

The Dispute among the Reformers of the Education Around the New IDEB

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ABSTRACT – The Dispute among the Reformers of the Education Around the New IDEB. This analysis highlights the ongoing process of reformulating the Basic Education Development Index (IDEB) in Brazilian education policy, which began in 2020. Anchored in documentary and bibliographic research, the text focuses on analyzing four issues in dispute with a view to the constitution of a *New IDEB*, linked to the learning component, namely: adaptation to international standards; updating of learning expectations; alignment of the IDEB with the National Common Curriculum Base (BNCC); and measurement of an IDEB by subject. The findings of the investigation point to a considerable effort by education reformers to influence the redefinition of the index and its strengthening as an educational accountability mechanism.

Keywords: Accountability. Educational Policy. Business Reformers.

RESUMO – A Disputa entre os Reformadores da Educação em torno do Novo IDEB. Esta análise põe em evidência o processo, em curso, de reformulação do Índice de Desenvolvimento da Educação Básica (IDEB) na política educacional brasileira, iniciado em 2020. Ancorado em uma pesquisa documental e bibliográfica, o texto concentra-se em analisar quatro temas em disputa, com vistas à constituição de um *Novo IDEB*, atrelados ao componente da aprendizagem, a saber: adequação aos padrões internacionais; atualização das expectativas de aprendizagem; alinhamento do IDEB à Base Nacional Comum Curricular (BNCC); e aferição de um IDEB por disciplina. Os achados da investigação apontam para uma considerável articulação dos reformadores da educação, no sentido de influir na redefinição do índice e no seu fortalecimento, enquanto mecanismo de *accountability* educacional.

Palavras-chave: *Accountability*. Política Educacional. Reformadores Empresariais.

Introduction

This analysis¹ highlights the dispute surrounding the reformulation of IDEB in the context of neoliberalism, characterized by a continuously unfinished educational reform. According to Freitas (2018), the neoliberal context in education is configured as a global business reform, structured and implemented within the scope of the State, under the management of the New Public Management (NPM) model. It is in this context that the dispute surrounding the "New IDEB" is expressed in Brazil's current political, economic, and cultural climate.

The IDEB emerged as a result of the State Reform that began in the 1990s and was established in 2007 with the aim of strengthening the national policy for evaluating basic education and addressing the agenda related to educational quality. Within this scope, a consensus was reached that the index, touted as an indicator of the quality of basic education offered in schools and education systems across the country, would be composed of two measures ($IDEB = N \times P$). Where N corresponds to the average proficiency of students in Portuguese Language and Mathematics in the Basic Education Assessment System (SAEB), while P is based on the average pass rate of students in each of the grades of the assessed stage of education (Brasil, 2007).

The index was established by Decree No. 6,094, dated April 24, 2007, which provides for the implementation of the All for Education Commitment Goals Plan (TPE), defined as a joint effort by the Union, states, municipalities, and the Federal District, through technical and financial assistance and collaboration, with a view to social mobilization for the improvement of the quality of basic education (Brasil, 2007). The IDEB was therefore created during Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's second term in office, forming one of the priority areas of the Education Development Plan (PDE), with the aim of improving the quality of public basic education. It is a key part of the Coordinated Action Plan (PAR), defined under the terms of the PDE and TPE, as an educational planning tool for municipalities, states, and the Federal District, which would receive technical and/or financial support from the federal government, especially those with low IDEB scores.

With the end of the target cycle approaching in 2021, a process to reformulate the index began in 2020. The debate surrounding the proposal for what has been dubbed the "Novo IDEB" (New IDEB) is marked by the publication of Ordinance No. 556, dated October 2, 2020 (Brasil, 2020), which established a Working Group (WG) responsible for preparing a technical study to support the updating of the IDEB. Under the coordination of the president of the Anísio Teixeira Institute for Educational Studies and Research (INEP), the conclusion of the WG's activities was then associated with the delivery of a report with the proposed study, with a deadline of six months from the publication of the Ordinance.

The first meeting of the WG took place on November 6, 2020, and was attended by the President² of INEP, between 2005 and 2009, and a Consultant³ from the Cesgranrio Foundation. According to information

released by INEP (2020), these guests contributed to analyses of the possible data that the “New IDEB” should express, without revealing, however, what that data would be. The results of this work were restricted to the members and the responsible body, given that the report that was eventually produced was not published. In March 2021, Ordinance No. 119, dated March 11, 2021 (Brasil, 2021a), which repeals Ordinance No. 556, dated October 2, 2020, highlights that the technical study to support the IDEB update would be coordinated by the Executive Secretariat of the Ministry of Education (MEC).

In official discourse, the resumption of the topic was evident at the end of the first half of 2021, with Ordinance No. 445, of June 2021 (Brasil, 2021b), which establishes a new WG, within the scope of the MEC, to discuss the updating of the SAEB and IDEB. Under the terms of this Ordinance, the WG could “[...] invite representatives, public and private bodies and entities, as well as researchers and experts, to participate in its activities, when useful for the fulfillment of its purposes” (Brasil, 2021b, p. 45). There was, therefore, greater openness than that allowed by the previous Ordinance. While Ordinance No. 556/2020 (Brasil, 2020) refers to experts or representatives of civil society organizations (by invitation), it is receptive to interference from the private sector. In general, the provision does not address specificities regarding the renewal of the index. However, it establishes that such an update in both mechanisms should take place “[...] in view of the recent changes that have occurred in Brazilian basic education” (Brasil, 2021b, p. 45).

It should be noted that the process of reformulating the IDEB and establishing a “New IDEB” began in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, in the reactionary and anti-democratic context of the Jair Messias Bolsonaro administration, which is made up of a team that is quite unprepared to deal with educational issues and is clearly uncommitted to Brazilian public education (Alfano, 2021). Fortunately, the discussion and referrals regarding the creation of a “New IDEB” did not come to fruition during the aforementioned administration, and there was an important political shift with the transition to the administration of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva.

With the education portfolio under new leadership on the threshold of 2024, a new working group is established through Ordinance No. 26, dated January 29, 2024 (Brasil, 2024). It establishes the Working Group, also known as WG “Novo IDEB” (New IDEB)⁴, to prepare a technical study to support the Ministry of Education in updating the IDEB. The Ordinance in question also established that the WG would hold regular meetings according to a schedule agreed upon by its members, with a minimum participation of five members, under the direction of the President of INEP.

The regulations also state that, if there is consensus among members, managers, and professionals from municipal and state education networks, experts and representatives from civil society organizations may be invited to participate in the meetings. The aforementioned Ordinance established six months from its publication for the submission

of a report to the MEC, with the expectation that this work would be consolidated in July 2024. Unlike the first three ordinances, the “New IDEB” working group (Luiz Inácio administration) entrusts INEP and its departments with the execution of this task, granting them the power to deliberate to assist the Ministry of Education in updating the IDEB.

In response to actions initiated at the governmental level, certain actors and entities, clearly interested in the IDEB's continuity, began to engage in and defend proposals to improve the index by producing materials and holding debates focused on reformulating the index. The following webinars are particularly noteworthy: 1 - *The future of external assessments*, held in December 2020, with Alexandre Lopes (then President of INEP), Francisco Soares (former President of INEP), Luiz Araújo (University of Brasília - UnB), and Reynaldo Fernandes (University of São Paulo - USP) as panelists; 2 - *An indicator to replace IDEB*, promoted in August 2021, with speeches by Maria Helena Guimarães (then member of the National Education Council - CNE), Ruben Klein (Cesgranrio Foundation), Francisco Soares (former president of INEP), Reynaldo Fernandes (USP), Ernesto Martins Faria (director/founder of the Institute for Interdisciplinarity and Evidence in Educational Debate - IEDE), Neca Setubal (Tide Setubal Foundation), Gabriel Corrêa (TPE), André Loureiro (World Bank) and João Pedro Azevedo (World Bank); 3 - *The future of IDEB*, held in May 2022, with João Pedro Azevedo (World Bank), Reynaldo Fernandes (USP), Ruben Klein (Cesgranrio Foundation), and Ernesto Martins Faria (director/founder of IEDE) as panelists; and 4 - *Assessments and indicators for a new educational agenda*, promoted by IEDE in September 2024 in the city of São Paulo, with the participation of Francisco Soares (former president of INEP), Mariane Koslinski (Federal University of Rio de Janeiro - UFRJ), Cristina Lopes (executive director of the Center for Studies and Data on Racial Inequalities - CEDRA), Júlio César Alexandre (municipal secretary of education of Eusébio/CE), and Patrícia Mota Guedes (Itaú Social).

It should be noted that, since 2020, the future of IDEB has been the subject of a series of discussions and debates, with the involvement of certain actors and entities that have been working to influence the redefinition of the index. There is a significant presence of representatives from private institutions in discussions on reformulating the index. The role of the secondary sector in the formulation of educational policies reflects the advancement of the logic advocated by corporate education reformers, a term used by Freitas (2018) to describe actors linked to the private sector who promote a managerialist view of education. These reformers advocate an agenda focused on efficiency and results-based management, seeking to transform education into a field controlled by indicators and performance targets. There are strong indications that much of what is being highlighted in these debates and documents has significantly influenced the direction IDEB will take in the coming years. The focus of observation here concentrates on the

discourses originating from both public institutions and Private Apparatuses of Hegemony (Gramsci, 2000), which revolve around the construction of a “New IDEB.”

The debates and materials analyzed in this text cover the period from 2020 to 2024. In general, sources recognize the importance and legacy of IDEB, but point out its limitations, taking into account its impact on educational institutions and systems. Based on this recognition, we discuss what these limitations are and how they can be overcome. In this context, the IDEB is undergoing a review process, which this text focuses on analyzing four controversial issues⁵ in the form of proposals addressing the dimension of learning, which are: adequacy to international standards; updating of learning expectations in relation to the 1997 benchmark; alignment of IDEB with the National Common Core Curriculum (BNCC); and assessment of IDEB by subject. In addition to the introduction, the text presents the methodological procedures, followed by the section *Reform and establishment of an Evaluating State in the Brazilian educational context*, followed by sections that discuss the aforementioned proposals. Finally, considerations are presented in the process.

Methodological Procedures

By understanding education as a field of dispute over societal projects, amid the different dimensions of studies in the field of Educational Policy (Mainardes, 2018), this research adds to studies focused on analyzing the process of formulating public education policies. The analysis presents partial results from the postdoctoral research project “New IDEB, education quality, and socio-educational inequalities: ongoing narratives toward a new indicator,” currently underway at the Universidade Federal de Mato Grosso do Sul (UFMS).

To this end, this study was developed in the form of documentary and bibliographic research on the subject in question, which has been dubbed the “New IDEB.” That said, the *research corpus* consisted of documentary and bibliographic sources found on the internet, encompassing textual and non-textual, official and unofficial discourse relating to the “New IDEB.” Along these lines, the database was created by searching the internet for information related to the topic, and was also fed using *Google Alerts*, a feature that monitors one or more keywords and automatically sends the findings to the email address of the creator of the resource.

The alert was created using the term “New IDEB” as a descriptor and has been active since May 15, 2023. The *research corpus* comprises 37 textual sources and four non-textual sources of various types (administrative orders, news articles, scientific articles, events, among others), published since 2020, with no sources on the subject found prior to that year. Therefore, the research used document analysis as well as content analysis methodology.

The research, therefore, began with a systematic review of the collected materials, moving on to a study of the context in which the

text was produced, the authors and social actors involved, and the concepts involved (Cellard, 2008). In this process, content analysis was invaluable in revealing “what lies behind the words being studied” (Bardin, 1977, p. 45), with “the message, whether verbal (oral or written), gestural, silent, figurative, documentary, or directly provoked” (Franco, 2018, p. 21), as a starting point.

Reform and Establishment of an Evaluative State in the Brazilian Educational Context

In Brazil, the 1990s saw the adoption of what became known as State Reform. The changes resulting from this new public management organization sought to modernize the public sector based on principles of efficiency, with direct influence from neoliberal ideas. Known as second-generation reforms⁶, the changes implemented during this period followed on from the structural reforms that began in 1970, with the common denominator being the “idea that it would be necessary to reform the institutional context” (Castro, 2007, p. 124).

As such, the reforms sought to modify public administration, legislation, and the structure of the central government with the aim of making the state more governable, increasingly aligning it with neoliberal logic⁷. Furthermore, over time, this logic took on different contents and forms, with the new prescriptive program emphasizing performance evaluation and policy outcomes, adopting the principles of efficiency, effectiveness, and productivity (Castro, 2007).

Through these changes, the State relinquishes its *status as executor* of public policies to act as coordinator, regulator, and evaluator. For authors such as Afonso (2006), the state adopts a competitive *ethos*, bringing market logic to the forefront by importing private management models into the public domain, inducing the creation of control and accountability mechanisms that have evaluation as a prerequisite, hence the expression Evaluating State (Dourado, 2016).

In this sense, assessment theory takes on a positivist bias, and the influence of the Assessing State on education is manifested by the centrality of assessment in the reception or achievement of public policies, by the imposition of certain educational objectives and content, and by the emphasis on the results of educational systems that make it possible to establish a plausible basis for accountability (Afonso, 2006).

In the Brazilian context, reform of the state apparatus began during Fernando Henrique Cardoso's first presidential term, from 1995 to 1998. For those for whom the reorganization of nation-states was a demand arising from the process of globalization. According to Cardoso (2006), reforming the state meant, above all, moving away from a welfare and patrimonialist state to a new model of administration based on management techniques that instill in the public service indispensable notions of quality, cost reduction, employee accountability, and performance-based evaluation, among others.

Starting in 1995, the FHC administration began investing in the Management Reform of Public Administration, which was promptly

implemented with the creation of the Ministry of Administration and State Reform (MARE) and the drafting of the Master Plan for Reform of the State Apparatus. Both in mid-1995. The minister tasked with this responsibility was Luiz Carlos Bresser Pereira, who has since published important analyses and articles in scientific journals and books on this reform, which has been recognized as a success in relation to its objectives and has had a profound impact on the Brazilian state.

According to Pereira (1999), the Master Plan is based on a diagnosis of the inefficiency of Brazilian public services at the time. Next, we advocate in favor of the guidelines and foundations of the reform under discussion, in accordance with the management model that emerged in the 1980s. In Brazil's case, the reform agenda focused on decentralizing social services to states and municipalities; defining the scope of the state's activities, with the transfer of activities to the market and the non-state public sector; the separation between policy formulation and implementation; accountability⁽⁸⁾ through management by objectives, the creation of "quasi-markets," and the strengthening of transparency in the public service, among other decisions, such as granting greater autonomy to government agencies and their leaders. These principles have since been imported into various social sectors.

Education, likewise, began to be influenced by this new management model, with repercussions on educational policies and programs that were (re)modeled in the second half of the 1990s by the federal government. This includes, in particular: the approval of the National Education Guidelines and Framework Law (LDB) in 1996, the creation of the Fund for the Maintenance and Development of Primary Education and Teacher Training (FUNDEF) in 1996, the establishment of the Direct Money for Schools Program (PDDE) in 1995, in a context of strengthening national large-scale assessment policies with the creation of the National Course Examination (ENC) in 1995, the creation of the National High School Examination (ENEM) in 1998, and the strengthening of the SAEB created in 1990.

It should be noted that, during this decade, concerns about improving the quality of education were linked to the context of the transformations driven by the ongoing reform of the State. However, this process did not occur in a linear or continuous manner. In the following years, different governments adopted different strategies. While some sought to expand the capacity of the state and strengthen public policies, others resumed austerity agendas, with budget cuts and reductions in federal bureaucracy, resulting in the weakening of essential areas of public administration (Moraes, 2002).

In this scenario of improving educational quality, there was "an intensification of large-scale assessment policies, and the creation of performance indicators for students, schools, and networks began to inform the state's options and priorities to ensure a certain benchmark of quality" (Nardi; Schneider, 2012, p. 228). That said, external assessments now determine not only student performance, but also the quality of education offered in the country, insofar as their results are used as the sole and legitimate representatives of that quality.

The SAEB's influence over education networks remained essentially unchanged until 2005, when the system underwent a restructuring. In this cycle, SAEB now consists of two assessments: the National Assessment of Basic Education (ANEB) and the National Assessment of School Performance (Anresc). In this restructuring, the characteristics of the 2003 SAEB⁹ were credited to ANEB, while Anresc took on the census and dissemination of results as two of its main characteristics, with symbolic consequences for schools, especially when such data began to serve as the basis for calculating the IDEB in 2007.

According to authors such as Fernandes and Gremaud (2009), since 2005, Brazil has had a national *accountability* system for basic education. This is because, starting this year, ENEM results are now published by the school, the education system, and the state, and are also used as criteria for awarding scholarships under the University for All Program (PROUNI). With the changes introduced that year, SAEB, in turn, began to rely on an evaluation system with vast informational content—enabling all public networks to see themselves in the evaluation—and a *weak accountability* system for schools and education systems.

In this context, IDEB stands out as the main instrument of educational *accountability* in Brazil. Given that, as Schneider and Nardi (2019) have rightly pointed out, the index is credited with the ability to bring together more consistent *accountability* objectives, as it works with targets to be achieved by schools and administrative departments, thereby holding state and municipal governments and schools accountable for results. Immersed in a concept of *accountability* that is consistent with the regulatory perspectives inherent to the Evaluating State, anticipating the need for monitoring, transparency, accountability, and responsibility of school community members for the results obtained, developing side by side with the process of strengthening evaluation systems.

New IDEB and Reformers' Proposals for the Learning Dimension

In the narrative that has been constructed in favor of updating the IDEB, identifying limitations in the index has been a key strategy in the discussions that have arisen. This logic also materializes in propositions related to the dimension of learning. In debates, these limitations are not identified without purpose, but are intentionally evoked to justify possible changes, cloaked in the guise of supposed improvement. Thus, almost always, the recognition of a given limitation is followed by one or more "overcoming strategies," which, if implemented, will invariably reshape the component.

Broadly speaking, discussions related to learning can be considered to have been marked by the webinar *on the future of external assessments*, promoted by the Association of Education Journalists (JEDUCA) on December 15, 2020. Nevertheless, proposals on this subject during this period were still vague, and were later revisited in proposals put forward in speeches and formulations following this debate.

This point was revisited in the webinar *An indicator to replace IDEB and the webinar The future of IDEB*, which presented a more in-depth and diverse discussion on the subject, mainly through the speeches of Reynaldo Fernandes, Ruben Klein, Francisco Soares, and Ernesto Martins Faria, representatives of the World Bank and TPE.

The leading role played by IEDE in this process is striking, as it has been developing both a coordinating and proactive role, clearly aiming to bring about the "New IDEB"¹⁰. Clear proof of this is the document entitled *Proposals and Reflections for the New IDEB*, published in August 2022 by the agency, with the massive involvement of Francisco Soares, Reynaldo Fernandes, Ruben Klein, and the World Bank, in addition to IEDE itself. This document has gained traction in the political arena, hosted on the Federal Senate's own website and aimed at civil society.

In addition to these actors, it is worth noting that the document has the declared support of participants in the Grassroots Movement, the Lemann Foundation, the Getúlio Vargas Foundation (FGV), the Social Service for Industry (SESI), the Gesto Institute, Sincroniza Educação, MegaEdu, the Association of Members of the Brazilian Courts of Auditors (Atricon), the CEDAC Educational Community, as well as individuals who are in some way linked to the field of education, even if to a lesser extent. The Letter of Introduction is also signed by Maria Helena Guimarães (then president of the CNE).

This document aims to play a key role in the possible revision of the IDEB, as it compiles the main ideas and recommendations from a group of intellectuals, entities, and private organizations that are clearly interested in the continuity and reformulation of the index. It is therefore imperative to consider its influence in current and future discussions. As stated in the document, since 2021, "[...] we, the signatories of this letter, have participated, either as individuals or together with the organizations we work for, in many discussions about the need to review and define a New IDEB" (IEDE, 2022, p. 2).

For these individuals, "in addition to its inherent function of signaling the state of education, it is reiterated that the 'New IDEB' should indicate which learning outcomes should be the focus of the essential actions to be monitored" (IEDE, 2022, p. 2). Along these lines, for this same group, the reformulation or updating of the IDEB should be guided by five principles: ensuring the monitoring of essential learning expressed by the BNCC; upholding the right to education for all, promoting equity; being easy to understand for public policy makers, educational managers, and teachers, serving as a guide for more assertive decision-making; and being guided by a technical perspective, incorporating lessons learned since 2007 (IEDE, 2022).

The main proposals advocated by the participants in these discussions, which focus on the learning component, are summarized in the following topics. We now turn our attention to each of these proposals, which, if implemented, regardless of what they may be—as we learned from the first IDEB experience—will define not only the future

of IDEB, but above all, the notion of quality education throughout the country.

Compliance with International Standards

One of the key proposals is to bring SAEB/IDEB in line with international trends and standards. This requirement was introduced in the second half of 2020 by Francisco Soares, who argued that one of the most serious limitations related to the learning measure used in SAEB is the adoption of very low learning expectations when compared to the standard used in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), applied in countries such as Portugal. This difference is evident in the complexity of the texts used in this assessment compared to the textual support used in the SAEB tests. A second limitation would be the exclusive use of multiple-choice questions, which are used to assess more basic cognitive processes.

Similar statements were also made at the federal government level in 2021, when, on the occasion of the publication of Ordinance No. 445, of June 2021 (Brasil, 2021b), which established, on that date, the working group to discuss the updating of SAEB and IDEB, the then Secretary of Literacy, Carlos Nadalim, mentioned the intention to align SAEB with the parameters of both PIRLS and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). What would be pertinent in view of Brazil's formal accession to the aforementioned international studies. Brazil's participation in these two assessments dates back to 2021 and 2022, respectively.

This point is reiterated by Francisco Soares in the webinar *on the future of IDEB (2022)*, highlighting the need to align SAEB tests with PIRLS, TIMSS, and PISA standards. In his words: "[...] we are celebrating results with very low standards, many people say: 'oh, it will get better later,' but it doesn't get better. Schools are guided by assessment; if it is not included in the assessment, it is unlikely to be included in the school. Soares's proposal thus converges on converting SAEB into preparation for the two international exams, with the clear intention of making this function a central part of the school curriculum and practices. At the same event, João Pedro Azevedo reinforces the importance of using international references, endorsing and going beyond Soares' proposal. For him, achieving good *performance on* an indicator based on low learning expectations is not enough, so it is necessary to resort to international references to establish solid bases for comparison.

In the World Bank's proposal, SAEB should follow two benchmarks, one national and one international. The first is the BNCC, while the second could be achieved by introducing additional reading and math tests within the SAEB, with requirements and formats based on the establishment of an international proficiency benchmark, also known as a global proficiency benchmark. According to João Pedro Azevedo, this is part of a project to assess global proficiency levels, which is being developed by UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank, and other international partners within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)¹¹ of the Organization. United Nations (UN).

The goal is to enable international comparability based on national assessment systems. The ongoing project is part of SDG 4, which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education, setting minimum proficiency rates in reading and mathematics as one of its seven indicators.

The proposal is in line with what Hypólito (2019) characterizes as the Global Educational Reform Movement, since, in addition to establishing a global agenda to be implemented internally (by each country), it promotes the internationalization of national assessments. This process reflects the intensification of global influence on education regulation, whether through the incorporation of international performance standards or through the emphasis on large-scale assessment results as benchmarks for quality, equity, and educational success. From this perspective, such an approach tends to neglect the social, cultural, and economic specificities of each country, since the reality of some does not fit or match that of others, given the uniqueness of each context. Furthermore, it reduces the diversity of knowledge essential for the social development of individuals, disregarding the particularities that enrich education in different regions.

This process promotes the homogenization of education systems, compromising the identity and autonomy of national education policies. International comparisons in education often ignore structural differences such as curricula, levels of investment, and social inequality, making it unfair to evaluate Brazil (for example) using the same criteria applied to developed countries. Thus, adopting foreign models without proper adaptation can result in ineffective policies that focus more on rankings than on improvements. Therefore, Brazil needs to develop educational strategies that take into account its challenges and specificities, promoting a more equitable and contextualized education.

Update of Learning Expectations in Relation to the 1997 Reference

With regard to learning, another fundamental argument for implementing changes is based on the need to assess student learning in the current context, rather than using the performance recorded in 1997 as a reference. As explained in a technical note produced by INEP (2007), since its creation to date, the calculation of IDEB has been influenced by the proficiency scores in Portuguese Language and Mathematics of Brazilian students in the 1997 SAEB. The mean and standard deviation of these proficiencies are essential for determining the N parameter in the indicator formula ($IDEB = N \times P$), where N corresponds to the mean proficiency in Portuguese Language and Mathematics calculated in each edition of the SAEB.

Criticism in this regard was summarized in the booklet produced by IEDE (2022), based on two central arguments: 1 - “The IDEB score is a comparison with the results that students achieved in 1997 and does not provide an overview of what constitutes adequate learning” (IEDE,

2022, p. 9); 2 - “The context in 1997 is different from the current context” (IEDE, 2022, p. 12). What is now being pointed out, therefore, is a problem related to the learning component. In this sense, the indicator is difficult to interpret and does not assist educational and school managers in their decision-making. This is because, among other reasons, IDEB scores only offer a comparison with student performance in the 1997 SAEB, without any pedagogical function. This would not happen, “[...] if the learning component of IDEB helped managers understand how many of their students are at the appropriate level and how many are currently performing poorly” (IEDE, 2022, p. 12).

In this regard, there have been calls to update learning expectations within the SAEB framework, abandoning the parameter currently used by the IDEB. The issue is presented as a problem that calls for solutions through changes in the logic of the learning indicator. This limitation drives the agenda for updating the diagnosis, which should serve as a reference for comparison and for defining the desired performance of students in the SAEB. This update can easily be invoked to justify different modifications, with relevant methodological implications for the calculation, interpretation, and impact of IDEB on education networks. One example is the adjustment of the IDEB to the BNCC—a discourse that, incidentally, has been reiterated by the Unibanco Institute (2024).

Everything is moving towards achieving a new benchmark for student performance. This time, based on student performance in what can be called the New SAEB, fully adjusted to the BNCC. It should be noted that, since 2019, SAEB has been following BNCC to measure competencies in the new curriculum. In 2023, it expanded the areas assessed to include Humanities and Natural Sciences in the 5th grade. In high school, implementation has been gradual, with tests adjusted to the BNCC scheduled for 2025. It should be noted that the adoption of reference matrices aligned with the BNCC is the latest update to the SAEB, announced in February 2025 by INEP (2025).

Alignment of IDEB with BNCC

On the IDEB update agenda, another proposal with significant agreement among business education reformers is to adjust the scope of learning to the BNCC. In the events covered in this analysis, the mention of this turning point for IDEB appears timidly in Maria Helena Guimarães' closing remarks in the webinar *An indicator to replace IDEB*, 2021, gaining greater emphasis in the webinar *The future of IDEB*, 2022, with proposals from Francisco Soares and João Pedro Azevedo.

The issue also came to the fore in mid-2021, shortly after the publication of Ordinance No. 445 of June 2021 (Brasil, 2021b), which established a working group within the Ministry of Education (MEC) with the aim of discussing and presenting a proposal to update the SAEB and IDEB, in a speech by Mauro Rabelo, who was Secretary of Basic Education at the time. However, the defense of adjusting the IDEB to the BNCC in a more incisive and systematic manner was carried out in the

document *Proposals and reflections for the New IDEB* (IEDE, 2022), appearing as one of the five principles to be guaranteed in the new index from the perspective of the IEDE and its supporters. In summary, it would be up to the “New IDEB” to “systematize the learning outcomes of a SAEB aligned with the BNCC, in order to help ensure that more students reach the appropriate levels of learning, as expected for each stage (IEDE, 2022, p. 3).

This proposal is therefore clearly stated and presented as something unavoidable in the discourse produced thus far. This change is logically aligned with the ongoing updates to the SAEB¹², which, as of 2018, now has Cognitive Test Reference Matrices for Elementary Education based on the BNCC, as can be seen in what has been called the Master Matrix of the Basic Education Assessment System (Inep, 2018).

In this regard, these Reference Matrices differ from the previous structure in that they are divided into five areas of knowledge, namely: Portuguese Language - 2nd year of elementary school; Languages - 5th and 9th years of elementary school; Mathematics - 2nd, 5th, and 9th grades of elementary school; Natural Sciences - 5th and 9th grades of elementary school; Humanities - 5th and 9th grades of elementary school.

It is in this sense that, at a certain point, this debate also touches on the inclusion of other areas of knowledge (for the composition of the IDEB) in order to contemplate the BNCC, that is, Natural Sciences and Human Sciences. This idea is part of the proposals put forward by the World Bank and Francisco Soares. In the latter's view, “[...] if included in the SAEB, proficiency in science could also be included in the IDEB without difficulty” (IEDE, 2022, p. 27). The World Bank and its representatives, in turn, argue that

[...] the “NewIDEB” should make the best use of available information and include the results of all subjects currently monitored by SAEB as subdimensions of the learning component. However, as historical comparability is important, their suggestion is to maintain an initial focus on Portuguese and mathematics (IEDE, 2022, p. 25).

In proposing the standardization and alignment of IDEB with BNCC, the arguments presented clearly revolve around the most recent curriculum policy for Basic Education instituted by the federal government: BNCC. As indicated by the play on words, which is recurrent in arguments in favor of its approval – “the Base is the Base.” The movement in question argues that the index should be built on the basis of the Base, that is, not only aligning with it, but also constituting an instrument for its strengthening throughout the national territory.

This recommendation has been highlighted in documents such as those produced by Instituto Unibanco (2024, p. 3), which, in addition to suggesting an IDEB adjusted to the BNCC, advocate for the assessment of “all areas covered by it, including socio-emotional skills such as responsibility and citizenship; scientific, critical, and creative thinking; empathy and cooperation, among others.”

In one of the most recent works on the subject, André Coube (2021) – who analyzes the issue from a historical perspective, exploring the forces at play in the process of constructing the BNCC – highlights that various actors were present in the debates before, during, and after the latest version of the Base, with two opposing sides playing a strong role: on the one hand, business reformers, who advocate for a homogeneous national curriculum; on the other, academics and educational entities, who oppose the existence of a homogeneous and mandatory national curriculum. These poles are occupied by groups that diverge not only in relation to the Base, but above all in terms of their objectives and conceptions of education.

By linking up with the New SAEB and the “New IDEB,” the BNCC serves as the basis not only for building a market focused on the commercialization of educational materials and services (teaching materials, teaching systems, assessment platforms, and teacher training programs), but above all for deepening control over school curricula and teaching work. The term *Base*, in this context, carries an emblematic meaning: its meaning goes beyond the strictly curricular domain and reveals itself as one of the pillars, if not the foundation, of the education project conceived by the movement that drove the development and implementation of the BNCC in the country.

Assessment of an IDEB by Subject

The proposal for an IDEB per subject was authored by Ruben Klein. In the webinar *an indicator to replace IDEB*, held in 2021, Klein basically points out that it is possible to consider an indicator per subject, taking into account the changes made to SAEB, with the inclusion of new subjects. In this perspective, we work with the notion of a “disaggregated IDEB.” In mid-2022, this idea is revisited by the same author in the webinar *“The Future of IDEB.”*

Klein's statements at these two events are more in the realm of technical feasibility, without explicitly presenting themselves as a proposal to change the logic of the IDEB, unlike what is evident in the document *Proposals and Reflections for the New IDEB*. In this text, the proposal to create a learning indicator for each subject is evident. In summary, Klein advocates the adoption of a specific indicator for each curricular component, based on the SAEB scales. This proposal, however, does not exclude the possibility of maintaining an overall IDEB, which could be calculated based on the average of the specific indices for each subject. In his view: “the advantage of the index by subject is that it does not lose the interpretation by subject” (IEDE, 2022, p. 35).

This suggestion is strongly in line with the current idea of giving greater pedagogical interpretability to IDEB results and can be easily linked to other proposals on the agenda, being finely tuned to the alignment of SAEB and IDEB with BNCC, with the inclusion of new subjects in the composition of the index, as well as with the proposal that provides for the arrangement of IDEB results into performance levels. In view of this proposal, it can be inferred that learning measures, under

a "New IDEB," would be presented separately, with an IDEB in Portuguese Language, an IDEB in Mathematics, an IDEB in Humanities, and an IDEB in Natural Sciences.

The essence of this debate is also addressed by Waltenberg (2014) in the document *Equity and the Future of IDEB*, commissioned by Instituto Unibanco. The author argues that, although the inclusion of new subjects is valid, Portuguese Language and Mathematics should continue to carry greater weight in the calculation of the indicator, as they are essential for basic education and for the development of students' fundamental skills. According to him, these areas are pillars of education, and the introduction of new components should complement assessment without compromising this centrality. Furthermore, Waltenberg (2014, p. 42) points out that "the possible inclusion of grades from other subjects in the calculation of the IDEB learning component would not alter the essence of the analysis."

Waltenberg's (2014) criticism of the inclusion of new subjects in the IDEB, without them being considered in the calculation of the indicator, is linked to his defense of an evaluation model based on traditional references of educational quality. In his view, new subject areas are not as essential as Portuguese Language and Mathematics, which, according to him, should continue to be the central focus of the assessment. However, by disregarding the importance of other disciplines, such as Humanities and Natural Sciences, his position reinforces a limited view of education, raising questions about what knowledge is really valued in educational policies and whether this approach favors a model more aligned with the logic of an education based on neoliberal principles.

Considerations in Process

As demonstrated, the discussion surrounding the creation of a "New IDEB" began as an initiative promoted by the Ministry of Education, with the participation of representatives linked to public agencies. This is a process that is also receptive to collaboration with organic intellectuals and representatives of private entities (interested in the topic), especially those who stand out or have a consolidated track record in relation to IDEB. It is known that, since 2020, the issue has been on the federal government's agenda; however, decisions regarding the future of the indicator remain marked by uncertainty. On the other hand, it is clear that this debate has been appropriated by a specific group of actors and private institutions, which have been working systematically to incorporate their ideas into the design of the new index.

Undeniably, the group identified here as Business Reformers of Education shows a particular interest in maintaining and strengthening IDEB as a mechanism for educational accountability. In this context, there is a clear intention to bring the indicator into a new era of international comparisons, bringing the results of Brazilian students closer to the performance of students in other countries, while disregarding the profound social, economic, and educational inequalities that distinguish them. It is, therefore, not a simple reformulation of the

IDEB, but rather a strategy that is part of a broader project aimed at consolidating a global level of proficiency, in accordance with the guidelines of multilateral organizations.

It is clear that this group has been working hard to impose its conception of education on Brazilian educational policy, a conception that is strongly focused on the cognitive dimension, with well-defined, standardized learning objectives guided by the logic of homogenization. Under the pretext of promoting improvements in IDEB, there have been a series of attempts to establish an increasingly close alignment between curriculum and assessment. In this vein, following the emblematic National Common Core Movement, reformers seek to consolidate the BNCC through the IDEB itself. The proposal is to build a new "level" of regulation for basic education, using the Base as a foundation and the "New IDEB" as a tool for its implementation. Furthermore, considering that the BNCC is one of the conditions for access to the VAAR (Student Year Result Value) supplement from the New Fund for the Maintenance and Development of Basic Education and the Valorization of Education Professionals (FUNDEB), it can be said that the intended alignment goes beyond the strictly pedagogical field, aiming to articulate curriculum, assessment, and financing as cogs in the same management model.

It is worth noting the similarity between the ongoing IDEB review process and the discussions and interventions that took place in the period leading up to the approval of the BNCC. As analyzed by Coube (2021), Business Reformers represented the greatest driving force behind debates and investments for the BNCC to be approved by the CNE, triggering sources, events, and negotiations in the texts of successive versions of the Base. In this process, the BNCC received full support from several private institutions, such as the Roberto Marinho Foundation, the Lemann Foundation, the Ayrton Senna Institute, the Natura Institute, Itaú Social, and TPE, which, during the period leading up to its approval, promoted a series of studies and debates for its construction through the Movimento Pela Base (Movement for the Base).

It is these same pro-privatization forces, this time represented in particular by IEDE, Itaú Social, TPE, Instituto Unibanco, Fundação Cesgranrio, Fundação Lemann, and the World Bank, that are once again coordinating their efforts with a view to interfering in the definition of IDEB parameters and education quality. At events, in official documents, statements, and discussions, the rhetoric of improving IDEB scores by updating the requirements and performance benchmarks for students within the SAEB framework stands out. Also noteworthy is the discourse in favor of improving the pedagogical communicability of the index, with the argument that it should more effectively guide the work of educational and school managers, in addition to promoting pedagogical practices that are more aligned with the established goals. All this under the pretext that "the IDEB was good, but needs to be improved."

It is worth highlighting the leading role played by IEDE, the World Bank, and Instituto Unibanco, whose actions converge in favor of compiling a repertoire of proposals related to the redefinition of IDEB, with the aim of defining the direction of the index. Given this, it is possible to see a range of actors and institutions seeking to shift decision-making on public education to the private sphere, acting according to market logic. Similarly, it is undeniable that the federal education portfolio has been opened up to private interests, marked by a neoliberal trend that reinforces the growing involvement and influence of the private sector in decisions about basic education in Brazil, which poses a risk to the democratic nature and socially referenced quality of education. At the same time, there is a certain distance from progressive sectors, collective and individual subjects that have historically defended public education from discussions related to a "New IDEB."

The aspects presented here do not overcome the complexity of the debate nor do they cover all of the proposals surrounding the concept of a "New IDEB." Within INEP, as well as among Business Reformers in Education, a set of ideas is being developed regarding the need for the new index to "address" the issue of social and educational inequalities, whether in its calculation formula, in the ways the results are disseminated, or in the definition of goals. These proposals are linked to the already established dimensions of the IDEB, namely: Learning and School Performance, to which a new narrative layer is sought to be added. In any case, the "IDEB-Inequality" dyad has gained prominence since the first mentions of the need to reformulate the indicator, becoming one of the main discursive axes around the proposal for a "New IDEB."

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Notes

¹ It was carried out in partnership between the Universidade do Estado do Rio Grande do Norte (UERN) and the Universidade Federal de Mato Grosso do Sul (UFMS). Translation funded by the Graduate Studies Asymmetry Reduction Program (PRAPG) of CAPES..

² Reynaldo Fernandes, professor in the Department of Economics at the School of Economics, Business Administration, and Accounting at the University of São Paulo, in Ribeirão Preto, São Paulo.

³ Ruben Klein, specialist in Educational Assessment.

⁴ The New IDEB WG was the same nomenclature launched under Ordinance No. 556, of October 2, 2020 (Brasil, 2020b, p. 22), which, on that occasion, created a WG with the objective of "preparing a technical study to support the updating of the Basic Education Development Index - IDEB."

⁵ It is known that there are other issues being discussed and debated in the context of the formulation of evaluation policy; however, due to space limitations, we have chosen to bring only these issues to the discussion.

- ⁶ According to Bresser-Pereira (1998), the first-generation reforms promoted in the 1980s and 1990s included measures such as privatization, trade liberalization, and fiscal adjustment, with a focus on economic stabilization and reducing the size of the state. The second-generation reforms, articulated by him in the State Management Reform, sought to modernize public administration, replacing the bureaucratic model with a managerial one based on efficiency, results control, decentralization, and partnership with the private sector.
- ⁷ Dardot and Laval (2016) characterize neoliberalism as a rationality that reconfigures society according to market logic, promoting competition, flexibility, and individual accountability, while redefining the state as a promoter of the market.
- ⁸ That is, in the sense of assigning responsibility and controlling actions, imposing on a person or institution the obligation to be accountable, with the possibility of suffering some type of sanction or consequence, as defined by Mulgan (2000) cited by Schneider and Nardi (2019).
- ⁹ In 2003, SAEB collected data from samples of public and private schools in urban and rural areas. In both school systems, the system administered Portuguese language and mathematics tests to students enrolled in the 3rd year of high school and in the 4th and 8th grades of elementary school.
- ¹⁰ The Institute for Interdisciplinarity and Evidence in Educational Debate (IEDE) was founded in 2017 with the aim of integrating knowledge from various fields, such as education, psychology, economics, and social sciences. As a private initiative, IEDE operates at the federal level and is based on three principles. First, it seeks to map and disseminate best practices in education networks and schools. Secondly, it is dedicated to diagnosis and analysis to combat educational inequalities. Finally, it commits to using indicators and assessments as a basis for guiding educational decisions (IEDE, 2024).
- ¹¹ The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were established by the United Nations General Assembly in 2015. Their purpose is to create an international action plan to achieve 17 goals (to be achieved through 169 targets). They address fundamental issues for human development such as: poverty eradication; agriculture; health; education; security; reduction of inequalities; among others; from the perspectives of: people, planet, prosperity, partnership, and peace. It is a global agenda aimed at developing and implementing public policies to guide humanity until 2030.
- ¹² As stated on the Inep website: Since 2019, SAEB has been undergoing a transition in which the matrices used since 2001 are being progressively replaced by those developed in accordance with the BNCC. In order to ensure comparability with the 2021 edition, whose results were strongly influenced by the end of the pandemic, in 2023 the old matrix will still be used for Portuguese Language and Mathematics in the 5th and 9th grades of elementary school and in high school.

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