers who have tried

to do things differently from colleagues, distinguishing themselves from them, have described situations of marginalization and hostility, set by other teachers, for not fitting in with the latter's strategies of working and standardization in school (CARIA, 2000). In this way, younger teachers tend to reproduce the older teachers' activity and assessment methods, believing this is the role that they are supposed to perform in the institution. Thus, school traditions play not only a great part in constructing what teachers believe in, but they are also often confused with what the national educational policy is.

Research approach and Methods

Research questions

What are Portuguese teachers' beliefs towards assessment?

Why do Portuguese teachers use grade repetition as a common form of intervention?

Instruments

To find out and to gain a better understanding about Portuguese teachers' beliefs towards assessment and grade repetition, a multimethod approach was applied through qualitative and quantitative instruments. To do so, a focus group and survey were designed and applied in order to collect primary data.

Several studies have adopted and adapted previous surveys designed in other investigation processes for their research. Though its validation, for this given investigation, designing a survey based on a focus group has allowed for a better adjustment of this research to the Portuguese reality. The focus group has allowed to understand what Portuguese teachers' beliefs towards assessment and grade repetition are in a qualitative way. Based on this procedure and considering the theoretical contributions mentioned above, a questionnaire was designed and addressed to teachers.

Focus Group

The focus group discussion was carried out in February 2019 with a group of 10 teachers from different subjects, 3 men and 7 women, between 28 and 65 years old. In order to find out these teachers' beliefs towards assessment and grade repetition, the focus group protocol included an introduction to the discussion, providing an

informed consent to the participants and establishing ground rules for the group. Then, participant teachers were asked why there is such a high grade repetition rate in Portugal compared to other OECD countries, although, paradoxically, PISA test scores are better than the OECD average. Throughout the discussion, the moderator involved and explored teachers' perceptions about the educational system, national exams, assessment criteria, grade repetition and school tracks. The main results from this focus group can be found on section Focus Group analysis.

Survey

The focus group results were taken into account to define the questions that were put into the survey. The survey sought to validate in a quantitative way the considerations made in a qualitative way on the focus group.

Survey sampling

To determine the size of a sample (n_0) for a population of infinite size, the following calculation formula should be used (ISRAEL, 1992):

$$n_0 = \frac{Z^2 \cdot p \cdot q}{e^2}$$

In this formula, Z is the chosen value of the standard normal distribution with a certain confidence level associated, p is the probability of success of occurrence of a certain characteristic, q is the probability of failure ($q = 1 - p$) and e is the margin of error. For a confidence level of 95% and a margin of error of 5%, the sample size assuming an infinite population (n_0) is 385. To determine the size of a sample (n) for a finite population (N), n should be corrected by the following formula (ISRAEL, 1992):

$$n = \frac{n_0}{1 + \frac{(n_0 - 1)}{N}}$$

Considering DGEEC's characterization of Portuguese teachers' population in 2016/2017, for a finite population with a $N = 119\,765$ individuals (PORTUGAL, 2020), the corrected n is 383. It should be noted that the size of the two samples is very similar since the teaching population is a very large population.

Aiming to ensure a good quality sample close to the procedures of a probabilistic sample, a mixed method was used in the sample selection:

1) Opportunity: an e-mail was sent to all public and major private schools in Portugal promoting this study among their teachers (all teachers in Portugal had equal opportunity to be contacted through their school director).

2) Unpredictability: the survey was disseminated by e-mail through a group of public and private sector teachers. Then, they were asked to spread and promote the survey through their personal network of teachers successively (Note that it is impossible to know which teachers received the survey and who responded it).

The survey stopped being available for response 10 days after its publication and once it had been verified that more than 383 teachers had answered it, a necessary condition for a 95% confidence level with a margin of error of 5%.

Sample's features

The survey was online for 10 days during April 2019. Among a total of 2012 answers, it was necessary to exclude from the database 7 people who reported not to be teachers and 161 responses from teachers who did not complete the whole survey. The survey was fully answered by 1 844 teachers from all over the country. In the following Tables (2-5), it is possible to observe how the Portuguese teaching population and the selected sample are characterized by cycle, gender, age, qualification and type of school.

Table 2 - Sample and Population characterization by cycle and gender.

	Sample			Population		
	Men	Women	TOTAL	Men	Women	TOTAL
First Cycle of Basic Education (lower ISCED 1)	69 (3.7%)	324 (17.8%)	393 (21.3%)	3 453 (2.9%)	23 829 (19.9%)	27 282 (22.8%)
Second Cycle of Basic Education (upper ISCED 1)	89 (4.8%)	219 (11.9%)	308 (16.7%)	6 020 (5.0%)	15 972 (13.3%)	21 992 (18.4%)
Third Cycle of Basic Education / Secondary education (ISCED 2+3)	355 (19.2%)	788 (42.7%)	1143 (62.0%)	19 800 (16.6%)	50 691 (42.3%)	70 491 (58.9%)
TOTAL (Compulsory school)	513 (27.8%)	1331 (72.2%)	1844 (100%)	29 273 (24.4%)	90 492 (75.6%)	119 765 (100%)

Sources: The authors (2019); PORTUGAL (2020).

Table 3 - Sample and Population characterization by age.

	< 30 years old	30-39 years old	40-49 years old	≥ 50 years old	TOTAL
Sample	8 (0.4%)	158 (8.6%)	658 (35.7%)	1020 (55.3%)	1844 (100%)
Population	1 086 (0.9%)	21 353 (17.8%)	44 860 (37.5%)	52 466 (43.8%)	119 765 (100%)

Sources: The authors (2019); PORTUGAL (2020).

Table 4 - Sample and Population characterization by qualification.

	ISCED 5	ISCED 6	ISCED 7 or ISCED 8	TOTAL
Sample	45 (2.4%)	1410 (76.5%)	389 (21.1%)	1844 (100%)
Population	6 912 (5.8%)	98 656 (82.4%)	14 197 (11.9%)	119 765 (100%)

Sources: The authors (2019); PORTUGAL (2020).

Table 5 - Sample and Population characterization by type of school (public or private).

	Public	Private	TOTAL
Sample	1 778 (96.4%)	66 (3.6%)	1844 (100%)
Population	107 306 (89.6%)	12 459 (10.4%)	119 765 (100%)

Sources: The authors (2019); PORTUGAL (2020).

In percentage, the distribution on the sample and on the population is very similar regarding the known variables given through institutional statistics by DGEEC. Nevertheless, for all the statistical tests, weights were defined for these dimensions so that the sample could be adjusted to the population under study.

It is important to remark that those are the only characteristics from all the Portuguese teaching class known and given by DGEEC. Therefore, those were the only variables considered in this study.

With 1 844 valid cases, the sample goes far beyond the minimum number of 383 teachers to have a 95% confidence level with a margin of error of 5%. In actual fact, the statistics presented in the following point, with a sample of 1 844 cases, result in a 95% confidence level with a margin of error of 2.3%.

All the opinion questions in the survey have used a Likert scale from 1 to 10, in which 1 means "I completely disagree" and 10 is "I completely agree".

Data analysis

Focus Group analysis

The results here presented are perceptions and arguments given by the teachers that participated in the focus group. Those results were analyzed and can be interpreted as conflicts or tensions that teachers identify in the compulsory school system as a possible cause of school failure. These tensions were classified into five different dimensions depending on where the tension is:

1. In Portuguese society and culture
2. In the educational system
3. In school administration
4. In teachers' practices
5. In students and parenting

The main perceptions and arguments for each of the five different dimensions, given by the teachers that participated in the focus group, are explored in the following subsections.

Tensions in Portuguese society and Culture

According to teachers that participated in the focus group, school failure is a product of modern society and a product of what people want and demand from school. Other countries do not have school failure (from the point of view of the repetition of the school year), because people have a different way of living and a different social organization that is reflected in the school and in the school paths. Hence, demands from society towards school are different. Other countries have identified grade repetition as a problem and have done something to solve it. In Portugal, grade repetition is not seen as a problem and so there is no strong social pressure for its resolution. There is resistance to change.

Tensions in the educational system

Although students spend more time at school than ever before, some teachers feel they have little time to teach all the curriculum defined by central government. They say that the flexibility that the Portuguese educational law establishes to adjust school programmes to students' needs it is not possible to put into practice. There are national exams for which students have to know the *curriculum* and, if they do not, it will be the teacher that is to be held accountable. Consequently, teachers say that they have to teach all the school programmes defined by central government, which are long and not appropriate to promote school success.

This is a very great contradiction, kids have never spent so much time in school as nowadays and, yet, I feel I don't have time to work all the *curriculum* with my pupils. (Second cycle Mathematics' teacher, 2019).

They also feel that, despite all the national reforms that come with new governments, changes that reach schools are slight and the system is too attached to theory based *curriculum*, with little practice. As a result, there is an excessive value attributed to written tests and national exams, not only by the Ministry of Education, but also by schools, teachers, students, parents and society.

Besides that, teachers have stated that many national policies to promote school success demand greater human resources, new and different facilities in the classroom, different equipment and resources, which require greater investment from central government, which does not happen.

Tensions in school administration

Many teachers stated that schools are not physically prepared to promote different practices towards success. Most classrooms still have a nineteenth century configuration and they lack new and more appealing resources to children.

There is also a lack of human resources to develop different approaches when a student with difficulties is identified. Students spend too much time inside a classroom with classes based only on theory and teachers should have more time to work using different approaches.

It was also mentioned that schools want to perform well in national exams because society values that. This becomes evident in the assessment criteria defined at the beginning of each year, in which written tests, like the exams, have an excessive weight compared to other dimensions in the assessment criteria. This creates a great pressure on teachers to teach all the *curriculum* and to prepare their students for a written test and/or exam.

Tensions in teachers' practices

Some teachers say that many colleagues have an old fashioned vision about school that is not the one that the Ministry of Education wants today. They have stopped in time and do not innovate. They also say that many teachers do not know what the recommendations from the Ministry of Education towards the *curriculum* and assessment are. They simply keep doing everything as they always did when they started teaching. On the other hand, others believe that many teachers are

improving over time as they become more experienced and aware of students' needs.

Teachers feel a pressure to teach all the *curriculum* and they forget that they are the administrators of their classroom and the *curriculum*. They confine their own activity even if there is not any external requirement to do so.

They also feel that, when they identify a student with difficulties, they do not have extra resources to intervene, which they cannot do alone. As a consequence, not all students are given the opportunities for success they deserve. The opportunities that are given are the ones that are possible to provide and thus, it is inevitable that some students will fail.

There is always something else that we could do for our students. So, we never provide them all the opportunities to achieve success. We provide the opportunities that we can give. (Second and third cycle Physical Education's teacher, 2019).

Several teachers also said that the repetition of a school year is a new opportunity for students to achieve success. Some of them even highlighted their own experience as a student, where they consider that the grade repetition they had was good for their own ego and knowledge about subjects. They believe that it is prejudicial for a student to go to a new grade when certain subjects and competences have not been learned. Therefore, grade repetition is the best solution for a low achievement student.

Some also specified that, for those low achievement students that keep failing even after a repetition, there should be earlier professional routes. If they are unable to learn the regular *curriculum*, they should have a different approach in a different school, as used to occur in the old days.

Tensions in students and parenting

Students and parents were also pointed out as a cause of school failure. Nowadays, the reality and children's interests are completely different, and school is not something of interest to them. According to the teachers, students do not concentrate, they do not have study habits and their parents are not at home to help them with it. They also stated that older low achievement students prefer to have a precarious job rather than stay at school. Starting to work is more appealing to them than staying in school.

Survey's data analysis

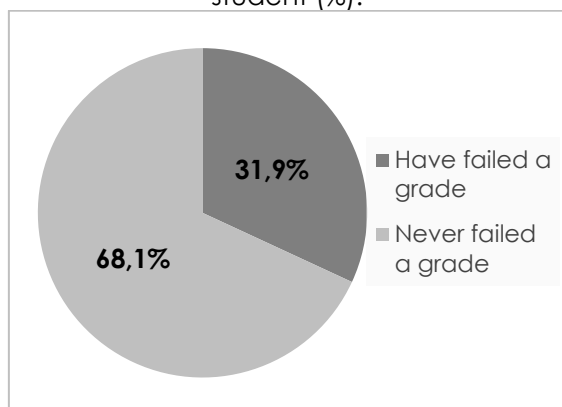
The survey was designed considering the tensions and beliefs about assessment and grade repetition shown in the focus group. It aimed to validate the considerations made in the focus group for all the teaching class.

In the survey, Portuguese teachers tend to consider that school is not valued in Portugal ($M=4.58$, $SD=2.630$) and that there is not a real concern with what students learn at school ($M=4.95$, $SD=2.145$). Teachers with lower qualifications (ISCED 5) have this perception with a stronger and more significant strength ($F(2, 1841) = 12.667$; $p \leq 0.001$) than the more qualified teachers with ISCED 6 ($dif_M = 1.140$, $p < 0.001$), and ISCED 7+8 ($dif_M = 1.014$, $p = 0.001$). Furthermore, most teachers considered that there is a great pressure to approve students by the end of a school year regardless of what they know ($M=8.53$, $SD=1.820$).

When recalling their own experience as students, there is a general perception that school used to be better and more demanding ($M=6.90$, $SD=2.600$). Teachers also tend to consider that the quality of teaching was better ($M=6.00$, $SD=2.668$), with suitable and fairer assessment processes ($M=5.53$, $SD=2.671$) where grade transition or retention of a student were fairer ($M=6.76$, $SD=2.775$).

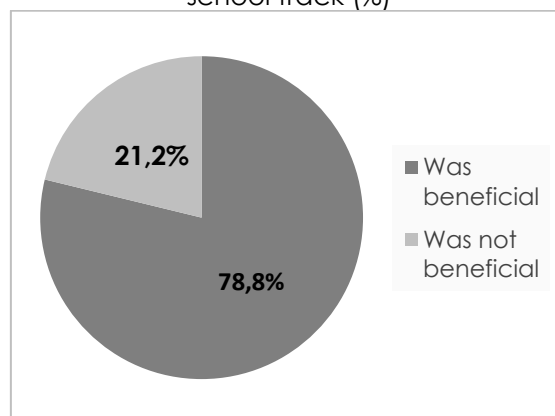
Moreover, still recalling their own experience as students, 31.9% of teachers said that they failed at least one grade as a student. From those who had repeated at least one grade as a student, 78.8% consider that the grade repetition they had was beneficial to their school career and personal experience.

Figure 3 - Teachers who have failed at least one year at school when they were a student (%).



Source: The authors (2019).

Figure 4 - Teachers who said that the grade repetition was beneficial on their school track (%).



Source: The authors (2019).

At present, teachers tend to think that the assessment processes defined by the Portuguese Ministry of Education are not suitable for what is done in schools ($M=4.24$, $SD=2.291$). There is not a consensual position among the Portuguese teaching population as to whether grade repetition is beneficial or harmful to students ($M=5.57$, $SD=2.513$). However, they propose the grade repetition for a student considering the best interests for that given student ($M=6.66$, $SD=2.863$) and, therefore, they believe that the grade repetition of a student should not occur mostly at the end of a cycle of studies as recommended by the Ministry of Education ($M=3.88$, $SD=3.073$).

When it comes to who is responsible for a student's success, teachers believe that students are principally responsible for their own success (50.3%) followed by the ministry of Education and their educational policy (21.0%). Teachers come next with 11.8% and least important are the parents (8.9%) and schools and their internal organization (7.9%).

On a similar question, when it comes to who is responsible for a student grade repetition, teachers still believe that students are principally responsible for their grade repetition (50.4%) followed by the Ministry of Education and their educational policy (31.7%). Next comes school and their internal organization (7.9%) and the least responsible are the teachers (6.5%) and the parents (3.6%).

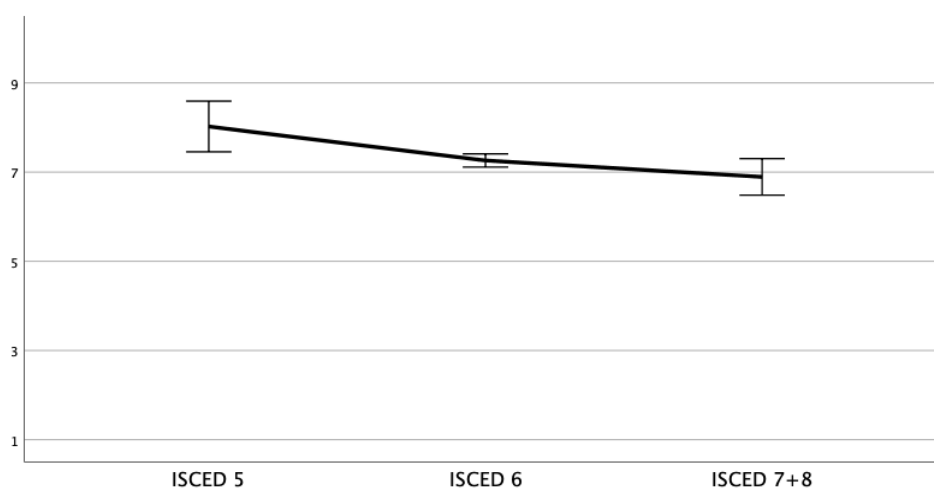
When the issue is assessment processes, teachers believe that the evaluation criteria are appropriate to the syllabus of their subject area and to their students ($M=6.79$, $SD=2.466$). They tend to reject the idea that it is not possible to make curricular adjustments because there is a programme to complete ($M=4.54$, $SD=2.994$) and that diagnostic testing is not useful because students do not care about it ($M=4.68$, $SD=3.268$). In fact, they use diagnostic testing to establish the starting point for their students ($M=7.88$, $SD=2.534$) and to define consequent curricular adjustments to the abilities and limitations of their students ($M=7.38$, $SD=2.461$) as it is proposed by the ministry of education. Although the possibility of equal variances within each group of age was rejected and the ANOVA test could not be applied, it is possible to say that the younger teachers and the teachers from the first cycle of studies attach greater value to the diagnostic testing than the older teachers and the teachers from the second, third cycle and secondary school teachers. In both situations, applying a Kruskal-Wallis nonparametric test, it is possible

to reject the hypothesis of equal distributions ($H(2) = 26.333$; $p \leq 0.001$) and ($H(2) = 67.972$; $p \leq 0.001$) respectively, show that these differences are statistically significant.

Teachers also reported that they put differentiated strategies in practice when they identify a student with difficulties ($M=8.33$, $SD=1.779$) and they reject that they no longer have alternatives if these strategies fail ($M=3.45$, $SD=2.662$). However, they tend to support that students with difficulties need differentiated measures that are not possible to provide in the classroom ($M=6.19$, $SD=2.893$) and that these students should be attending a different school track appropriated to their abilities and limitations ($M=6.14$, $SD=2.984$).

Despite the fact that they reject the idea that they no longer have alternatives if these strategies fail, teachers also believe that, for some students, the repetition of a school year is inevitable ($M=7.20$, $SD=2.983$). Nevertheless, it is important to remark that this belief is statistically significant and stronger among the least qualified teachers with ISCED 5 ($M=8.02$, $SD=2.954$, $F(2, 1841) = 5.191$; $p = 0.006$). As qualification increases, this mean drops: Teachers with ISCED 6 ($M=7.26$, $SD=2.953$) and the teachers with ISCED 7+8 ($M=6.89$, $SD=3.072$).

Figure 5 - Means for groups of teachers according to their ISCED qualification, who believe that for some students the repetition of a school year is inevitable (From 1-10 where 1 means "I completely disagree" and 10 is "I completely agree", with error bars of 95% confidence interval).



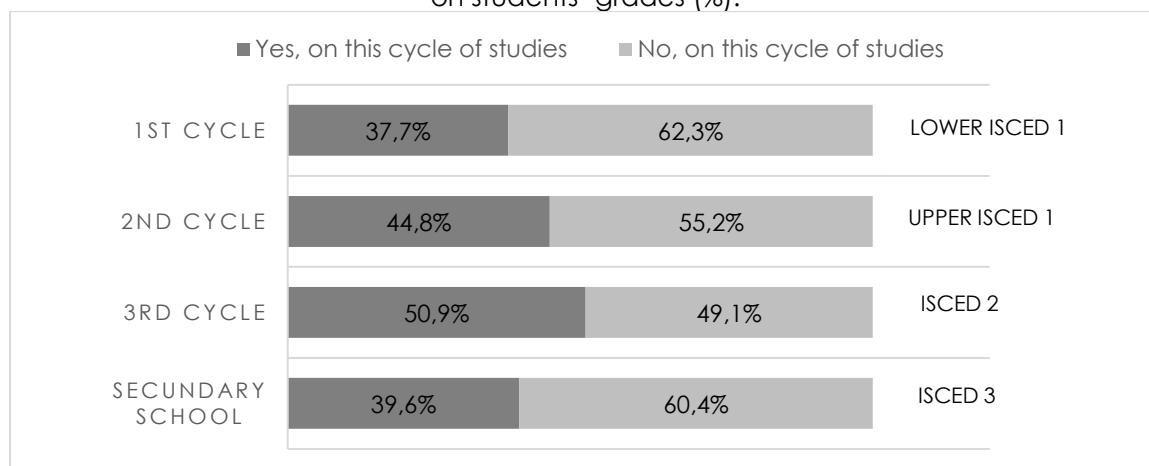
Source: The authors (2019).

When asked if assessment should attach greater weight to the objectives of the subject area, irrespective of the student's evolution, teachers tend to reject the idea ($M=4.79$, $SD=2.541$). Teachers believe that student assessment should be based

primarily on their evolution throughout the year, regardless of whether they have achieved the objectives of the subject ($M=6.78$, $SD=2.425$). This belief is more significant and stronger among the less qualified teachers with ISCED 5, ($M=7.78$, $SD=2.423$, $F(2, 1841) = 8.907$; $p \leq 0.001$) than among the more fully qualified teachers with ISCED 6 ($dif_M = -1.000$, $p < 0.001$), and ISCED 7+8 ($dif_M = -1.094$, $p = 0.001$).

When it comes to external assessment moments, with the exception of the third cycle of basic education, teachers generally reject the need for the existence of National Assessment Tests with no implication on students' grade ($M=4.58$, $SD=3.408$). Although the possibility of equal variances within each teaching cycle group was rejected and the ANOVA test could not be applied, by applying a Kruskal-Wallis nonparametric test, it is possible to reject the hypothesis of equal distributions and assume that differences among groups are statistically significant ($H(2) = 50.841$; $p \leq 0.001$). Hence, it is possible to say that first cycle teachers do not attach so much importance to National Assessment Tests compared to other cycles of studies (dif_M from 2nd Cycle = -0.997 , $p < 0.001$; dif_M from 3rd cycle and secondary education = -1.437 , $p < 0.001$).

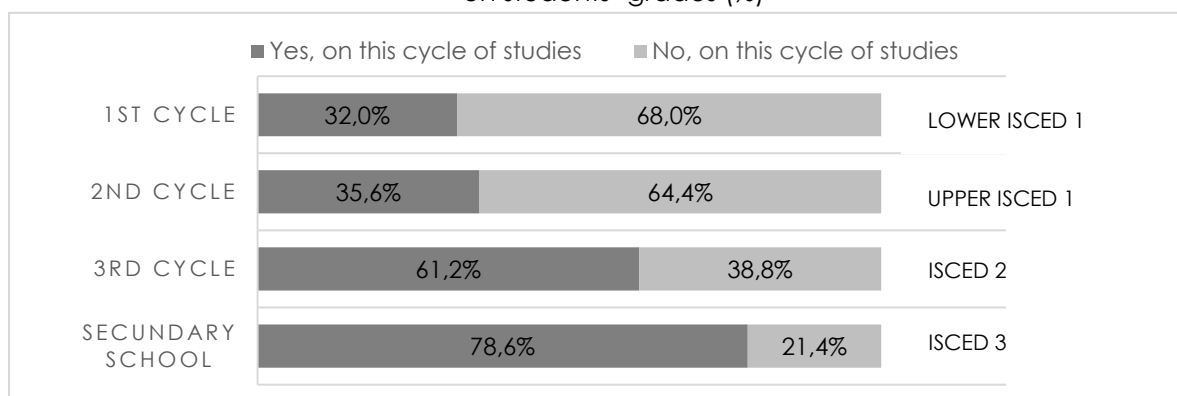
Figure 6 - Teachers who agree with the existence of National Assessment Tests with no impact on students' grades (%).



Source: The authors (2019).

With a similar approach but following a different perspective, teachers tend to approve the existence of National Assessment Exams with impact on final students' grade ($M=6.53$, $SD=3.235$). However, they consider these National Assessment Exams should exist mainly in upper levels of school.

Figure 7 - Teachers who agree with the existence of National Assessment Exams with impact on students' grades (%)



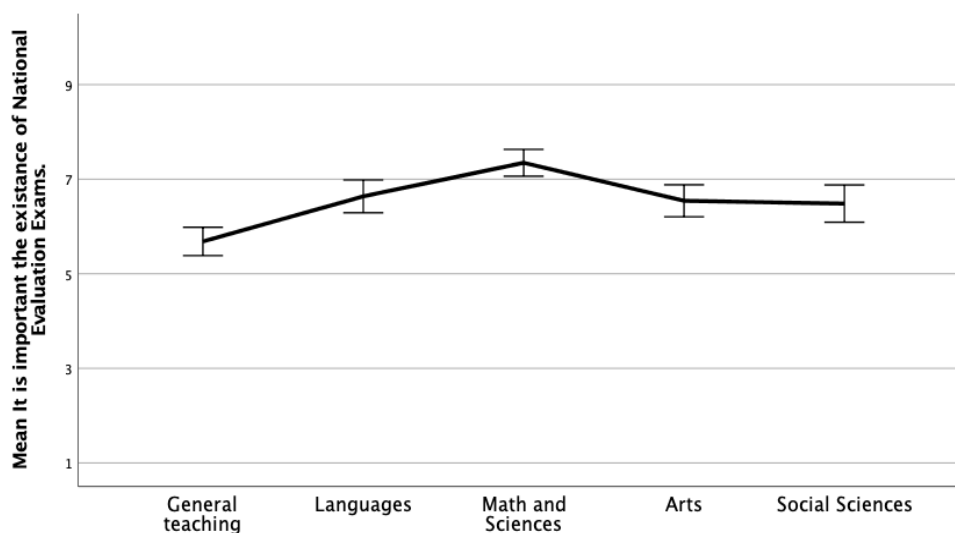
Source: The authors (2019).

Second cycle, third cycle and secondary teachers consider that the existence of National Assessment Exams is more important than first cycle teachers with statistical significant differences ($F(2, 1836) = 15.458; p \leq 0.001; dif_M \text{ from 2nd Cycle} = -1.015, p < 0.001; dif_M \text{ from 3rd cycle and secondary education} = -0.985, p < 0.001$).

Teachers not only agree more with the existence of National Assessment Exams, but they also consider that these are more important than National Assessment Tests ($M=6.35, SD=3.235$). Once again, it is also the second cycle, third cycle and secondary teachers that consider that National Assessment Exams are more important than National Assessment Tests ($F(2, 1833) = 16.489; p \leq 0.001; dif_M \text{ from 2nd Cycle} = -0.860, p = 0.002; dif_M \text{ from 3rd cycle and secondary education} = -1.108, p < 0.001$).

Finally, it is also possible to say that Mathematics and Science teachers' value the existence of National Assessment Exams more, with impact on students' grades, in a more significant way when compared to other subject teachers. It should however be noted that the possibility of equal variances within each group of teaching subjects was rejected and the ANOVA test could not be applied. Applying a Kruskal-Wallis nonparametric test, it is possible to reject the hypothesis of equal distributions and assume this difference is statistically significant ($H(4) = 67.068; p \leq 0.001; dif_M \text{ from general teaching} = 1.664, p < 0.001; dif_M \text{ from Languages} = 0.710, p = 0.053; dif_M \text{ from Arts} = 0.804, p = 0.015; dif_M \text{ from Social Sciences} = 0.864, p = 0.015$).

Figure 8 - Means for groups of teachers according to their subject of teaching, who consider that it is important the existence of National Assessment Exams (From 1-10 where 1 means "I completely disagree" and 10 is "I completely agree", with error bars of 95% confidence interval).



Source: The authors (2019).

Discussion

In this discussion section, a sum up from both focus group and survey validation main ideas about assessment and grade repetition is attempted.

Portuguese society and parents demand

Portuguese teachers consider that there is a great pressure on society to approve students regardless of what they know. There is little concern with what students learn or school quality as long as students perform good in External National Tests and/or Exams.

Educational System

Although Portuguese teachers put different approaches in practice to work with low achievement students, they defend that school programmes should be smaller and that they should have a higher weekly time allocation to work with their older students. They also believe that low achievement students should be attending different school tracks and should have different teaching approaches that are not possible to provide in a classroom.

The existence of National Exams or Tests creates pressure from society, ministry and school administrators to teach the whole *curriculum* and prepare the students

for it. But the truth is that teachers also appreciate the existence of National Assessment Exams. In fact, there is a kind of paradox between what teachers believe that assessment should be and the existence of National Assessment Exams (with implication for students' grades) or Assessment Tests (with no implication for students' grades). On the one hand, these teachers say that the assessment of a student should attach greater importance to their evolution throughout the school year but reject the importance of National Assessment Tests (with no implication on students' grade that aims to reorganize the teacher, school and ministry of education activity). Yet, on the other hand, they reject the idea that student assessment should favour the achievement of the objectives of a subject regardless of the evolution of a student, but, at the same time, they overvalue the existence of National Exams (with implications for students' grades and does not take into account students' evolution).

School administration

Portuguese teachers feel that there is a pressure from school administrators to teach everything in the *curriculum* in order to prepare the students for an External National Test or Exam because schools and directors want to look good on these.

There is also a general perception among the teaching class that school used to be better and more demanding than today. They believe that school is worsening its quality and that assessment used to be fairer in the past when grade repetition rates were higher. To lower grade repetition rates teachers consider there should exist new school tracks and more resources to work with low achievement students.

Teachers practice

Despite the worsening of assessment processes and school quality, teachers believe that their qualification, practice and quality has improved.

Portuguese teachers also state that they take into account diagnostic assessment and formative assessment of their students to adjust their practice. They put different strategies into practice to define consequent curricular adjustments to the abilities and limitations of their students and they reject the idea that they no longer have alternatives if these strategies fail.

Moreover, teachers recognize that they confine their own activity even if there is not any external requirement to do so, because there is a great pressure from society, ministry and schools to prepare students for national exams and tests.

Teachers also tend to believe that grade repetition is a new opportunity for students to achieve success when recalling their own experience as a student and recalling their practice. This is in line with previous research that shows that

(...) teachers at all grade levels believe retention is an acceptable school practice that prevents students from facing daily failure and motivates them to work harder. (TOMCHIN; IMPARA, 1992, p. 199).

It also becomes evident that Portuguese teachers tend to externalize their own responsibility for the success or poor academic achievement of their students. The responsibility is the Ministry of Education's who does not provide more school tracks for students with low achievement; schools which do not provide more physical and human resources to work with students; and students themselves who do not work hard enough.

Students

In fact, a majority of teachers say that students are principally responsible for their own (lack of) success and teachers are one of the least responsible. The success or failure of a student is mostly explained by their greater or lesser capacities, by their intelligence, and by their work in the classroom and at home.

Conclusions and further research

This investigation has enabled us to observe that Portuguese teachers are attached to their past experience as a student and as a teacher, which has an impact on what they believe in today. In most issues, those beliefs are common to all the teaching class regardless age, sex, qualification, public or private sector, disciplinary group or teaching cycle. Moreover, those beliefs were formed at an early stage and tend to self-perpetuate with regard to reason, time, schooling or experience (PAJARES, 1992).

Those conceptions about assessment and grade repetition have an impact on teachers' practice superseding national educational public policies, educational laws and scientific recommendation. Assessment processes are performed mostly for the production of a classification by the teacher, in many cases disconnected from the teaching/learning processes (FERNANDES; GASPAREL, 2014), as the national tests

and exams that teachers appreciate are. As a consequence, there is a persistent culture of using grade repetition in Portugal as a form of intervention for low achievement students. These findings are in line with investigation done in other countries (CRAHAY, 1996; HOUTTE, 2011; RIBEIRO; KASMIRSKI; GUSMÃO; BATISTA; JACOMINI; CRAHAY, 2018).

In the post covid-19 epidemic period, where teaching and assessment methods were forced to change, it will be interesting to apply this same questionnaire and study the possibility of transformation of teachers' beliefs about assessment, and the change of practices in this respect.

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