

 Open access • Journal Article • DOI:10.1080/09695940903076055





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Institutions: University of Lisbon

Published on: 23 Jul 2009 - Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice (Routledge)

Topics: Summative assessment, Formative assessment, Dictatorship, Educational assessment and Compulsory education

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PROFILES OF EDUCATIONAL ASSESSMENT SYSTEMS
WORLD-WIDE

Educational Assessment in Portugal

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Educational Assessment In Portugal

Key Features of Portugal

After living under a strong dictatorship for almost 50 years, Portugal has been a politically free country since 1974. Today, Portugal enjoys a constitutional democracy and has been a member of the European Union (EU) since 1986.

Portugal lies in the southwest of the European continent bordering Spain in the north and in the east and abutting the Atlantic Ocean in the south and in the west.

Portugal's total area, including the Atlantic archipelagos of Madeira and the Azores, consists of almost 92, 391 square kilometres. According to *Gabinete de Informação e Avaliação do Sistema Educativo* (GIASE) [Cabinet for Information and Evaluation of the Education System]; Portugal's population in the year 2000 was 10,256,658 with about 40% of the population living in urban centres. The age structure shows that 16% of the population falls in the 0-14 age span, 14.3% in the 15-24 age span, 53.4% in the 25-64 age span and 16.3% are older than 65 (GIASE, 2004).

Portugal qualified for Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) in 1998 and began circulating the Euro on 1 January 2002 along with 11 other member economies. Although the overall economic, social, and cultural situation of the country has improved dramatically in these last 30 years, the country has not yet reached the standards of living of most of its EU counterparts. For example, according to the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD), the Portuguese Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita in 2002 was 18,394 dollars as compared to 22,406 for Spain and 25,917 for Germany. The GDP per capita stands at 70% of that of the leading EU economies such

as Germany, England, Sweden or Denmark (OECD, 2004). The performance of the Portuguese education system has been pointed out as one of the major reasons for Portugal's somewhat slow convergence with the economies of most of the countries in the EU.

Key Features of the Portuguese Education System

The current structure, organization, and principal trends of the Portuguese education system, as well as its major and fundamental guidelines, are framed by *Lei de Bases do Sistema Educativo* [Fundamental Law of the Education System], usually known as *Lei de Bases* (Lei 46/86 de 14 de Outubro [Law 46/86 of 14 October]). This was the first comprehensive law providing a mission and a vision for the education system within the new democratic political system; it was approved in the Assembly of the Republic in 1986. Figure 1 (adapted from GIASE, 2005b) displays the overall structure of the Portuguese education system which is made up of four main levels: a) Pre-school education (3-5 year olds); b) Basic education (6-14 year olds); c) Secondary education (15-17 year olds); d) Higher education, either Polytechnic Institutes or Universities (18 year olds and above). The main courses of basic and secondary education, the so-called *regular* courses are attended by more than 95% of the student body. These courses include the more academic or general courses, the artistic courses, and all sorts of vocational courses. The remaining courses are aimed at meeting the needs of special populations such as adults or young adults who are looking for a basic or secondary certification, or pupils who are at risk of dropping out.

INSERT FIGURE 1 AROUND HERE

About 82% of the Portuguese pupils at all levels of schooling are enrolled in public state schools (GIASE, 2005b).

According to GIASE (2005a), more than 80% of the 12,783 public state schools are pre-schools (about 27%) and first cycle, Grades 1-4 schools (about 54%). A significant number of these schools are quite small (typically, one small building, one classroom and one teacher) particularly in the rural and inland areas.

Still according to GIASE (2005a) the percentage of pupils, who are 15 to 17 years old, enrolled in secondary education (the expected ages to be at this level of schooling) as it relates to the total Portuguese population in the same age range, has more than trebled in the period of 18 years; from 17.8% in 1985/1986 to 58% in 2003/2004. During the same period, the percentage rose from 60.7% to 86.9% in the second cycle of basic education (Grades 5-6), and from 41% to 82% in the third cycle (Grades 7-9).

If one considers the whole Portuguese population at the typical age of secondary education graduation, one verifies that, in 2002, there were only about 45% of graduates as compared to a mean of more than 80% for the OECD countries (OECD, 2004; Azevedo, 2003).

General Organization and Curriculum Features of Basic Education

As it is displayed in Figure 1 basic mandatory education comprises of three cycles: a) the first includes Grades 1-4 (ages 6-9); b) the second includes Grades 5-6

(ages 10-11); and c) the third includes Grades 7-9 (ages 12-14). In many European countries this last cycle is considered as a lower secondary level. According to *Lei de Bases* [Fundamental Law of the Education System], basic education is defined as a coherent unit of nine compulsory years of schooling, organized in the above mentioned three sequential cycles, aimed at insuring that all citizens could acquire a general common education. This also means that pupils should be given the opportunities to acquire the attitudes, knowledge, skills and competencies, which enable them to go on to secondary education. At this point it should be mentioned that compulsory education used to be four years before the democratic regime, it was extended to six years right after 1974, and to nine years in 1986. (Quite recently education authorities stated that mandatory education could be soon be extended to 12 years.)

Beyond the general principles stated in *Lei de Bases*, further legislation (e.g., Decreto-Lei 6/2001 de 18 Janeiro [Law 6/2001 of 18 January]) has been providing more specific and concrete guidelines concerning the organisation, structure, curriculum, and assessment issues of basic compulsory education. Indeed, according to Law 6/2001, compulsory, nine-year, schooling should be based upon a set of eight guiding principles including the following: a) there should be coherence among the three cycles; b) assessment should be integral to curriculum development and must have a major role in the regulation of teaching and learning; c) students must be engaged in experimental and practical activities in all disciplines, specially in the sciences-related classes; and d) students must have ample opportunities to make use of information and communication technologies. These guidelines, as well as the overall content of Law 6/2001, were put forward by the Ministry of Education in order to face some problems that have been

identified (e.g., lack of coherence among cycles; student retention and dropout rates; problems in curriculum management; lack of articulation between curriculum and assessment) as a consequence of a nation wide, school-based, discussion on the nature and the aims of curriculum development within the whole basic education. This initiative of the Ministry of Education is well documented and described in several publications where basic education problems and possible solutions are identified and discussed (e.g., Ministry of Education, 2001a, 2001b, 2002a, 2002b). It is apparent that the different pedagogical, organisational and administrative traditions of each cycle might explain some of those problems. For example, most Grades 1-4 schools are quite small, one-building institutions, have few students enrolled and are somewhat isolated. A single teacher normally teaches each class. However, when it comes to Grades 5-6 (second cycle) and Grades 7-9 (third cycle), and because teachers of these cycles are specialised in one or two subject matters, each class of pupils is taught by quite a large number of teachers (no less than 10). This means that there is a quite significant change concerning number of teachers and school size when pupils leave the first cycle and enrol in the second cycle.

Educational authorities have recently been stressing the relevance of improving both the quality of teaching and learning and the results of pupils in Grades 1-4 through a number of specific programs such as: a) school-based teacher education on mathematics teaching; b) Music, Physical Education and English classes; c) improvement and adaptation of school buildings and construction of new ones; and d) a National reading plan (Ministry of Education, 2007).

As far as curriculum is concerned, all three cycles of basic education share a number of common characteristics. Thus, in each cycle, there are two major curriculum components: one consists of a set of subject-matter disciplines (*Áreas curriculares disciplinares* [Subject-Matter curriculum areas]) whereas the other includes the so-called *Áreas curriculares não disciplinares* [No Subject-Matter curriculum areas], that is, curriculum areas where pupils have the opportunity to develop a number of transversal competencies such as problem solving, collecting, analysing, and interpreting information, studying skills, working in groups, project work, and tolerance towards other people's points of view (Ministry of Education, 2001a).

In the first cycle (Grades 1-4) all pupils study four subject-matter areas: a) Portuguese; b) Mathematics; c) Social Studies; and d) Arts and Physical Education.

In the second cycle (Grades 5-6) there are also four subject-matter areas which include the disciplines displayed between parenthesis: a) *Languages and Social Studies* (Portuguese, Foreign Language, and History and Geography of Portugal); b) *Mathematics and Sciences* (Mathematics and Natural Sciences); c) *Artistic and Technological Education* (Education in Visual Arts and Technology and Musical Education); and d) *Physical Education*. Pupils study all these eight disciplines in both grades 5 and 6.

Finally, in the third cycle (Grades 7-9), the curriculum follows the same pattern of the other cycles but the disciplines are now 11 in Grades 7-8 and 10 in Grade 9. Thus, in Grades 7-8, students have to study the following mandatory disciplines: Portuguese, two Foreign Languages, History, Geography, Mathematics, Natural Sciences, Physics and Chemistry, Arts Education, Technological Education, and Physical Education. In Grade 9 pupils must only take one discipline in the artistic and technological area, which is

chosen from the ones provided by the school; the remaining nine disciplines are the ones listed above for Grades 7-8.

The three cycles of basic education share the following mandatory, no subject-matter, curricular areas: a) *Área de Projecto* [Project Area]; b) *Estudo Acompanhado* [Study Skills Support]; and c) *Formação Cívica* [Citizenship Education]. In the *Project Area* pupils are urged to develop, to implement, and to assess a wide variety of projects by integrating, and making use of, what they know and are able to do; this means making sense of what they have learned in the different subject-matter disciplines. The main ideas behind the *Study Skills Support Area* have to do with helping pupils to develop good methods of organizing their studying time and to become more autonomous in the learning process. Within the *Citizenship Education Area*, pupils should have opportunities to be involved in a wide range of activities aiming at developing their social and civic competencies. Also, pupils could make the option to sit in classes of *Educação Moral e Religiosa* [Moral and Religious Education] (Ministry of Education, 2002a).

Beginning in the school year of 2005/2006 and as part of a policy aimed at improving the quality of education and learning at the first cycle level, pupils in Grades 3 and 4 must be engaged in a number of *Actividades de Enriquecimento Curricular* [Curriculum Enrichment Activities (CEA)]. *Despacho 12591/2006 de 16 de Junho* [Legal Norm 12591/2006 of 16 June] defines what these CEA are as well as the curricular time per week for each one: a) English, 135 minutes; b) Study Skills Support, at least 90 minutes; c) Music, 135 minutes; d) Physical Education and Sports, 135 minutes; e) other foreign languages, maximum of 90 minutes; and f) other Arts, maximum of 90 minutes. All activities are organised in time slots of 45 minutes. Right

now English and Study Skills Support are the only ones, which are mandatory for all pupils in Grades 3 and 4; however, schools could offer one or more of the other non-mandatory CEA and generally they do it.

It should be mentioned that the CEA, which are financed by the Ministry of Education, could be an initiative of local authorities, parents' associations, private and non-government related welfare institutions and school clusters. Thus, schools, teachers, and the organisations that take the initiative have to cooperate to find the best ways to put the CEA to functioning properly (e.g., defining what CEA to offer beyond the mandatory ones, recruiting teachers, finding timetables). And this, in the Portuguese context, is indeed an innovation.

A Comissão de Acompanhamento do Programa (Commission to Accompany the programme) is responsible for the evaluation of the proposals presented, the overall evaluation of the programme, and for the annual publication of an evaluation report. The Commission integrates Teachers' Associations, the National Association of Municipalities, the National Confederation of Parents' Associations, and other similar organisations. The programme is seen as innovative and considered a true success since, according to the Ministry of Education (2007), 99% of the Portuguese schools of Grades 1-4 had CEA in 2007, parents are closer to the schools and could have their children learning English, Music or other subjects, schools became more attractive and, for the first time in the last ten years, the number of pupils enrolled in the first cycle has risen.

If one considers both all subject-matter and no subject-matter areas of the curriculum as well as Moral and Religious Education (45 minutes per week), which is optional, pupils have to attend a maximum of 25 hours of class time per week in the first

cycle, 25.5 hours in the second cycle, and 27 hours in the third cycle. Time spent in the CEA is beyond those amounts.

Time distribution throughout the areas of the curriculum differs between the first and the other two cycles. In the first cycle it is up to the schools and teachers to distribute the total of 25 hours of class time per week by the different subject matter and no subject-matter areas of the curriculum although, in recent years, the Ministry of Education have made recommendations concerning Mathematics and Portuguese. However, in the second and third cycles, it is up to the Ministry of Education to distribute time for the different areas of the curriculum; nevertheless, taking into account their own realities, schools are free to allocate time to the specific disciplines of those areas. For example, although the Ministry allocates a total of five hours and fifteen minutes of curriculum time per week to the *Mathematics and Natural Sciences Area* in the second cycle, schools are free to distribute that time by the two grades of the cycle (e.g., two hours and fifteen minutes in Grade 5 and three hours in Grade 6) and/or by the two disciplines (e.g., three hours and forty five minutes for Mathematics and one hour and thirty minutes for the Natural Sciences) (Ministry of Education, 2001a).

Learning Assessment Within The Three Cycles Of Basic Education

Internal Assessments

According to the current educational legislation and legal regulations of the Ministry of Education (Law 6/2001; *Despacho 1/2005 de 5 de Janeiro* [Legal Norm 1/2005 of 5 January]; *Despacho 18/2006 de 14 de Março* [Legal Norm 18/2006 of 14

March], *Despacho 2351/2007 de 14 de Fevereiro* [Legal Norm 2351/2007 of 14 February]) learning assessment of pupils of Grades 1-6, comprising the first two cycles of basic education, is totally internal by nature; that is, teachers and schools are fully responsible for pupils' academic progression and certification. Also, learning assessment in the third cycle could be said to be *almost* internal by nature once external assessments, in the form of National examinations in Mathematics and Portuguese, only occur at the end of Grade 9. This means that teachers and schools take full responsibility for pupils' assessments in Grades 7-8 and in all the disciplines of Grade 9 but Mathematics and Portuguese.

Since at least 1992, there has been Portuguese education legislation stating that formative assessment should prevail in the classrooms of all grade levels, with the purpose of improving learning and teaching (e.g., *Despacho 98-A/92 de 19 de Junho*, [Legal Norm 98-A/92 of 19 June]; *Despacho 338/93 de 21 de Outubro* [Legal Norm 338/93 of 21 October]; *Decreto-Lei 6/2001 de 18 de Janeiro* [Law 6/2001 of 18 January]; *Despacho 30/2001 de 19 de Julho* [Legal Norm 30/2001 of 19 July]; *Decreto-Lei 74/2004 de 26 de Março* [Law 74/2004 of 26 March]; *Decreto-Lei 24/2006 de 6 de Fevereiro* [Law 24/2006 of 6 February]; *Portaria 259/2006 de 14 de Março* [Legal Norm 259/2006 of 14 March]). Indeed, according to this education legislation, formative assessment should be an integral part of teaching and learning and be related with: a) self-assessment and self-regulation of learning on the part of pupils; b) the use of a diverse number of strategies and assessment instruments; c) the participation of pupils and other intervening persons in the assessment process; d) the transparency of

procedures; e) the definition of the criteria relative to developing competencies; and f) the feedback that teachers should provide to their pupils in a systematic way.

The same legal education legislation also states that internal summative assessments, aimed at grading, certifying, and selecting students, should occur to balance out what pupils know and are able to do. Moreover, it states that diagnostic assessment should be an important means that teachers can make use of in order to plan the best pedagogical strategies to deal with a growing diverse pupils' population.

As we have seen, according to the Portuguese educational legislation internal assessment is clearly predominant at all levels of basic schooling. As it will be discussed below pupils are only supposed to sit exams in Grade 9 (Portuguese and Mathematics).

The above-mentioned current Legal Norms stipulate that academic progress of pupils enrolled in basic schooling should be routine. Pupils who demonstrate learning difficulties should be given support through a variety of teaching strategies such as pedagogical differentiation; it is up to the class teaching council to delineate the plans, which are aimed at meeting pupils', learning needs. Actually, class teaching councils, which include all teachers of each class in the second and third cycles (Grades 5-6 and Grades 7-9, respectively), play a very significant role concerning a wide range of assessment issues such as: a) defining and implementing curriculum development projects for the class based upon the school projects; b) applying criteria to assess pupils' learning; and c) making decisions about pupils' academic progress and certification. Since in the first cycle (Grades 1-4) there is only one teacher for each class, teachers of different classes form a schoolteachers' council to discuss and make decisions on teaching, learning, and assessment issues as their colleagues of Grades 5-9 do it.

Decisions on the retention of pupils should only be made at the end of the fourth, sixth and ninth years of basic schooling; that is, pupils should not be failed in the beginning and in the intermediate years of any cycle of basic education. Consequently, decisions about retention should only be made at the end of each cycle to allow pupils to take more time to overcome their learning difficulties. This is consistent with the legal principle that retention of pupils should always be considered as a last resort (e.g., Law 6/2001; Legal Norm 1/2005). However, it is the teachers' council of each class, which has the final say on pupil academic progress or retention.

Despite the progressive intentions of the legislation passed since at least 1992, the fact of the matter is that there is a gap between what has been legally stipulated and the current assessment practices in the majority of Portuguese schools (e.g., Campos, 1996; Fernandes, 1994, 2005, 2007; Fernandes, Neves, Campos e Lalanda, 1996; Gil, 1997). Indeed, Portuguese and international research, has been suggesting that assessments which are predominant in classrooms have the main purpose of collecting information in order to classify pupils rather than helping them to improve and overcome their learning difficulties (e.g., Fernandes *et al.* 1996; Black & Wiliam 1998a, 1988b).

Teachers enjoy autonomy to plan curricular projects adequate to each class and are urged to develop their class projects based upon both the educational and curricular projects of the school, which are built taking the National curriculum into account.

Internal summative assessment in basic mandatory schooling should allow a global appraisal of the pupils' learning. As a norm there are three formal moments of internal summative assessment where teachers grade pupils: before Christmas, before Easter and before summer. In between these formal assessment periods teachers also

carry out other summative assessments without giving grades. Both assessments are reported and shared with students and their parents.

In the first cycle of basic schooling (Grades 1-4) the results of the summative assessments are reported in a descriptive and qualitative form. In the second and third cycles (Grades 5-6 and Grades 7-9, respectively) results are reported using both an ordinal scale form ranging from a minimum of 1 and a maximum of 5 and a descriptive and qualitative account of the pupils' achievements. When it comes to non subject-matter areas of the curriculum, the results of internal summative assessments are reported in a descriptive and qualitative form; no grades are assigned to these areas.

In the ninth grade pupils have to complete a final project or an *end of cycle test* as a requirement of their internal summative assessment. In this kind of assessment pupils must demonstrate that they achieved the competencies defined for each discipline of this level of schooling. The results of each of these *end of cycle tests* carry a weight of 25% of the overall final grade for each discipline. The remaining weight of 75% has to do with all the assessments that teachers carry out throughout the academic year. Those *end of cycle tests* are written, administered and marked by the teachers at the schools. As Mathematics and the Portuguese language are subject to National external examinations, pupils are not required to do internal *end of cycle tests* for these subjects.

Each basic school based on their internal regulations and on the National curriculum guidelines autonomously defines assessment criteria of pupil's competencies.

Generally speaking, criteria, which should be taken into account to determine the academic progression of pupils in grades 1, 2, 3, 5, 7, and 8, are defined by the pedagogical councils of each school based upon generic guidelines provided by the

Ministry of Education. The teachers' councils of each class use those criteria in order to decide whether pupils pass or fail. For example, the majority of teachers of a given class may decide to allow a pupil to pass from the 7th to the 8th grade without him or her having developed the required level of competency in several subject-matter disciplines. Since the pupil have obtained less than 3 in some subjects, the class council will have to set up pedagogical strategies for the pupil to overcome his or her learning difficulties in the next academic year.

As of the end-of-cycle years (Grades 4, 6, and 9) the Ministry of Education defines more specific criteria relative to the progression and certification of pupils. These criteria establish less flexible norms concerning low achievement in Portuguese and Mathematics. For example, at the end of Grades 6 and 9 the decision concerning the progression or certification of a pupil who, simultaneously, has grades lower than 3 in Portuguese and in another subject must be taken unanimously by the class council. (In the intermediate grades a simple majority of teachers could make the decision.)

In order to provide better support for pupils enrolled in basic schooling the Ministry of Education has passed legislation about three different pedagogical plans that schools should put into practice: *recuperation*, *support and assistance* and *development* plans (Despacho 50/2005, de 20 de Outubro [Legal Norm 50/2005 of 20 October]). The *recuperation* and the *development* plans must be put into practice after the first formal internal summative assessment in December. They are aimed at helping students that either did not achieve the necessary competencies in several subjects (recuperation plan) or that have revealed outstanding learning qualities (development plan). These plans can be varied in nature and range from pedagogical differentiation to tutorial programs and

either *catch up* or developmental classes. Parents are informed of the nature and aims of these plans. The *support and assistance* plans, aimed at students who were graded less than 3 in several subjects at the end of a given year, must be put into practice in the following academic year.

In sum, as far as internal learning assessment at the basic education level is concerned, and taking into account the current legislation, the Portuguese assessment system could be generally described as follows: a) the purpose of internal assessment is predominantly formative and it is aimed at helping pupils to learn, following their progresses, and providing them with feedback about their learning and performance; b) summative assessment is used to inform parents, pupils and other agents about pupils' achievements at certain moments of the academic year as well as to certify pupils' knowledge and competencies; c) teachers seem to be the main agents in the process of assessment although the legislation also calls for the participation of students, parents, and other teachers and agents; d) teachers and schools are entirely responsible for assessing and certifying pupils in Grades 1-4, Grades 5-8, and in all disciplines of Grade 9 but Mathematics and Portuguese; e) assessment tasks are essentially developed by teachers and schools; f) teachers and their different pedagogical structures (e.g., pedagogical council of the school, teachers' class council) enjoy a great deal of autonomy to define assessment criteria and to make decisions on pupils' academic progress and certification based upon generic guidelines provided by the Ministry of Education; g) decisions concerning pupils' academic progress are supposed to be made at the end of each cycle, that is, in Grades 4, 6, and 9, and not in the beginning or in the middle of a given cycle; h) pupils who progress without achieving the expected competencies are

supported by different kinds of plans and programmes; i) learning assessment is essentially criteria-referenced and pupils-referenced (ipsative); and j) assessment results are reported through written comments against specified criteria in Grades 1-4 and through scores of a 1-5 ordinal scale together with some descriptive written comments based upon defined criteria.

External Assessments

It was until about thirty years ago that the academic progress and certification of pupils depended almost exclusively on external assessments; in fact, there were compulsory, high stakes, National exams in all subjects in the 4th, 6th, 9th, and 11th year (pupils who were about 9, 11, 14, and 16 years old). On these *examination years* internal assessments had no weight whatsoever, serving only to decide whether a pupil could sit the exams or not. Therefore, the grades that pupils obtained in those final examinations had a weight of 100% for the purpose of progression and certification.

Soon after the democratic revolution, in 1974, National exams were abolished, being re-introduced in 1996 at the end of secondary education and in 2005 at the end of compulsory education. For many years academic assessment within the Portuguese education system was essentially internal and school-based.

The re-introduction of national examinations in Mathematics and Portuguese at the end of the third cycle as well as the introduction of low-stakes external assessments at the end of the first and second cycles, followed the approval, in 1986, of the above mentioned *Lei de Bases* and of a series of complementary legal laws and norms.

Indeed, the publication of Law 6/2001, *Decreto-Lei 209/2002 de 17 de Outubro* [Law 209/2002 of 17 October], and other legislation (e.g., Legal Norm 98-A/1992, Legal Norm 1/2005), paved the way to the introduction of external assessments in the system of basic education.

It is interesting to note that the first Legal Norms that made explicit the need for the implementation of external assessments in basic education were published more than 15 years after Portugal became a constitutional democracy (*Despacho 162/1991 de 10 de Setembro* [Legal Norm 162/1991 of 10 September]; Legal Norm 98-A/1992). However, it took eight more years to put this last Legal Norm into practice. As a matter of fact, standardised external low-stakes assessments, in Mathematics and Portuguese only, for grades 4, 6, and 9 began to be administered in the 2000/2001 academic year, following a policy aimed at improving the quality of teaching and learning at the basic education level (*Despacho 5437/2000 de 18 de Fevereiro* [Legal Norm 5437/2000 of 18 February]). Indeed, this Legal Norm states that “(...) these assessments are aimed at monitoring pupils’ performance levels, evaluating the educational system, improving the quality of learning, and building up social trustworthiness in the education system.” (Legal Norm 5437, 2000, p.4613).

Still according to that Legal Norm of the Ministry of Education, these assessments have the following purposes: a) to control the performance level of pupils; b) to contribute to the evaluation of the quality of the educational system; and c) to contribute to the decision making in order to improve the quality of learning and to strengthen social confidence in the educational system.

The Ministry of Education (ME) is responsible for the conception, elaboration, distribution, administration and marking of the tests, relying on the collaboration of schools and teachers. Grades are given according to levels of performance, which are defined within a five point ordinal scale from 1 (the minimum level) to 5 (the maximum level).

As compulsory National exams for Mathematics and Portuguese were introduced in 2004/2005 at the end of the third cycle (Grade 9), low-stakes, external assessments, were abolished for this schooling year. Actually, in practical terms, they were substituted by the current National examinations (Law 209/2002; *Legal Norm 1/2005*).

Currently, external assessments in the first two cycles of basic education are administered to pupils of grades 4 and 6 only. These assessments, the so-called *Provas de Aferição* [Gauging Tests], have been administered since 2001 in the disciplines of Mathematics and Portuguese only and are officially considered as an “(...) adequate means to assess the quality of the National curricula and the performance of schools in the first cycles of schooling.” (Legal Norm 2351/2007 of 14 February, p. 3979). Based upon this Legal Norm, the Ministry of Education has recently introduced important changes in the processes of test administration, grading, reporting, and results dissemination aiming at improving the quality and the credibility of the information gathered through those external assessments. The major changes can be described as follows: a) although there is a process that insures pupils’ anonymity during the marking process, students must now write down their names in the assessment sheets because it was observed that many students made little or no effort to do well in these tests, as they didn’t have to disclose their names, thus giving an inaccurate picture of their actual

competencies; b) tests are administered to the whole populations rather than to samples of those populations as it used to be done before; c) results are now sent back to schools on an individual, rather than a collective, basis in order to provide them with both the individual results of their own pupils, the mean of the school, and the regional and national means; and d) schools must post their own results making them public to students, parents, and the community in general.

Beginning in the school year of 2006/2007 low-stakes external assessments are scheduled as follows: a) pupils take the tests in the third week of May; b) results are sent back to schools about one month after test administration; c) in the month of October schools are provided with class and school reports; and d) no later than the month of December a final report, synthesizing all schools and classes reports, is distributed throughout all the schools involved in the process (Legal Norm 2351/2007).

The main purpose of both basic and secondary education exams are: a) to ensure that the subjects are taught according to the national curriculum; b) to monitor the functioning of the educational system; c) to moderate the internal grading given by teachers; and d) to certify pupil's competencies.

As stated before, all pupils in the 9th year have had to sit standardised national exams for Portuguese and Mathematics since 2004/2005. These exams have a weight of 30% in the computation of the final classification in these subjects. For this reason they are influential for academic progression and certification of pupils.

The exam process is both centralised and totally controlled by the Ministry of Education (ME) with schools and teachers co-operating in its administration and grading under the control of the National Examination Board and other ME departments. The

exams are totally anonymous, last for 90 minutes and teachers cannot administer them to their own pupils.

The tests are developed in such a way to take into account the competencies and contents listed in the National curriculum. After correction, grades are assigned in an ordinal 1 to 5 scale. The exams, marking criteria and weight of each item are made public.

For pupils with special needs the ME has ensured that the appropriate technical, technological and pedagogical systems have been put in place to guarantee that those pupils take their exams under conditions, which are compatible with their specific situation.

All students enrolled in Grade 9 can sit the National exams except those who, in their internal assessments, have not met any of the criteria defined by the ME (Legal Norm 1/2005) such as: a) pupils cannot get a grade of 1 in Mathematics and Portuguese simultaneously; b) pupils cannot get grades less than 3 in two disciplines and, at the same time, a grade of 1 in either Mathematics or Portuguese; c) pupils cannot get grades less than 3 in three disciplines or less than 3 in two disciplines, but Portuguese and Mathematics, plus a mention of non-satisfactory in the Project Area. All pupils have the right to see the completed exams and ask for them to be re-marked if they wish.

General Organization and Curriculum Features of Secondary Education

It seems important to state at this point that soon after the revolution of 1974 all vocational schools (e.g., technical and commercial schools) were extinguished because,

among other stated reasons, the courses in those schools, starting in Grade 5, discriminated the students too early in their academic lives. Thus, starting in the school year of 1975/1976, curricula were unified and all students had access to exactly the same general common comprehensive education throughout Grades 1-9. For about a decade after the revolution secondary education was fundamentally a means to get into higher education. This means that there were no any secondary courses available where students who might want to start to work could learn any sort of professional skills. All courses were general and academic in nature.

It was only eleven years later that *Lei de Bases* defined secondary education as a three-year period of study organised within different courses – some more general in nature and aimed at preparing students for higher education, others more specific and oriented towards the labour market. That is, *Lei de Bases* established that secondary schools could offer a wide variety of courses, including vocational and professional oriented ones. Indeed, three years later, *Decreto-Lei 286/89 de 29 de Agosto* [Law 286/89 of 29 August] defined the main guidelines of both basic and secondary education and established a schedule for the implementation of new curricula, starting in 1990. As a consequence of the orientations of this legal educational law, the secondary education curriculum was organised around four wide groupings of subjects: *Natural-Scientific*; *Arts*; *Socio-Economic*; and *Humanities*. Within each of these main areas there was a *General Course* and a number of at least two *Technological Courses*. This means that in 1989 the so-called *regular* secondary school curriculum (the other has to do with second opportunity or after work programmes) included four *General Courses* and 11 *Technological Courses*. Besides, there were specialised *Artistic Courses* and, starting in

the school year of 1989/1990, *Professional Courses*, which were totally put into practice in mostly private professional schools. These were aimed at providing an alternative education and training pathway serving primarily the same age group as secondary education (Grades 10-12; 15-17 age span) but its structure, organization, and pedagogical approach were quite different from the *regular* secondary schools. As a matter of fact, they were mostly operated privately by industry-based or local organisations under a contract with the Ministry of Education. Most of these schools were strongly geared to meeting industry needs, and graduating students do not usually have much trouble finding employment (Fernandes, Figueiredo e Palma, 1998). In less than ten years pupil enrolment in these schools jumped from 2,000, at its launching time, to 26,000 at the beginning of the current decade.

Currently, under Law 74/2004, secondary education includes four main courses of study: a) *Sciences and Humanities Courses*, which are aimed at preparing students for higher education; b) *Technological Courses* which share a number of disciplines of the curriculum with the ones indicated in a) (e.g., Philosophy, Mathematics) but include a number of technical and technological disciplines which provide students with professional skills (e.g., Mechanics, Electronics, Construction, Advertisement Techniques, Marketing Techniques, Accounting Practices); c) *Specialised Artistic Education Courses* which are vocational in nature and are aimed at those students who want to become professionals in the arts; and d) *Professional Courses* which are more practical in nature and whose primary goal is to provide students with technical competences that allow them to get into the labour market.

There are also other courses within basic and secondary education (e.g., other vocational courses and a variety of adult education courses). For example, both basic and secondary education students who might be in risk of dropping out or who want to change their course of study could enrol in the so-called *Education and Training Courses*. These courses are designed to encourage students who are 15 years old or more to finish up compulsory basic education or to further their education and/or professional training. There are seven different courses, which are organised, in a coherent sequence of seven different stages. The access to each stage is dependent upon the level of education and training of the candidate. These basic and secondary *Education and Training Courses* provide students with both an academic and a professional certification. All courses comprise four education and training components (sociocultural; scientific; technical; and professional practice) and they allow for a more flexible approach to curriculum development. There are a wide variety of these vocational-oriented courses in areas such as childcare, mechanics, accounting, computer programming, ceramics, new information and communication technologies, health, tourism and electronics. These courses can be organised in a wide variety of institutions: a) public state schools; b) private schools; c) professional training centres of the Ministry of Labour and Social Security; and d) any institution which has been accredited by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labour (*Agência Nacional para a Qualificação-ANQ, 2008* [National Agency for Qualification, 2008]).

It must be mentioned at this point that the number and variety of vocational courses in general have been soaring quite significantly in the last years, and particularly since 2005, as part of a programme launched by both the Ministry of Education (ME) and

the Ministry of Labour and Social Security. This programme – *New Opportunities* – aims to improve the qualifications and competencies of the Portuguese citizens prioritising young people without any qualifications or who want to further their current level of education and training. Indeed its “main objective is to ensure that, by 2010, 650 000 young people are involved in some modality of education and training, and at least 50% of courses offered are for professional purposes” (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 21). Still according to the ME (2007) the provision of secondary courses with dual certification was 1,638 in 2005/2006 and was 2,836 in 2007/2008; as the number of *New Opportunities* centres there were 6 in the year 2000 and 270 in the year 2006. Currently, and according to the programme website there are 425 *New Opportunities* centres spreaded out through the country (Ministry of Education, 2008). These centres can be located in public state schools, private schools, and all sorts of public or private institutions, which get the necessary official approval.

The current curriculum of secondary education in Portugal includes the following *Sciences and Humanities Courses*: a) Sciences and Technology; b) Social and Economic Sciences; c) Languages and Humanities; and d) Visual Arts (Decreto-Lei 272/2007 de 26 de Julho [Law 272/2007 of 26 July]). All these courses share a common *general component* consisting of four disciplines: a) Portuguese (Grades 10-12); b) Foreign Language (Grades 10-11); c) Philosophy (Grades 10-11); and d) Physical Education (Grades 10-12). Beyond this, for each course, there is the so-called *specific component*, which includes disciplines that relate to the knowledge base of a given course. The structure of this component is exactly the same for the four above mentioned courses and can be synthesized as follows: a) a three-year discipline (Grades 10-12); b) two two-year

disciplines (Grades 10-11) that students must choose from a given set of three; c) one annual discipline (Grade 12) that students must choose from a set of disciplines directly related to the content of the course; and d) one annual discipline (Grade 12) that students might choose from several disciplines that schools might offer according to their own pedagogical projects and resources. Furthermore, at Grade 12, pupils have to take *Project Work*, which is a no subject-matter area of the curriculum as it was already discussed for basic education. Thus, in Grades 10-11 pupils must attend, in each grade, four disciplines of the general component and three of the specific component, whereas in Grade 12 they must attend two disciplines of the general component, three of the specific component, and *Project Work*.

If one wants to characterise the current trend of the Portuguese secondary school curriculum one could say that flexibility, diversity, dual certification, recognition, validation and certification of competencies, and improvement of academic and professional qualifications of young adults are some of the key words for what is going on.

Learning Assessment within Secondary Education

Internal Assessments

The principles and guidelines for learning assessment in secondary education (Grades 10-12) are quite similar to the ones that were defined for basic education (Grades 1-9). Essentially, assessment is regulated by Legal Norms which are specific to the each one of the available courses: a) *Portaria 550-A/2004 de 21 de Maio* [Legal Norm 550-A/2004 of 21 May] for the *Technological Courses*; b) *Portaria 550-B/2004 de 21 de*

Maio [Legal Norm 550-B/2004 of 21 May] for the *Specialised Artistic Courses*; c) *Portaria 550-C/2004 de 21 de Maio* [Legal Norm 550-C/2004 of 21 May] for the *Professional Courses*; d) *Portaria 550-D/2004 de 21 de Maio* [Legal Norm 550-D/2004 of 21 May] for the *Sciences and Humanities Courses*; and e) *Despacho 453/2004 de 27 de Julho* [Legal Norm 453/2004 of 27 July] for the *Education and Training Courses*.

The following brief and somewhat general description is based upon this body of legislation which obviously shares a substantial amount of principles and orientations concerning pupils' internal learning assessment.

According to what is prescribed in the Portuguese curriculum, formative assessment should prevail in relation to summative assessment and should also be integral to the teaching and learning processes. However, research has shown that the compulsory end of year exams in the 11th and 12th grades of the *Sciences and Humanities Courses* have an enormous influence on the way pupils are both taught and assessed. In fact, in their internal assessment practices Portuguese secondary teachers tend to emulate the exams as their main concern is to prepare pupils to be able to answer its questions (Fernandes, 2005). Teachers seem to have some difficulty in articulating formative assessments with both internal and external summative assessments; actually, they seem to believe that internal summative assessment is more effective for preparing pupils for external examinations. For this reason, tests are the most used form of assessment as they can be designed to be quite similar to the compulsory exams; this seems to mean that the backwash effect of examinations exerts a strong influence on the day to day running of secondary school classes (Fernandes, 2005; Fernandes *et al.*, 1996; Kellaghan & Madaus, 2003).

The grading scale of 0–20 used in all courses of secondary schooling is more discriminate than the ordinal grading scale of 1–5 used in mandatory basic schooling. Secondary school pupils are formally graded three times per year. The grades obtained in the third period of each year are used to determine the progress of the pupils for the following year, to find the final average grade, and to decide whether or not a pupil can sit the final examination. Pupils may only be eligible to sit the exam if they obtain a minimum grade of 10 in each subject. Moreover, they can only progress to the following year if they achieve a minimum grade of 10 for all but two subjects. When they progress under these conditions, pupils have the option to enrol for internal, school-based and teachers' made, examinations for those failed subjects. By doing this they are exempt from going to classes for those subjects in the forthcoming year. For instances, in a given course a pupil in Grade 10 passes all subjects but History and Economics; he or she can progress to Grade 11, apply to sit internal examinations in these failed subjects, and not being required to attend their Grade 10 classes. In general, internal examinations could be taken in the month of June of each academic year. However, pupils could only ask for these internal exams if there are no national external exams for the same subjects.

For the purpose of certification of secondary schooling in the *Sciences and Humanities Courses*, internal grades, those which teachers are entirely responsible for, have a weight of 70%. Therefore the remaining 30% is accounted for by the mandatory external exams.

The certification of pupils who attend any of the remaining courses of secondary education depends of the internal grades only; however, if a pupil wants to go on to higher education then he or she must take the required exams for that purpose.

Internal summative assessments in secondary schooling are designed to deal with the particularities of each one of its different courses. For example, in the final year of the so-called *regular* secondary education, pupils on technological, art and professional courses must take *Aptitude Tests* which require the domain and use of techniques and technologies which are specific to a particular course; the same applies to the above mentioned education and training courses. These tests are assessed by a jury made up of teachers, representatives of both unions and business associations and professional individuals who are recognised for their expertise and merit in their respective field. The composition of the jury has been considered as an important factor in creating a stronger tie between schools and the labour market and in facilitating pupils' employment (Fernandes, Figueiredo & Palma, 1998). For the purpose of computing pupils' final grade the weight of these aptitude tests ranges from 10% in the technological and in the education and training courses to roughly 30% in the professional courses.

According to the legal documentation, pupils, teachers and parents are those who should participate more actively in the assessment process. However, other school bodies such as the class and pedagogical councils and specialised services of educational support as well as some Ministry of Education departments may also be involved in pupils' learning assessment.

In sum, it can be said that internal learning assessment at the secondary education level shares a significant number of orientations with what is prescribed for basic education. The most important seem to be the purposes and uses of formative and summative assessments; the role of teachers, students, parents, and other participants; the development of assessment tasks; and the autonomy of teachers and their different

pedagogical structures (e.g., pedagogical council of the school, teachers' class council) to define assessment criteria and to make decisions on pupils' academic progress. Nevertheless, there are some specific features of internal assessments at the secondary level of schooling such as: a) learning assessment is totally internal in all courses but in the *Sciences and Humanities* ones where pupils have to sit for National examinations; b) pupils enrolled in any general or vocational courses can always apply for higher education since they sit for the exams required for the institution they are applying to; and c) in all vocational courses teachers must share their assessment responsibilities with representatives of both the professional unions and the different businesses as well as professionals of the training areas of a given course.

External Assessments

The re-introduction of national examinations for secondary school pupils in 1996 followed the approval, in 1986, of the above mentioned *Lei de Bases* and of a series of Legal Norms as well. Actually, it was in the sequence of the publication of Law 286/89 and Legal Norm 338/93 that, in 1995/1996, external examinations were re-introduced in the system after several years of intense and passionate National discussions and ideological and pedagogical disputes and controversies.

Right now the legal orientations concerning pupils' external assessment are the above referred to Legal Norms 550-A/2004 – 550-D/2004 of May 21 and 453/2004 of 27 July.

Students who are enrolled in any *Sciences and Humanities Courses* must take the following four National external examinations: Portuguese, from the general component,

plus three disciplines of the specific component (e.g., Mathematics, Biology/Geology, and Physics/Chemistry in the *Sciences and Technology* course; Drawing, Descriptive Geometry, and History of Arts and Culture in the *Visual Arts* course). Among others, these examinations have a major twofold purpose: they are a mandatory requirement for pupils' certification and they also serve as a means to selecting them for higher education. As a matter of fact, for each one of the courses they offer, all institutions of higher education indicate one or two disciplines that are to be taken into account for selection purposes. This means that when a pupil wants to apply for a given course of a given institution of higher education he or she has to take the secondary school exam or exams required for by that institution. In general, higher education institutions demand pupils to take the exam of the three-year discipline of the specific component (e.g., Mathematics, History, Drawing) and one of the two-year or one-year disciplines (e.g., Biology and Geology, Biology, Geography, Latin). For example, Medical schools demand Mathematics and Biology or Mathematics and Chemistry while most Engineer schools ask for Mathematics and Physics. For the purposes of selecting students for higher education these access examinations worth 50% of the final computed grade, while the internal assessments worth the other 50%. It should be said at this point that for the purpose of secondary education certification only, internal assessments worth 70% whereas external examinations worth the remaining 30%.

Pupils can only take final examinations if they had been successful in the internal summative assessments throughout their secondary education (Grades 10-12); this means that they must get at least a grade of 10, in a 0-20 scale, in each one of the disciplines of the course curriculum. In general, pupils enrolled in one of the *Sciences and Humanities*

Courses take two National examinations at the end of Grade 11 (e.g., Descriptive Geometry; History of Arts and Culture) and another two at the end of Grade 12 (e.g., Portuguese; Drawing).

Right now students who are enrolled in any of the *Technological, Specialised Artistic Education, Professional, and Education and Training Courses* are not required to take any National examinations for certification purposes. This means that the responsibility for their secondary education certification is totally in the hands of schools and teachers. However, if they want to go further in their education they must take two specific National examinations required by the institutions of higher education. Again, for selecting purposes, the results of these exams worth 50%. Internal summative assessments, which include grades in each discipline, grades on internships reports, and grades on professional, technological, and artistic aptitude tests, all being assigned by teachers, groups of teachers, or teachers and other professionals (e.g., artists, professional accountants, construction engineers) worth the remaining 50%.

As in basic education, the ME controls exams in secondary education at all levels. This is done through several of the central and regional departments of the ME as well as by the National Examinations Board (NEB). The NEB plans and co-ordinates all the operational procedures, supervise the marking and grading, and deal with any pupil's complaints or requests for re-marking. It also must ensure that the process is transparent, fair, efficient and effective. All examinations, for both basic and secondary education, are developed within *Gabinete de Avaliação Educacional* (GAVE) [Cabinet for Educational Assessment] of the Ministry of Education since 1998. GAVE works on a regular basis with a number of basic and secondary schools for the purposes of item and

test development as well as for defining scoring and grading criteria. Also, that department works with a quite large number of external consultants in the specific content areas and in a range of pedagogical areas as well.

Participation of Portugal in International Assessments

Portugal has been participating in international assessments endorsed by the following organisations: a) International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) (e.g., Reading Literacy; Third International Mathematics and Science Study – TIMSS); b) Educational Testing Service (ETS) (e.g., Second International Assessment of Educational Progress -- SIAEP); and c) Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (e.g., International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS); Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)).

Portugal has been involved in international assessments for about 20 years mainly in the studies related to Literacy in Reading, Mathematics and Science. The assessments of these subjects have revealed a number of problems that affect the Portuguese education system, namely with what concerns higher order thinking competencies where Portuguese pupils have showed a poor performance. As opposed to this, Portuguese pupils have tended to achieve medium or even good grades in algorithmic procedures, narrative texts and routine tasks.

Although having improved substantially in the last few years international assessment studies still have to face some challenges such as; a) assessing results from a great diversity of curricula and contexts in an adequate way; b) ensuring that the student

samples, which are supposed to be compared, are equivalent; c) guaranteeing that the translation of the tests have the same meaning throughout the participating countries; d) ensuring that the test items have the same curricular relevance in the different countries; e) guaranteeing that all participating countries follow the methodological procedures rigorously as defined by the assessment co-ordinating body; and f) the somewhat restrictive nature of modelling, analysing and interpreting data as well as the absence of a longitudinal dimension of the studies (e.g., Goldstein, 1996, 2004; Riley & Torrance, 2003).

In spite of these limitations we should recognise the quality of many of those international assessment procedures and the impact that they could have in the development of the educational systems. However, it is necessary that more detailed and contextualised analysis of the results is made in Portugal (or any other country) in order to better understand student performance, thus avoiding simplistic and premature judgement.

For example, it is widely known that the PISA study assesses the competencies of 15 year olds who are at school. In almost all of the participating countries the great majority of 15 year olds are enrolled in either the 10th or 11th year. According to GIASE (2005b), in 2003/2004 only 46.3% of the total number of 15-year-old Portuguese pupils were in the 10th year while around 3.4% were in the 11th year. The data also showed that 25.5% were in the 9th year, about 21.2% were in either the 7th or 8th year and about 3.4% of the remaining was enrolled between the 2nd and 6th years. The Portuguese sample therefore, includes pupils who are enrolled in between the 5th and 11th years!

It is therefore obvious that it is very different to test a 15-year-old pupil who is in the 10th or 11th year to another who is in the 5th or 6th year.

If we take the results of 15 year old Portuguese pupils who have never failed a year, that is, who were in the 10th or 11th year, into consideration, we find that in several cases their average results are higher than the average of the OECD participating countries (e.g., *Gabinete de Avaliação Educacional (GAVE)* [Cabinet for Educational Assessment], 2001). Obviously, this is not a problem of the international assessment itself; indeed, it simply illustrates a structural problem of the Portuguese education system. But it also shows that one needs to be careful when it comes to analyse assessment results presented in a league table format.

Although it is difficult to determine whether these international assessment results have had any influence on concrete political decision-making, it is clear that the media is giving this matter more and more importance. However, the content of the news has always been very poor, limiting itself by only disclosing a ranking of the participating countries as if they were in a football league. It seems that part of the responsibility for this situation is, maybe, due to the lack of a timely dissemination and a careful and fine analysis of the Portuguese data. In fact, it seems that there is a need for a careful and detailed production of local reports which contextualise the results. In the same way, the international organisations, which are responsible for both the studies and the publishing of the data, could be more careful when making their comparisons giving greater relevance to the specific contexts of each country.

Some Reflections and Conclusions

A “ ‘System’ implies a whole comprised of parts that are connected to each other” (Harlen, 2007, p. 12). This paper outlined and discussed the fundamental parts of the current *Portuguese Assessment System* for both basic mandatory education (Grades 1-9) and secondary education (Grades 10-12).

At the outset it seemed indispensable to provide a brief description of some of the most relevant current curriculum development trends such as: a) the emphasis on vocational secondary education as part of a policy to better the academic and training qualifications of the Portuguese citizens through programmes such as *New Opportunities*; b) the strong investment in the early years of basic compulsory education (Grades 1-4) through programmes such as *Enrichment Curriculum Activities*; and c) the diversity of courses as part of a policy to achieve a more flexible education system. Besides, when it was considered relevant, brief descriptions were made about the recent historical developments of the system, particularly since the democratic revolution of 1974.

For each level of schooling, basic and secondary, the discussion was broadly organised under the ‘umbrellas’ of both internal and external assessments and followed the same pattern. Thus, bearing in mind the parts of an assessment system also suggested by Harlen (2007) this paper described and discussed issues such as: a) the role of the Ministry of Education; b) the role of teachers in the processes of formative and summative assessments; c) the collection of evidences of learning; d) the purposes of assessment information; e) the uses of assessment data (e.g., improving learning, deciding on pupils’ academic progress; reporting; certifying); and f) the role of both low-

stakes and high-stakes external assessments. At this point only some selected reflections and conclusions will be made about these issues.

Research results have shown us that formative assessment, when adequately used, contributes to a significant improvement in a pupil's understanding and learning. Research also suggests that pupils with learning difficulties are those who most benefit from formative assessment practices (e.g., Black & Wiliam, 1998a, 1998b, 2006).

The current assessment system in Portugal seems to be generally adequate and progressive, clearly recognising the fact that formative assessment is a key process in the development of educational success. That is, the Portuguese legislation on assessment seems to be consistent with research-based recommendations reported in the National and international literature. However, research has been suggesting that in many Portuguese classrooms internal assessments are more oriented and organised to classify and to rank pupils' achievements rather than to help them to learn. Assessment for grading, selecting and certifying pupils continues to be the predominant aim. The balance between formative and summative assessments seems to be difficult to achieve (e.g., Campos, 1996; Fernandes, 2005, 2006, 2007; Fernandes *et al*, 1996; Gil, 1997). These facts suggest that education policy should give the highest priority to improving learning in the classrooms through the appropriate use of formative assessment. As a matter of fact, this recommendation seems to be consistent with the current efforts made by the Portuguese government to improve the quality of education at all levels of schooling. Besides, if one keeps in mind that, in the Portuguese assessment system, teachers and schools do hold a significant and almost exclusive power to make decisions concerning pupils' academic progress and certification within the majority of grade levels, it is not difficult to

understand the importance of that recommendation. Putting it in another way, one might say that more needs to be made for internal assessments to be more consistent with reform efforts to improve the quality of teaching and learning.

As far as external assessments are concerned, the system makes use of both low-stakes (Grades 4 and 6 in Mathematics and Portuguese) and high-stakes (Grade 9 in Portuguese and Mathematics; Grades 11-12 in a variety of disciplines).

As of low-stakes assessments they seem to have been contributing to uncover realities that were only barely known so far, to alert schools and teachers for the need to reflect upon their pupils' results, and to make decisions which could improve the current state of affairs. The variety of programmes that have been launched by the Ministry of Education to improve basic mandatory education (e.g., National Reading Plan, School-Based Mathematics In-Service Training for Teachers) is probably one of the responses to the pupils' results in the so-called *Provas de Aferição* (Gauging Tests). In general one might conclude that these assessments have been achieving its objectives.

As it was mentioned before there are high-stakes assessments in Mathematics and Portuguese for Grade 9 pupils and in a wide variety of disciplines for pupils of the *Sciences and Humanities* courses only in grades 11 and 12. There is not much reflection or even research-based, well-grounded, analyses concerning examinations' results, effects, or relationships with teaching and learning. Nevertheless, one can state that Portuguese examinations have been calling the attention of schools, teachers, researchers, educators, and politicians for issues such as: a) the need to achieve a balance between school-based and external assessments in order to lessen or even to avoid the perils of having teachers teaching exclusively for the tests; b) the relevance of the consistency

between what is asked in the questions of the examinations and what, and how, is taught in the classrooms; c) the need to think about the quality of teaching and learning; d) the need to invest in both the quality of grading criteria and of grading moderation meetings among teachers; and e) the need to make intelligent and systematic use of the information provided by the examinations for a variety of purposes (e.g., improving teaching and learning; upgrading the curricula; dealing with validity and reliability issues).

It seems that in these last 10 years both National external assessments and International surveys on pupils' achievement brought up a variety of issues that needed to be discussed in our society. Although we may be still far from engaging in systematic, research-based, discussions on assessment matters, it is true that there is a growing body of information that starts to be shared and begins to be used to make both political and pedagogical decisions. This can mean, for example, that in our days discussion and research on learning-related issues start to deserve more attention on the part of teachers, researchers, decision-makers, and other involved people. This is of course a positive evolution.

Certainly, much still remains to be done to achieve an adequate balance among all parts of the Portuguese assessment system. Nevertheless, its current major features seem to have the potential to achieve that important and decisive goal. Indeed, there are characteristics of the system that should deserve consideration, particularly those that are more closely related to the improvement of the teaching and learning processes. Improving the quality of these fundamental processes is probably the current major challenge that the Portuguese society has to face. It is important to remember that assessment must be a decisive partner in that crucial challenge.

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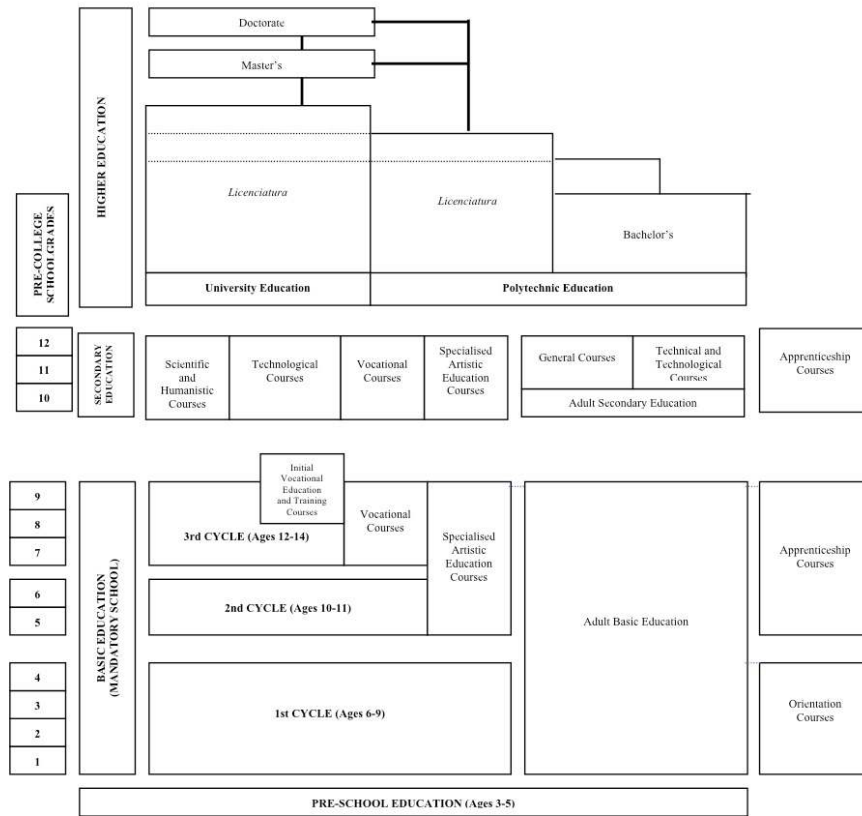


Figure 1. Organisational structure of the Portuguese education and training system (Adapted from GIASE, 2005b).