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From official narratives about PISA to the conceptions of basic education teachers in the North of RS

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Abstract: The article presents and discusses the results of a research that investigated the following question: what are the conceptions of teachers working with 15-year-old students in a municipality in the Northern region of Rio Grande do Sul (RS) about the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)? PISA, coordinated by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), is an international large-scale assessment program that has become a powerful tool for transnational regulation. Its impact on Brazilian educational policies also resonates in teachers' performance. Therefore, this text aims to analyze the conceptions of teachers working with 15-year-old students in a municipality in the Northern region of RS regarding PISA. This is a qualitative, exploratory, and descriptive study. The methodological strategies adopted were bibliographic, documentary, and field research. Field data collection was conducted through the application of a questionnaire to the teaching staff (12 teachers) working in the ninth year of Elementary School and the first and second years of High School in the aforementioned municipality. The strategy used for data analysis was Content Analysis. The results highlighted a lack of knowledge among the participants regarding PISA and its influences, as well as a certain self-responsibility for students' performance. These results point to the emphasis placed on the technical aspect of training, which reverberates in the reduction of criticality and the loss of the political dimension of teaching performance.

Keywords: evaluation policies; large-scale assessment; Programme for International Student Assessment; regulation; basic education; teachers.

1 Introduction

The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), coordinated by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), is a large-scale international assessment program applied every three years in OECD member countries and invited countries. The test, of which Brazil participates as a guest country since the first edition (in 2000), evaluates students in the age group of 15 years in sets of skills called literacies. The areas of knowledge assessed are reading, mathematics,

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and science. According to the widespread rhetoric, “PISA assesses the extent to which 15-year-old students, near the end of compulsory schooling, have acquired knowledge and skills considered essential for full participation in social and economic life” (Brazil, 2020, p.17).

Given this conception, which has a very close relationship with the Theory of Human Capital¹, the OECD acts as a key actor in defining and affirming a global education agenda and disseminates a hegemonic model of education. Their discourses act by fabricating and disseminating what is meant by effective schools, efficient managers, and good teachers. Said manufacturing constitutes a process that excludes other concepts and models, not attuned with the interests in question (Oliveira, 2020). Among the main modes of action of the OECD in the field of education is PISA (Carvalho, 2011).

Widely publicized world rankings are generated based on the performance, in the test, of students from different countries. The classifying list of countries based on their educational performance is among the main results offered by PISA. The comparison effect it provides is highly appreciated by national political actors. The aforementioned ranking, listing which countries have the highest educational quality, serves the OECD as a means to disseminate changes in education systems on an international scale. National governments use the results of the examination in order to promote and legitimize reforms in their educational systems and justify the adoption of certain policies (Oliveira, 2020). This use, however, occurs uncritically in many situations. The data are assumed “[...] as if they were technically, culturally, and politically neutral and, under any circumstance, comparable with other organizational, cultural, and educational realities regardless of the conditions and specificities of each country” (Afonso, 2009, p.24).

The enthusiasm and interest mobilized around large-scale assessment programs such as PISA intensified from the 1980s on, with the advent and spread of neoliberal and neoconservative governments. The states have adopted a competitive and neo-Darwinist ethos, admitting the logic of the market and importing private and

¹ The concept of human capital, which had the American economist Theodore William Schultz (1902-1998) among its main formulators, was created to explain the possibility of increasing productivity through investment in the human factor of the production process: when human labor is qualified through education, productivity and rates of profit/capital accumulation increase. Brought to the educational field, the concept made emerge a technicist conception of basic education that understands it as a presupposition for economic development (Minto, 2006).

corporate modes of management. In the educational field, at this juncture, the emphasis began to reside on the results achieved by students. This mode of state action is called the Evaluative State (Afonso, 2017).

Large-scale tests, in the context of the hegemonization of neoliberal logic, have also served to discredit and, consequently, reduce state actions and responsibilities (Afonso, 2017). The responsibility for the crisis faced by the educational systems of some countries, especially those whose PISA results are unsatisfactory, and for the consequent and convincing need for reform is attributed to teachers, schools, and students themselves. Among the effects of this situation is the reconfiguration of the daily functions of teachers. Their performance becomes directly associated with student results (Afonso, 2009).

Assessments such as PISA are used as mechanisms for developing accountability processes. In this context, teachers develop their work in the midst of contradictory pressures and demands. They need to be accountable, even without realizing it, to various hierarchical instances: to international organizations, to governments, to the management teams that are in a higher level to them, to students and their families, to society as a whole (Afonso, 2009).

From reflections on the scenario discussed above, concerns emerged that were transformed into research: are teachers who work with 15-year-old students (PISA age) also aware of this scenario? Do they know the test? Do they recognize the impact of this assessment on their professional performance? Are they aware of the responsibility assigned to them? Based on these concerns, the following research problem was elaborated: What are the conceptions of teachers who work with 15-year-old students from a municipality in the northern region of Rio Grande do Sul (RS) about the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)?

The objective of this article, therefore, is to analyze the conceptions of teachers who work with 15-year-old students from a municipality in the northern region of Rio Grande do Sul about PISA. The study is qualitative and, as for the objective, it is characterized as exploratory and descriptive. The methodological strategies mobilized were bibliographic, documentary, and field research. With regard to the bibliographic research, references were mobilized that address the topic of the regulation of educational systems, large-scale assessment, PISA, and its reverberations. The

documentary research made it possible to identify narratives present in the field of Brazilian educational policy about large-scale assessment and PISA.

The production of data, in the field stage, occurred through the application of a questionnaire (with the support of the *Google Forms* tool) to the teaching staff (composed of 12 professionals) who work in the ninth years of elementary school and in the first and second years of high school in a municipality in the northern region of Rio Grande do Sul. The option for teachers who work with these classes occurred because these are the ones with students in the correct age group, 15 years old (PISA age), among their members. The analysis of the data produced in the field occurred through Content Analysis from the perspective of Bardin (2016), commented by Franco (2018).

The article is divided into three main sections following this introduction. The second section situates the actions of the OECD and PISA in the current regulatory framework of education systems, composed of a multi-regulation. It starts from an approach to the concept of regulation and the description of the diversity of levels, sources, and modes of regulation that constitute and organize/reorganize formal education to address, especially, the transnational level and its reverberations in national educational policies. It also addresses the informal regulation operated by international organizations, including the OECD. This section also addresses the topic of large-scale assessment and its role in the framework of educational policies.

Sections three and four were devoted to the description, analysis, and discussion of the data produced in the field. It details, first, the methodological path adopted and the characterization of the teachers participating in the research regarding the age group, training, time, and place of professional performance. Following are the results of the research regarding the teachers' conceptions about PISA. It is discussed, based on the theoretical framework built, how they define/conceptualize and know PISA, the means by which the data and information about the test are presented to them, how they evaluate such data and their reverberations, if and how they perceive the impacts and influences of the assessment in basic education and in their teaching practice, and the feeling they facing the wide and extensive dissemination and acceptance of the results.

2 Concerning the place of large-scale assessment and OECD/PISA in the regulation of educational systems

The gestation, formulation, and implementation of educational policies are processes always influenced by decisions taken at different political and administrative levels. Thus, understanding the policies implemented in a given country requires considering the various instances of influence that precede and succeed the Ministry of Education (Barroso, 2018). According to Barroso (2005), as a way of coordinating educational systems, regulation can be understood as a process that constitutes a system and that has the function of simultaneously ensuring its balance, coherence, and transformation. The educational system is complex and consists of a diversity of sources, modes, and purposes of regulation. Therefore, the actors involved in the regulation process are diverse, as are their different positions, interests, and strategies.

Thus, the regulation process does not only include the production of rules and guidelines for the functioning of the education system. The (re)adjustment of the actions of the actors that compose it according to the aforementioned rules are also a fundamental part of this process. The regulation of an educational system is not a single, predictable, and automatic process nor does it result from a direct control, from a norm applied on the regulated individuals. The regulatory process is a composite process (Barroso, 2005). This is also the understanding of Antunes and Sá (2010). They point out, as do several authors, that among the objectives of the regulation process is the harmony of individual and collective behaviors, the mediation of conflicts, and the reduction of distortions that may threaten social cohesion. To regulate, therefore, is not only to prescribe norms. Attention must be paid to the complex tangle of levels, actors, interests, and power relations that permeate the process.

Regarding the different levels, Barroso (2006) highlights the existence of three of them. These, although different, are complementary. The first level is transnational regulation. It is the set of norms, discourses, procedures, and diverse materials that circulate and are produced in debates and international decision-making forums in the field of education. This set of instruments is adopted by national actors, including managers, experts, and employees, as mandatory. For managers, such instruments also serve the possibility of legitimization and public acceptance of decisions made

within their own educational systems. Transnational regulation originates in the central countries, among which the United States (USA), and is part of the system of dependencies structured by the effects of globalization. This system of dependencies places peripheral and semi-peripheral countries, including Brazil, in a position of dependence on central countries.

The second level presented by Barroso (2006) corresponds to national regulation. It is about how the state and its administration (the public authorities) control and influence the education system. It is, therefore, the way in which governments guide/induce, through injunctions, norms, and constraints, the context of action of the various social actors active in the educational field. Thus, they also influence its results. National regulation, at present, occurs through updated channels: the influences of transnational regulation contribute to the decrease of the decision-making power of Nation-States. Sudbrack and Fonseca (2021) contribute to this reflection by pointing out that, with the greater interdependence and competitiveness between countries being among the effects of globalization, the decision-making spaces of national actors are reduced.

Local microregulation, the third and final level of regulation, results from a tangle of diverse strategies, actions and negotiations, and from a diverse number of actors. It is from the aforementioned tangle that the norms produced at the national regulation level are adjusted and/or readjusted at the local level. This readjustment occurs even if, sometimes, unintentionally (Barroso, 2006). Local microregulation “[...] refers to institutionalized forms of intervention by the state and its administration in the coordination of the education system” (Barroso, 2006, p.56). The three levels described above constitute the formal modality of regulation.

In addition to the three formal levels of regulation described above, however, there are other more subtle and informal forms capable of operating regulatory effects, especially transnational regulatory effects. This is the case of the actions of the cooperation, support, development, and research programs that originate in international organizations. Among these are the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the World Bank (WB), and the OECD. By proposing diagnoses, methodologies, techniques, and solutions in a uniform manner, such organizations constitute a ready-to-wear. National actors, faced with the need to

resolve situations in the field of education, use these diagnoses and solutions to support and legitimize their decision-making (Barroso, 2006).

It should be noted that, despite being fundamental in the regulation of the educational system, given the diversity of sources and modes of regulation, the Nation-State is not the only regulatory instance and may not be the most decisive in the results of the regulatory tangle. The education system is subject to multiple regulations. Its coordination, balance, and transformation result from various regulatory devices: from a multiregulation (Barroso, 2018).

Dale (2005) explains that the meaning of the concept of regulation has undergone modifications over time. Initially, regulation operated through norms (rules, guidelines, commands, inputs) directed and/or imposed on educational systems. This mode of regulating turned into another, determined by goals. This new form acted *a posteriori* (from the effect to the cause), based on the need for achievements (outputs). Currently, the previously described changes have reached another level. The basis for regulation now lies in the results (outcomes) determined for educational systems. Large-scale assessments are fundamental instruments to this new regulatory mode. Among these, in the transnational sphere, is PISA.

The OECD also acts at the transnational (formal) level of regulation, promoting the circulation and acceptance of its ideas in international debates and forums on education. In these, various discourses, procedures, and materials are produced that are later adopted by Nation-States. There are also forms of direct political participation of the organization in the decision-making of countries with regard to education. Among the OECD's forms of action, there is also the so-called *soft* action. By disseminating and circulating their ideas and concepts, the OECD and PISA act in the construction of thoughts, of particular ways of thinking and understanding social and educational reality (Bieber, 2010). Such actions influence the social and educational conceptions of managers, teachers, students, families, and society as a whole (Oliveira, 2020).

The scenario mentioned above shows that international organizations, mainly the OECD through PISA, are part of the transnational level of regulation of educational systems and also integrate a multiregulation process. Large-scale assessments (especially PISA in its international character) are mobilized as a possibility of a reliable and comparable measurement of the results achieved by educational systems and acquire protagonism in this conjuncture. According to Sudbrack and Fonseca (2021),

large-scale assessments such as PISA are seen as something that lends itself to all responses.

Assessments, in general, are an invention that dates back to the seventeenth century and are related to the emergence of the first schools of that period. Its consolidation and legitimization took place at the same time as the expansion, in the nineteenth century, of mass education systems. With this, assessments became inseparable from compulsory schooling. Evaluating, from that scenario to the present day, consists in the creation of mechanisms of excellence. Evaluative action privileges certain ways of being in the classroom, at school, and in the world. It is a mechanism that also serves to elect a certain student model: a subject to be considered the ideal/reference for all others. This model, for some, must constitute friendly and docile subjects. For others, it must form imaginative and autonomous subjects (Perrenoud, 1999).

The notions of school success and failure, far from being neutral concepts, are built according to the requirements expressed by the evaluators: by teachers in the classroom; by government agencies at the municipal, state, and national levels; and by international organizations in the transnational sphere. Standards of excellence and assessment practices play an important role in transforming inequalities present in the domain of knowledge and skills: inequalities are transformed into ratings and then into judgments of failure or success. Without the existence of standards of excellence, there are no stated successes and failures. Without stated successes and failures, there is neither selection nor inequalities in access to socially valued qualifications and diplomas (Perrenoud, 1999).

In addition to the assessment of learning in the classroom, such foundations also underpin large-scale assessment mechanisms. The great interest shown by this assessment, since the 1980s, especially by neoliberal and neoconservative governments, can be translated by the expression Evaluative State. The expression means that national states have come to adopt a competitive and neo-Darwinist *ethos*, which admits the logic of the market and imports, into the public domain, private modes of management: its emphasis now resides in educational results and products (Afonso, 2017).

With the spread of neoliberal ideology, according to Afonso (2017), assessment mechanisms were also used as an instrument for discrediting and consequently

reducing the responsibilities and commitments of the state. Evaluation began to serve as an instrument of social deregulation and got metamorphosed into a form of introducing market logic into the state sphere and public education. Evaluation as a mechanism of regulation and, concomitantly, of deregulation, is one of the most characteristic expressions of the so-called new right. With the state's lack of responsibility, the responsibility for the poor performance of educational systems in assessments began to be attributed to schools, to the students themselves, and, above all, to teachers.

Among its objectives and functions, assessment is used as a mechanism and condition for the development of accountability processes. Accountability is conceived as an explanation and justification of what is done in the context of school education, of how and why it is done. It also implies the development and improvement of forms and assessment processes. In this context, more than ever, educators develop their work in the midst of great pressures and strongly contradictory demands. Teachers are required to account concurrently to various hierarchical bodies: the Ministry of Education, the management teams that are superior to them, their peers and supervisors, students and their families, the educational community, and society as a whole (Afonso, 2009).

The pretension of educational management bodies to achieve the principles of total quality leads, under certain and diverse conditions, to severe control of school institutions. The already rare spaces of relative autonomy are practically nullified (Afonso, 2017). The decrease in public expenditures, characteristic of the implementation of the principles of total quality in education, according to Afonso (2009), requires not only the adoption of a managerial culture in the public sector, but fundamentally, the creation of sophisticated control and accountability mechanisms. Evaluation is a prerequisite for the implementation of such mechanisms.

Large-scale assessment procedures, according to Werle (2010), are realized through the actions of agencies technically specialized in tests and measures. They are broad and extensive procedures that cover the supposed totality of an education system, even if disregarding the places and subjects that make up its exclusion criteria. Such assessments, according to Teodoro (2011), are developed in order to provide evidence for the action of governments, even if they end up relegating to the background the contextualization of learning processes and issues related to

participation and democratic debates. They conceive, according to Sudbrack and Fonseca (2021), managers as problem solvers, who govern with and through results.

The main objective of large-scale assessment mechanisms is to monitor the effectiveness or non-effectiveness of educational policies through tests applied to students. However, the historical, political, ethical, and philosophical assumptions and facts of this body of assessments evidence the non-existence of its apparent objectivity and neutrality (Welter; Werle, 2021). According to Sudbrack and Fonseca (2021), large-scale assessment is used in order to measure the results of investments intended for the education area, as well as as a tool for control and regulation. Evaluations have become the grand narrative of educational planning: one evaluates to plan, one does not plan from local and specific needs to evaluate.

Large-scale assessment mechanisms have been integrated into Latin American education systems, especially since the implementation of educational reforms in the 1990s. Since then, they have acted as an artifice of regulation of educational systems. Evaluation is the central element of regulation. The indicators provided influence the establishment of management goals, in the financing of education and, ultimately, determine and induce curricula (Oliveira, 2020). Such indicators, according to Gatti (2013), have become the flagship of educational policies, especially at the federal level. This indicates that the productivist perspective of education has been made sovereign and signals the country's link to the pressures of international organizations, especially those that offer financing possibilities.

The managerialist model, which permeates educational reforms in the globalized world, focuses on the results/data derived from the performance of students in school. Schools, in this context, must show efficiency and effectiveness in curriculum management (Gatti, 2013). The main large-scale assessment mechanisms implemented in Brazil are the Sistema de Avaliação da Educação Básica [National Basic Education Assessment System] (SAEB), the Exame Nacional do Ensino Médio [National High School Exam] (ENEM) and, for higher education, the Exame Nacional de Desempenho Dos Estudantes [National Exam for the Assessment of Student Performance] (ENADE). The average performance of students in the SAEB, together with the dropout and failure rates found through the school census, make up the Índice de Desenvolvimento da Educação Básica [Basic Education Development Index] (IDEB): the index ranges from 0 to 10 and allows, through the analysis of synthetic

results, goals to be drawn around the educational quality of the systems. In addition to these, in the international field, there is PISA.

The requirement of proof of academic acquisitions, the level of knowledge of students, and the preparation to which they are subjected to demonstrate them does not necessarily mean a real and effective learning. Learning, as it occurs in reality, can hardly be analyzed and proven through criteria and indicators that usually underpin accountability models based on market ideology and bureaucratic management structures (Afonso, 2017).

3 From the transnational level to the local sphere: teachers' views on PISA

The writing of the previous section was based on the argument that PISA/OECD integrates the framework of formal regulation of educational systems, as well as the tangle of a multiregulation. In this scenario, PISA (along with other large-scale assessment mechanisms) and its results acquire protagonism in the field of educational policy: encouraging and legitimizing reforms and other policies, disseminating ideas and concepts, to some extent, shaping curricula and, among the last instances, impacting on teaching professional performance and the results of this practice. There are, therefore, great reasons for teacher education (in the initial and continuing dimensions) to address the topic of large-scale assessments and PISA, as well as their origins, developments, and reverberations.

In view of this scenario, this section discusses how the teaching staff that works in the ninth years of elementary school and in the first and second years of high school in a municipality in the northern region of Rio Grande do Sul conceives/understands PISA. Initially, the text shows the description of the field research and the methodological strategies mobilized for its realization and analysis. Next, it addresses the characterization of the participating teachers. Subsequently, it analyzes how the aforementioned faculty knows/conceives PISA.

The faculty participating in the field research was composed of 12 teachers. These are all teachers who, in a municipality in the northern region of Rio Grande do Sul (region popularly known as Alto Uruguay Gaúcho), work in classes of ninth grade of elementary school and first and second years of high school. In the case of the aforementioned municipality, these are the classes that have students in the modal age of PISA. These teachers are distributed between two schools (the only two in the

municipality) that cover these classes: one from the municipal school system, which serves students from the initial and final years of elementary school (until the ninth grade); another from the state school system, which serves students from elementary to high school.

The production of data in the field was carried out after the approval of the research project, by means of Certificate of Presentation of Ethical Appreciation (CAAE) number 67740823.6.0000.5351, by the Ethics Committee (CEP) of the Universidade Regional Integrada do Alto Uruguai e das Missões (URI), *campus* Erechim/RS. The data were produced through the application of a questionnaire built on *Google Forms*, whose access link was sent via e-mail to the participants.

The questionnaire consisted of 14 open and closed questions. Seven of them concern the characterization of the participating teachers. The other seven are questions related to PISA and the conceptions/understandings that teachers have about the test, its developments, and reverberations. The analysis of the data produced in the field was carried out through Content Analysis, according to the approach suggested by Bardin (2016). Content Analysis requires the systematic performance of four fundamental steps: organization of the analysis, coding, categorization, and inference.

The first step corresponds to the moment of organization of the data to be analyzed. Then, the answers to the open questions of the questionnaire were printed and grouped according to the topic addressed in each question. The answers to the closed/multiple-choice questions were organized in graphs. In the second step, called coding, the answers to the open-ended questions (already organized according to their topics) were color-coded: the main elements/ideas were searched for in each answer. Such elements/ideas were marked with different colors. The same colors were maintained in order to identify similar elements/ideas in all answers.

With the coding performed, it was possible to elaborate the categorization. According to Bardin (2016, p.148) “[...] classifying elements into categories imposes the investigation of what each of the texts has in common with others. What will allow their grouping is the common part existing between them”. Thus, the coded elements (common parts by the same color) were grouped into categories. Categories, according to Franco (2018), can be created *a priori* (established, through the prior knowledge of the researcher, before the analysis of the material) or *a posteriori* (when

categories emerge from the analysis of the material). In the case of this work, the categories were created *a posteriori*.

The categories, created from the open questions, as well as the incidence of answers related to each one, were organized into tables according to the presentation suggested by Franco (2018). These present the topic of the question, the categories present in the answers, the number of answers corresponding to each category, and examples of answers that make up each of the categories. Finally, in the final step (called inference), the text of interpretation of the analysis (present in the sequence) was prepared.

As discussed above, the 12 teachers who answered the data production instrument are distributed between the two elementary and middle schools in the municipality: one from the municipal network and the other from the state network (located in the region covered by the 15th Regional Coordination of Education of the State of Rio Grande do Sul). Six of the 12 work exclusively in the municipal network, another five only in the state network. A teacher works in both schools/educational networks.

The majority, eight of the 12 participants, are in the age range of 41 to 50 years. Two are 51 years or older. One teacher is in the age range of 31 to 40 years. One participant did not want to answer the age question. As for teaching experience, five participants have fewer than 10 years of professional experience. All others have more than 15 years of experience. The most experienced teacher has 29 years of practice.

All participants have completed higher education. Of these, five have degrees in Letters (Portuguese language and literature, Portuguese language and Spanish language, Portuguese language and English language). Two have degrees in History. One of the teachers has a teacher training course in agricultural techniques. The rest have degrees in Mathematics, Geography, Pedagogy, and Physical Education. The vast majority of teachers, 10, have some kind of specialization. It is noticed the absence of training in specific disciplines in the areas of Human Sciences and Natural Sciences, such as Sociology, Philosophy, Art, Physics, Chemistry, and Biology. It is possible to understand this fact as a reverberation of the current reform movements, which privilege certain knowledge and skills, especially in mother tongue and mathematics (Lenoir, 2005).

The aforementioned knowledge (in mother tongue and mathematics), evident in the initial training of the participating teachers, is also privileged by PISA. Within the scope of the test, next to the science area, such areas are considered as those with the knowledge that is worth the most (Sudbrack; Fonseca, 2021). Each PISA cycle, one of the three areas is the focus of the tests. The fact implies directing a greater amount of questions to the highlighted area. According to the rhetoric of the OECD and the Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais Anísio Teixeira [Anísio Teixeira National Institute for Educational Studies and Research] (INEP), the body responsible for disseminating the specific results of Brazilian participation in PISA, “PISA assesses the extent to which 15-year-old students, near the end of compulsory schooling, have acquired knowledge and skills considered essential for full participation in social and economic life” (Brazil, 2020, p.17).

It is noted that PISA has and disseminates its own conception of what students should have knowledge of and know how to do at the end of schooling. This conception derives from the organization's concern for the economic development of countries and their competitive capacity in the globalized world, and is aligned with the need for flexible and minimally qualified Human Capital formation (Oliveira, 2020). The PISA results, thus, settled in the educational discourses in which they circulate, leading to debates and subsidizing/legitimizing political measures. Such credibility can also be attributed to the uniqueness of the delivery that the OECD promises: the possibility of collaborative policy guidance, the emphasis placed on the notion of lifelong learning, a particular concept of literacy, the regularity of applications, the validity and reliability of the data made available, and the geographical breadth achieved (Carvalho, 2011).

PISA is, therefore, presented by the OECD as a mechanism capable of bringing answers to the demands placed on countries and their policy makers. It is seen as a means to have available, on a regular basis, data considered reliable about the performance of national educational systems and the knowledge and skills that students have and can mobilize in the labor market (Carvalho, 2011). In the logic of the Evaluative State, which conceives of managers as problem solvers who govern for and through results, PISA has become a powerful instrument of transnational regulation. Its legitimacy was given, above all, by the reliability it has on the part of national decision-makers and a significant part of society (Sudbrack; Fonseca, 2021).

Taking into account the situation discussed above, the first question of the questionnaire applied to teachers in the field research proposed that they describe what they know about PISA, as to assign a definition/conceptualization. The question received ten answers. The variation in the number of answers occurred in all questions, since, in view of the ethical criteria of the research, the participants had the option not to answer. It was found, through the answers, that only six of the 12 participants define PISA as an assessment mechanism (although without mentioning any characteristic of the test). Four participants showed total ignorance about the topic and two did not answer the question.

The second question, multiple choice, asked how much information teachers have about the test. The three options available were: "Not a lot. I know only superficially", "I know PISA, its objectives, and its influences" and "I know it with a certain depth". All 12 participants answered the question. 11 of them selected the option "Not a lot. I know only superficially". Only one said they knew PISA, its goals, and influences. No one claimed to know it in depth. There is, therefore, a great indication of the absence of discussions on the themes of large-scale assessment, PISA, the regulatory processes of educational systems, and their reverberations in the scope of initial and continuing education of teachers. The answers to the question following this one reinforce such evidence.

In order to understand how information about PISA reaches teachers, a multiple-choice question with checkboxes was proposed. The third question was made available in the questionnaire with the following wording: "How do PISA objectives and data reach you? (You can select more than one option)" All teachers answered the question. The available answer options were: "Through social media (*Facebook*, *Instagram*, *WhatsApp*)", selected by four teachers; "Through news published online (I read the news on *Google*, for example)", chosen by two teachers; "Through television news (I follow the reports of the main television newscasters)", chosen by one teacher; "I usually read articles/books on the subject", no teacher chose this answer; "Through the training moments provided by the school", chosen by one teacher; and "I do not have access to PISA data and objectives", chosen by seven teachers.

PISA is, according to Villani and Oliveira (2018), the most developed international large-scale assessment program applied in the world. Currently, the breadth of application achieved by PISA is the largest ever recorded. The OECD, within

which PISA emerged, consolidated and continues to grow exponentially. It has been considered by several studies as one of the central actors in the definition of the global educational agenda. The relevance of the examination data and its possible uses, their acceptance in the growing range of countries that participate in it, and the reception they have by the press/media on a global scale, legitimize the OECD's intention to use them to determine the aforementioned global agenda (Oliveira, 2020).

Oliveira (2020, p.81) points out that “PISA is the main instrument that regulates education today” and expands its scope with each new edition. Acting as an unquestionable technology and an objective assessment of students and schools, a commonplace supported by both conservative and progressive governments (Oliveira, 2020), the exam got established as a technology of power supported in the “[...] governance by numbers that are presented as truths” (Oliveira, 2020, p.83). Therefore, it is not only an objective and neutral assessment, which evaluates and compares the skills of students from different countries of the world.

PISA needs to be understood within the conjuncture that underlies it: the power relations placed at the global level, in the globalized world, demand specific regulatory modes, whose conception of education is based on the Theory of Human Capital. This combines education, labor market, and economic development/capital accumulation. This is a model that, with international organizations among its main diffusers, is still in force (Oliveira, 2020).

The answers of the teachers participating in the field research to the first three questions of the questionnaire show the conjuncture described by Oliveira (2020). Half of the participants define/conceptualize PISA as an objective mechanism for evaluating students, without any consideration of the context that underpins it and the contradictions that permeate it. Added to this is the fact that four teachers stated ignorance about the test and two did not answer the question (which, potentially, also demonstrates ignorance), despite the wide dissemination and media appeal around its results and the growing legitimacy they acquire.

The responses also show that teachers who have access to PISA data and objectives do so using social media, news published online, and television news. There is a lack of critical immersion in the topic through theoretical readings and/or moments of formation. By resorting to open media, given that a significant part of them welcomes, appreciates, and sensationalizes such data (Oliveira, 2020), teachers

maximize their passive and uncritical reception and the understanding of the mechanism as a mirror of the educational reality of the country (Carvalho, 2011).

4 PISA from official narratives to teaching narratives: approaches and distances

With the intention of knowing the level of criticality mobilized by teachers around the PISA topic and large-scale evaluation, the fourth question was elaborated in order to verify how they evaluate the data from the test. All participants answered the question, but one, at the time of selection, opted for the option "I do not want to answer". Seven of them say they do not have a position because they do not know the evaluation criteria. Three teachers consider the PISA results useful. Only one stated that they do not consider the results to be absolute truths. In order to deepen the understanding of the positions, the fifth question proposed that the participants describe/justify the reason for such choices. Table 1, below, shows the answers of the teachers.

Table 1 - Positioning of teachers in relation to PISA results.

Positioning	Number of teachers
Disconnect with reality. "I believe that the results of these assessments do not always reflect our reality." "I think they show some of the students' performances. On the other hand, there are variables to be considered, such as which students were chosen for the evaluation. If someone who does not study and does not like to study takes the test and gets a bad grade, it does not mean that the teacher or the school of this student is bad".	3.
School performance. "It happens because we know the student in their performance." "When you evaluate something you have a diagnosis and you have to use it as a starting point to improve indexes".	2.
Ignorance. "I do not have a position on the matter." "Due to the lack of information on the subject, I will not comment."	2.

Source: Questionnaire applied by the authors in the first half of 2023.

It can be seen, from Table 1, that only seven teachers answered the question. Of these, two stated ignorance. Five teachers, therefore, did not answer the question. Their non-response potentially also indicates ignorance. Therefore, only five teachers described their positioning. Of these, two teachers justified their options by stating that the PISA results allow them to know and improve the students' performances. Only

three of them (25% of the total participants) understand that the test and its data may be disconnected from reality. Such data, especially with regard to the rankings, comparisons, and responsibilities that they originate, are used “[...] often without any reference to the social, economic, historical, and cultural context of the societies being compared” (Oliveira, 2020, p.17).

Regarding the distance and supposed independence of PISA from the different socioeconomic and cultural contexts it evaluates, another point to be considered is its exclusion criteria. In the Brazilian case, rural, indigenous, and quilombola schools are excluded from the sample, as well as those that present logistical difficulties for the application of the exam, given that it occurs via computer (Brazil, 2020). Such exclusion criteria, by invisibilizing certain schools and students, mask/cover up data and, to some extent, distort the results of large-scale assessments. Given that the disclosed indicators are taken as a measure of educational quality and development and used as accountability mechanisms, it is worth questioning the often uncritical reliability attributed to them (Welter; Werle, 2021).

The sixth question of the questionnaire was designed to understand whether participants believe that PISA has any influence on their daily teaching practice and why. Eight of the 12 teachers answered the question. One of them stated that, due to lack of information on the subject, they did not have an opinion. Four participants stated that the international exam does not influence their practice. In order to justify their position, they stated that there is no influence because they do not have knowledge and information about the exam and the topic. External and indirect influence is not mentioned by any of the participants.

Only three teachers recognize that PISA influences their work. This recognition, however, occurs in the sense that they themselves learn from the results and work to improve student performance. One of them pointed out that the exam has its percentage of influence. Two others answered the question as follows: “All external assessment influences pedagogical practice in a positive way, because through its data we can and should work and solve the difficulties presented” and “Yes. It can show where we can improve or what pedagogical practices we adopt”.

It can be seen, from the answers cited above, the idea that large-scale assessments are always useful to improve teaching practice. PISA assessments and their results are understood as neutral mechanisms and mere faithful descriptions of

reality. There is also a sense of self-responsibility. The two teachers whose answers are described above relate the topic, somewhat naively, to the need to improve their own practices. The influence on the scope of educational reforms, public policies, curriculum, and responsibilities assigned to teachers was not mentioned in the responses.

In the Brazilian context, international influences, arising from the new relations established by the neoliberal and globalized world, reverberated in the broad educational reforms implemented in the country throughout the 1990s. The decentralization process of which such reforms are proponents has shifted the functions of the state from provider to evaluator and articulator of policies (Shiroma; Moraes; Evangelista, 2002). The aforementioned displacement of state actions has made it possible for large-scale assessment mechanisms, including PISA, to metamorphose into the grand narrative of educational planning and public policies (Sudbrack; Fonseca, 2021). The order of actions, at this juncture, was reversed: planning does not precede evaluation. It is from the evaluation that the planning becomes structured.

The appreciation of Brazilian political actors for large-scale evaluation mechanisms can be seen when analyzing the narratives present in Brazil's major education legislation (Onyszko; Sudbrack, 2022). The Lei de Diretrizes e Bases da Educação Nacional [Law on Brazilian Education Guidelines and Bases] (LDB), Law No. 9,394, of December 20, 1996, in its ninth article, recommends that among the tasks of the Union is

[...] V- to collect, analyze, and disseminate information about education; VI- to ensure a national process for evaluating school performance in elementary, middle, and higher education, in collaboration with the education systems, aiming to define priorities and improve the quality of education (Brazil, 1996, article 9, Law No. 9,394).

It is noticed that since the major law of Brazilian education the priorities and strategies for improving the quality of education are thought of as inseparable from large-scale assessment mechanisms. The same occurs in the narratives present in the Plano Nacional de Educação [National Education Plan] (PNE), valid between 2001 and 2010, regulated by the LDB (Onyszko; Sudbrack, 2022). Following this trend, the narratives of the PNE valid from 2014 to 2024 also show the protagonism of large-scale assessments on Brazilian educational policies and planning.

It is in this document (the 2014-2024 PNE) that the importance attributed to PISA is officially evidenced. Goal 7 of the aforementioned plan is "to promote the quality of basic education in all stages and modalities, with an improvement in the school flow and learning" (Brazil, 2014, Goal 7). Among the strategies to achieve this goal is number 7.11, which discusses "improving the performance of basic education students in learning assessments in the Programme for International Student Assessment - PISA, taken as an external reference instrument, internationally recognized" (Brazil, 2014, Strategy 7.11). It is noticed that the improvement of the PISA performance is considered a strategy for the improvement of educational quality. Therefore, what is considered quality is, significantly, dictated by the assessment. PISA performance is considered synonymous with educational quality in the political field, even though it mobilizes/legitimizes a technicist conception of basic education linked to the Theory of Human Capital (Oliveira, 2020).

The narratives contained in the Base Nacional Comum Curricular [National Common Curricular Base] (BNCC), the main Brazilian curricular policy, also show the reverberations of PISA/OECD. The adoption of skills development as the core approach of the document is justified because this is also "[...] the approach adopted in the international assessments of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which coordinates the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)" (Brazil, 2017, p.13). It can be seen that, in addition to reforms, legislation, and curriculum policies, PISA also imposes itself on the definition of what is meant by educational quality. In the Brazilian scenario, two indicators are taken as reference when it comes to measuring the quality of education: one national and the other international. Namely: IDEB and PISA (Villani; Oliveira, 2018).

IDEB, consolidated as the main national indicator for measuring educational quality and the most important means of curricular induction in the Brazilian context, has been related to PISA since its conception process. PISA served and has served not only as a methodological reference for the national indicator, but also as a foundation for the development of goals and policies related to it. The international exam also acts by transforming and standardizing the concept of educational quality and incorporating into it OECD concepts. This new concept of quality has been incorporated by governments, in the academic sectors, and in various social segments,

which also demonstrates the soft governance process operated by the international organization (Villani; Oliveira, 2018).

It is noted that PISA/OECD reverberates in Brazilian basic education in several ways. Through transnational regulation, direct political participation, multiregulation, the dissemination of ideas and concepts, and the construction of thoughts about social and educational reality (soft actions). Such forms of action can be evidenced when analyzing the narratives present in educational legislation, in political, partisan, and media discourses, as well as in common sense. As previously discussed, among the exponents of such actions is the lack of responsibility of national political actors and the consequent blaming of teachers in the face of the always unsatisfactory results achieved by students. With educational results made measurable, comparable, and public (as occurs in the PISA framework), a credible accountability system has been established (Afonso, 2017).

The dimension of accountability/culpability, discussed above, is reiterated in the last question applied to the teachers participating in the research. This question allowed for the understanding of how participants feel about the dissemination of PISA results and other large-scale assessment mechanisms. Eight participants answered the question. Of these, three stated lack of knowledge. Thus, only five teachers expressed their conceptions. Table 2 below illustrates these answers.

Table 2 - Participants' feelings regarding PISA results

Feeling	Number of teachers
Self-responsibility "You always try to adjust and improve at every stage." "I feel challenged to improve my teaching practice on a daily basis."	5.

Source: Questionnaire applied by the authors in the first half of 2023.

It is noted, from Table 2, that although the teachers did not express their feelings directly, the answers were elaborated in a tone of justification and accountability. It is possible to consider that the topic awakens self-responsibility. It is noticed, even though less than half of the participants answered the question, the effects of teacher guilt. To some extent, the five teachers feel self-responsible for the results of the assessments and the performance of the students.

The dimension of self-responsibility and internalization of teacher guilt, arising from the scenarios discussed above, is enhanced by the observed lack of awareness on the part of teachers about the historical, economic, and social reasons, as well as the various interests and power developments that led/lead to this scenario. By taking large-scale evaluation mechanisms, namely PISA, as mirrors of educational reality and objective and neutral measurements of students' knowledge, they end up uncritically accepting, internalizing, and legitimizing their reverberations, including their own culpability for the almost always unsatisfactory performance of students.

Faced with this scenario, it is urgent to problematize the spaces that allow tension and awareness about the social and educational reality by teachers: the times and spaces of initial and continuing education. The lightening and superficialism that marks undergraduate courses and moments of continuing education in many realities are directly related to this absence of consciousness (Lorieri, 2020). The actuality of teacher training and performance is marked by what Lorieri (2020) calls the paradigm of professional simplification. It is a set of ideas that prevails in humanity in recent decades, according to which the function of formal educational processes is to form useful subjects to the new technological society.

According to this ideology, the subjects must have skills and abilities aimed at improving the production of marketable and powerful goods and services for the economic development of countries. Skill is understood as the mastery of doing certain operations. The organized and articulated execution of such operations, depending on the production and marketing of certain utilitarian goods, is considered competence. Thus, training simplification is present in the reduction of basic and vocational training to aspects of know-how and the mobilization of knowledge around it. This is the ideology that underlies, in many cases, teacher training. Licentiate and pedagogy courses and continuing education offered by education networks have increasingly been restricted to certain specialized knowledge: the domain of teaching and learning techniques. The ability to know how to do predominates, the technique of knowing how to teach (Lorieri, 2020).

The legitimization of this paradigm (the paradigm of professionalizing simplification), this way of thinking, has been maximized and is moving towards exclusivity in the training courses of educators (Lorieri, 2020). Teacher training is restricted, according to Lorieri (2020, p.77) "to only technical preparation of them and

of the human beings to whom they will offer their professional work". With the reduction of the workload of the disciplines of the area of Human Sciences in the curricula of basic education and in the courses of initial formation of teachers, and the superficiality present in the programs of continuing formation, one moves towards the predictable unfolding of the absence of criticality and rational understanding of the social and educational reality and the consequent acceptance and legitimization of the oppressive conjuncture in vogue. There is a path towards the depoliticization of teacher training and practice, which reverberates in the legitimation of a technicist conception of education (aligned with the Theory of Human Capital).

5 Final Considerations

Educational systems are complex systems. They are constituted by a diversity of actors, interests, strategies, and actions. Their regulation, therefore, is not a linear and predictable process. It is not about the elaboration, application, and direct acceptance of norms and laws. Several levels and sources of regulation are intertwined in this process: it is a multiregulation. Barroso (2006), when describing three formal regulatory levels (transnational, national, and micro-local), makes it possible to think about the transnational level. This is constituted by the ideas and decisions that are produced and put into circulation in international forums of debate and decision-making. Such elements are taken by national states as legitimate and their implementation is considered an obligation. Therefore, decisions made by national governments are not free from external interference. The national level of regulation is also readjusted at the local level.

In addition to formal modes of regulation, there are more subtle and informal ones. These are also capable of operating transnational regulatory effects. The actions of international organizations, such as the OECD through PISA are examples of this (Barroso, 2006). The OECD operates by getting its ideas circulated and accepted in international educational debates/forums. In addition to direct political participation, their actions can also be considered *soft*: disseminating ideas and concepts through PISA, it acts in the construction of thoughts about social and educational reality (Oliveira, 2020).

The maximization of the political use, in the field of education, of the data obtained through large-scale assessments such as PISA, accompanied the advent and

dissemination of neoliberal and neoconservative governments. While governments have been basing their decision-making on the principles of competitiveness and the so-called New Public Management (NPM), which imports private and market management principles to the state level, the results achieved by students in large-scale tests have become the protagonist of decision-making in education (Afonso, 2009). The narratives present in the major legislation of Brazilian education evidence this fact (Onyszko; Sudbrack, 2022). Brazil has a particular scenario regarding the implementation and use of large-scale evaluation mechanisms. Its governments adopt, concomitantly, two reference measures for what is conceived as educational quality: IDEB and PISA (Oliveira, 2020).

Thus, with the introduction of the market ideology in the public sphere, there is a displacement of state functions also with regard to education: the state ceases to fulfill the function of provider to act as an evaluator and articulator of policies. Currently, in the field of education, we live the logic of the Evaluative State. In this context, of hegemony of neoliberal logic, PISA also serves to discredit and, consequently, reduce state commitments. The responsibility for the unsatisfactory performance of students is now attributed to themselves, their families, and, above all, to their teachers (Afonso, 2009).

In view of the context resumed above, the field research that underpins this article was developed in order to understand whether teachers who work in basic education, with students aged 15 years, are knowledgeable about PISA and aware of the reverberations of this assessment in their didactic-pedagogical practices and the responsibility assigned to them. The analysis of data produced in the field, in a city in the northern region of the state of Rio Grande do Sul, made it possible to reflect that teachers who work in the ninth years of elementary school and first and second years of high school in that city have little or no knowledge about PISA. The little information they have reaches them through the media. There was also a lack of critical reflection on the topic of large-scale assessments based on readings and/or training moments. Due to the absence of awareness about the influences arising from the test, teachers understand that it does not influence their daily activities.

When asked about their feelings about the disclosure of the results of the assessment, teachers attributed answers in terms of justification and self-accountability for results. Although within the limits of the sample, effects of teacher

culpability are observed: one of the exponents of the dissemination and political use of PISA data and other large-scale evaluation mechanisms. Therefore, the absence of awareness about the existence of PISA and the regulation operated by it is denoted. As discussed earlier, it is a powerful supranational regulatory mechanism, which is acquiring more and more credibility and acceptance and whose results are increasingly used for governance and for the legitimization of political measures. Its data, prescriptions, and the complexities that involve them have also been legitimized by the teachers themselves.

Considering that the greatest power available to a mechanism is that of not being perceived, it is necessary to question the space allocated to the humanities and disciplines related to the current context of teaching in licentiate courses and continuing education programs. These are fundamental disciplines for awareness-raising and the construction of criticality, without which teaching can serve to legitimize and reproduce the predominant political, socioeconomic, and educational system.

We know that the present study has its limits, especially with regard to the number of participating teachers: it is composed of the conceptions of 12 teachers from a single municipality, based on data produced with the application of a questionnaire via online form. Such limits are also possibilities of continuity: extending this understanding to larger spheres/regions and exploring other possibilities of data production (such as conducting face-to-face interviews and focus groups) are powerful alternatives. The problematization of the place of large-scale assessments (not only PISA) in the field of Brazilian educational policy can (and needs to) be widely mobilized.

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