

# The influence of the *Programme for International Student Assessment* (PISA) on policy decision in Portugal: the education policies of the 17th Portuguese Constitutional Government

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## ABSTRACT:

The text discusses the new modes of government and regulation through the instruments, within the scope of which knowledge becomes a policy instrument and a vehicle used to regulate the social actors. This takes place in the background of public action characterised by the increase in the number of actors and bodies involved. Based on documental analysis and an interview with the Minister of Education, we gauged the influence of the *Programme for International Student Assessment* (PISA) on policy decision in Portugal. More specifically, the decisions made by the 17th Constitutional Government are analysed, which cited the PISA results to legitimise various education policies. A change has taken place in the decision-making process, with a renewal of the foundations of policy legitimacy, based more on scientific grounds and less on ideological thinking. In tandem with the reduction of political regulation, which translates a certain technicization and de-politicization of public action, we have witnessed a re-politicization of the instrument, resulting from the interrelations between the idiosyncrasies of political contexts, the political agenda and the values that the instrument inherently transports.

## KEYWORDS:

PISA, Regulation, Knowledge and policy decision, Public action instruments.

## INTRODUCTION

This text focuses on how the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), run by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), is used in the policy decision process in Portugal, chiefly legitimising the decisions of the 17<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Government (2005-2009), in the area of education policies.

Led by the socialist José Sócrates, who appointed Maria de Lurdes Rodrigues (MLR) as his Minister of Education, a university teacher with a PhD in Sociology, the 17<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Government used the OECD survey to justify several education reforms. Under its tutelage there seemed to be a change in policy decision making in Education, which became more based on scientific grounds, in possession of evidence, and less on political or ideological thinking.

This core idea of this text is to look at the way the Programme was used to legitimise education policies and in the governmental rhetoric. Our starting point — to analyse how PISA intervenes in the policy decision of the 17<sup>th</sup> Government — led us to question the empirical material as follows: What political measures were legitimised by citing PISA? What arguments were adopted by the government in the legitimisation process or processes? Does this herald new frameworks in the decision-making process or processes?

Our theoretical framework is based on the relationship between knowledge and policy, whereby

knowledge is considered fundamental in the regulation of the social project of education (Mangez, 2001; Whitty, 2002). We adopt the perspective of Political Sociology of Public Action, which allows us to look at public policies as collective action (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2007), involving a multiplicity of the actors and interactions and analysing a “State in action” (Jobert & Muller, 1987), which is a clear break away from the more hierarchical and state-based visions of the political process (Commaille, 2004). The State is suddenly invaded with new forms of governance and regulation and knowledge emerges as the instrument used in politics and to regulate the social actors. It is a regulatory State, which is included in a broader *network* of political relations, transposed beyond the national borders. It is an evolution in the direction of a “*new governance*” (Rhodes, 1996; Salamon, 2002), which is *negotiated*, non-hierarchical, and which calls on non-State actors who take part in the formulation and implementation of public policies (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2004, p. 23; 2007, p. 1).

The restructuring embodies a different mode of regulation and a new paradigm of the relationship between the governors and the governed, which is borne out through the instruments. A public action approach is imposed through the angle of the instruments (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2004, p. 3). As a supranational instrument of regulation, a mediator of the relationship between knowledge and policy, PISA enables the analysis of multi-regulation phenomena and government through

the instruments, based on knowledge in the policy decision and not on knowledge as a constructor of policy.

The study is based on an in-depth interview with the Minister of Education<sup>1</sup> and documental analysis of the parliamentary debates, institutional websites and legislation. The text is part of a broader study carried out as part of the research project entitled “Knowledge and Policy in education and health sectors”, funded by the European Commission (6<sup>th</sup> Framework Programme). More specifically, it is part of the research undertaken on the circulation and use of the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), in six European countries. The research encompasses the PISA initiatives of 2000, 2003 and 2006. To study the Portuguese case (Afonso & Costa, 2009), which led to this text, 10 in-depth interviews were carried out with the national representatives of PISA and the ministers of education who held the post between 1995 and 2009; a vast documental *corpus* was analysed, which encompassed documents produced by the National Centre — the Educational Assessment Office (GAVE) — the press, on-line newspapers specialized in education, and information contained in the institutional websites, teachers’ unions and blogs, as well as legislative texts and the content of parliamentary debates.

This article is organised as follows. First we contextualise PISA and the policy decision making process in Portugal, in the background of the growing complexity of the State action. We then analyse PISA as a tool that encourages the construction of meaning in education, which objectivises social meaning and allows the legitimising of decision making in education. The analysis then moves on to the capacity of PISA to legitimise knowledge and justify previously established policies. We subsequently discuss how PISA was mobilised to justify different education policies, in the area of quality and equity. Finally, we conclude the analysis around a circular relationship that seems to occur between a re-politicization of the PISA movement and a de-politicization of the public action movement.

## PISA AND THE POLICY DECISION MAKING PROCESS IN PORTUGAL

In Portugal the turning point in the mobilisation of the Programme to draw up education policies occurred in 2005, when the 17<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Government took office. Beforehand, the survey had only been mobilised politically at two moments: first, following the publication of the PISA 2000 Report, in December 2001, by the then Minister of Education, Júlio Pedrosa, who “took advantage of the occasion to refer to a series of measures already underway: Support Study introduced through the curricular reorganisation of primary schooling and the reformulation of the secondary school programmes” (*Público*, 5/12/2001); second, three years later, through the Minister of Education of the 16<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Government, Carmo Seabra, who brought the “PISA” topic to Parliament, advocating a change in the primary school curricula (Afonso & Costa, 2009), and considering it “a priority to learn the mother tongue, Mathematics and the sciences” (DAR, 7/10/2004), given that the “latest OECD figures” (...) are clear” (DAR, 7/10/2004).

With the 17<sup>th</sup> Portuguese Constitutional Government, decision making in the field of education policies was geared towards the possession of evidence and based on results. The Minister of Education championed the role of knowledge to back up the policies, saying that the decisions depended on having objective data, considering it “impossible to decide without having the information necessary to do so” (E1, 2009, p. 2). She talked about the need to search for “the best solutions, at each moment” (E1, 2009, p. 15) and “in each context, contribute to a better solution” (E1, 2009, p. 15).

This conceptualization of the decision-making process, based on scientific knowledge, fits into the framework of public action that is characterised by the increased number of actors and bodies involved in it. In such a scenario, one has to make a simplified decision that is as objective as possible in the choices made by the governors; which confers a new emphasis on knowledge and its utility (Bleiklie & Byrkjeflot, 2002), imposing itself as a central technology in the action of the State. The policy decision maker is led to develop new forms of knowledge and search for new modes of legitimisation

(Pons & Van Zanten, 2007, pp. 105-110), with repercussions on the growing usage of measurement and compared assessment instruments, designed in an attempt to break down the complexity of the reality and back up the decision made (Van Haecht, 2001).

It is in the background of this growing complexity of the State action and the presence, in a network, of multiple actors who intervene in the policy construction process, that we should understand the appetite of policy decision makers for the international studies, performance figures and good practices. Comparison between countries is transformed into a categorical aspect of the process to improve the quality of education, increase efficacy and provide public accountability, with a view to assessing the efficiency of the education systems and mapping out new national education policies (Bonnet, 2002, p. 389). According to MLR, when talking about information for policy, it is important to take into account the dimension of the instruments. Hence, the information supplied by studies such as PISA, “of a statistical basis” (E1, 2009, p. 2), is viewed as more indicative as it gives an idea on a global scale, given that: “it is very different to decide on a problem which affects 1 000 people than one which affects 100 000” (E1, 2009, p. 2).

The magnitude of the instrument is captured by the wide coverage of the sample and its geographical scope: it assesses, every three years, the performance of over one million 15-year-old pupils in more than 60 participating countries (OECD, 2007, p. 7). However, this magnitude also encompasses the technical aspect, owing to the acknowledgement of the competence and the high level of expertise of the OECD, and from the political of view there is a widespread perception that the OECD is an ideal, reputable actor in the industrialised world, which is seen as “as a golden standard for conducting comparative studies” (Grek *et al.*, 2009, p. 7).

This symbolic dimension of the OECD (Carvalho *et al.*, 2009), contributing to the “PISA” knowledge gaining more credibility, enables the governors to legitimise more controversial policies. In the case under analysis, this occurred with the implementation of the New Teacher Assessment Model, which generated heated contestation from the teaching body, above all because of observation of lessons:

The PISA international reports — which are recognised by the international community as one of the most credible instruments to assess school systems — identified long ago the need to implant this lesson observation and supervision practice in our system, which is essential to improve the quality of teaching (Government/Education Website, 6/3/2008).

PISA seems to point towards a policy decision more focused on results and numbers. It responds to a concern about the quality of the pupils’ learning, and could be an answer to the “doubts concerning the quality of learning and skills actually acquired” (E1, 2009, p. 6). MLR believes that having managed to keep pupils in school for a long time, until reaching the end of their mandatory education, the concern is “to measure the quality” (E1, 2009, p. 6), which “corresponds to a new level of demand as regards the education systems. Never before have the education systems been under such close scrutiny, there is no memory of this!” (E1, 2009, p. 6).

Moreover, the lack of statistical studies is, according to the Minister, the reason behind the lack of efficacy: “as regards the education statistics, for many years it was not possible to govern with this knowledge, simply because these things did not exist” (E1, 2009, p. 4); which, according to MLR, translates into little in-depth knowledge about the situation on the ground in Portuguese schools and the real problems of the education system. As such, she points out the existence of a secondary school system that is not in step with the reality, which ignores the true failure and drop-out rates, and is set up for 100 00/80 000 pupils, but which “in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year only has half this number; when we get to the 11<sup>th</sup> year (...) imagine what this waste and inefficacy means” (E1, 2009, pp. 4-5).

## PISA — PROMOTING THE CONSTRUCTION OF MEANING IN EDUCATION

The OECD survey, as an instrument used to justify actions in the domain of education policies (OECD, 2007, p. 17), focuses on social meanings (Berger & Luckman, 2004) and promotes the construction of meaning in education. Looking at education through

the PISA prism implies acceptance of drawing up education policies and thinking, using the internationally disseminated examples as integral components.

This is what happened with the National Programme of Portuguese Language Education, which was justified in the light of the “results of all the international projects in which Portugal took part (Reading Literacy — IEA, 1992, Pisa 2000 and 2003)” (Dispatch no. 546/2007). It is pointed out that Portuguese students presented 22% of “performances below level 1 (the level that ranks poor readers) in PISA 2003 (...) in comparison to an EU reference figure of 19.8 percent” (Ministry of Education Website, 1/6/2006), which hinders the academic and professional success of the Portuguese student, putting the benchmark objectives designated by the European Union of 15.5% by 2010 at risk. It is also the case of the National Reading Plan, presented as “an institutional response to the concern about the literacy levels (...) of the young, which are considerably lower than the European average” (National Reading Plan website; Council of Ministers Decision no. 86/2006). The connection to the survey results is evident in several sources and the National Reading Plan is described as a goal of national education policy, given that “48 percent of Portuguese pupils are at low levels (one and two) in a 5-point scale” (Government website, 1/6/2006; National Reading Plan website).

“Governing by numbers” (Grek, 2009; Grek & Ozga, 2007), the technical legitimacy of PISA enables the creation of “an additional and informal structure of authority and sovereignty besides and beyond the state (though providing) means of communication, socialisation, institutionalisation and integration” (Overbeek, 2004, pp. 15-16, quoted by Dale & Robertson, 2007, p. 5). The role of ideas comes very much to the fore; the recommendations that are made, and the problems that are cited, constitute a source of legitimisation of policy measures, proving that “the knowledge is not only being governed or used to inform the State and policy makers; it is also a tool for governing” (Mangez, 2008, p. 105).

It is a process according to which the device is no longer a mere procedure but is a value, used in order to legitimise public action: “I studied and analysed the data and took a series of policy decisions based on the PISA results” (E1, 2009, p. 3). The

Programme not only promotes the construction of “international benchmarks, in which countries can be compared among one another” (E1, 2009, p. 8) — which MLR sees as an advantage — but also circulates these benchmarks internationally, aiding the regulation of the education systems through the knowledge held on the indicators.

The survey becomes an instrument of public action, a technical and social resource, which organises the relations between the government and its citizens, based on the representations and meanings that it inherently transports (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2004, p. 13). An effort to rework education and intervene in the policy agenda lends itself to an in-depth look at the education system and the values that should be promoted, which allows one to “gain knowledge of results, skills acquired, competencies, the quality of what is taught, what is learned, with international cooperation” (E1, 2009, p. 8). Legitimising the policy decision through the PISA angle means taking part in the construction of meaning and in the dissemination of norms and specific values, in line with a given vision of education; which takes place through a battery of indicators and application of conceptual frameworks — of reading, mathematics and science literacy — created by a group of specialists in different and multiple research centres (Carvalho, 2009, pp. 70-71).

Knowledge is viewed as an instrument of regulation and a new kind of influence in the policy decision process and the way education should be thought out, centred on variables and recommendations. The complexity of the instrument is converted into a simplified appearance, in the form of indicators, numbers and tests, allowing the construction of “pictures of educational systems, e.g. in terms of resources, enrolment and outcomes” (Lindblad, 2001, p. 1). And because the “indicators are not numbers: they are words. They are named” (Mangez, 2008, p. 106), the neutrality of the instrument is only a pretence that hides “interests and a prior agenda” (Mangez, 2008, p. 107).

PISA is a politicized instrument, which “As well as the technical legitimacy (...) also triggers policy questions” (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2004, p. 16). This kind of “soft” governance, disseminated by the OECD, “leaves plenty of space for those who are being regulated to edit the rules — they choose parts of



the rules and display their compliance with them or translate rules to fit their own expectations” (Jacobsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2006, pp. 253-254). We witnessed a “nationalisation” of the instrument, which is reworked in accordance with the political context it is utilised in. Behind the discourses of political legitimisation, dimensions and values are hidden which arise out of the very materiality of the instrument and its ideological content (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2004, p. 367), in accordance with the agendas of the policy decision makers.

## LEGITIMISING KNOWLEDGE AND PRE-EXISTING POLICY MEASURES

The PISA data reinforces governments’ arguments and backs up their decision making, consolidating the knowledge behind the national assessment tools such as exams and assessment tests, which allows:

(...) contextualization of the data obtained in the PISA international study in relation to the Portuguese education system (...) of the utmost importance to draw conclusions, define strategies and take measures with a view to improving the performance of the pupils in the subject areas assessed (Government website, 12/5/2005).

This phenomenon is perceptible in the ongoing training programme of 1<sup>st</sup>-Cycle teachers, the need for which is “shown by the results of the assessment tests and the national mathematics exams, the failure rates of pupils throughout school and the indicators of the PISA programme” (Government/Education website, 29/9/2005); likewise, mathematics, one of the chief areas on the Government’s political agenda is the object of several policy interventions, as “our children are not acquiring the basic competencies in Mathematics”, “a situation (...) revealed by the assessment tests and the PISA tests (...), since the end of the 1990s” (DAR, 6/9/2005).

As well as consolidating the knowledge held by the governors, through information coming from national assessment tools, PISA acts as an “alarm” (Afonso & Costa, 2009), a “barometer” (Rautalin & Alasutari, 2009), shedding light on (new) problems and allowing the actors to (re)install them on

the policy agenda. It functions as an *awakener of consciences* (Afonso & Costa, 2009; Carvalho *et al.*, 2009), reinforcing “a need for urgent decisions, following lines of action that seem undisputed and uncontested, largely due to the fact that they have been internationally asserted” (Nóvoa & Yariv-Mashal, 2003, p. 425). On this matter, MLR points out:

I realised (...), based on the data that I ordered to be collected [for the session on the dissemination of the PISA 2003 results], that 1<sup>st</sup>-cycle teachers could reach the end of their course having always obtained negative results in Mathematics, and so nothing was demanded from them and the Mathematics components in the initial training could be completely absent (...) (E1, 2009, p. 3).

The governor’s discourse suggests the need to do more research, to provide technical back-up to the policy decision:

(...) PISA helps to reflect and understand better, but it is not enough. We need to complete our information and our knowledge based on what PISA reveals, with more specific and more in-depth studies (E1, 2009, p. 9).

This is the case, for example, of the issue of repeat years. According to PISA, Portugal is among the countries where the high retention rates most influence the poor results obtained: Portuguese pupils who are in their correct school year obtain good results, in many cases above the OECD average. This topic occupied part of the ministerial rhetoric, according to which PISA “aims to compare the results of the Southern countries that have these phenomena of repeat years, showing that repeating years does not help to improve school results” (Government/Education website, 2008). As such she argues that:

There are a huge number of studies that should and could be commissioned. This, for example, of repeating the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of schooling; it’s not worth discussing the repetition of the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of schooling without understanding why the 7-year-old children end up repeating years (E1, 2009, p. 30).

Here there was no place for the legitimising of specific policies to fight the high repeat year rates, as this matter “cannot be exclusively policy” (E1, 2009, p.9). To bring about a “change in practices, there has to be a systematic approach to the problem. It is not a question of forbidding repetition as many have suggested for a long time” (E1, 2009, p.9). The proposal is for changes in the organisation of schools “with regard to the organisation of the teaching cycles, or the rules governing school organisation, or make-up of the classes” (E1, 2009, p.10) and the pupils’ ability to respond to difficulties, to turn around past failure:

The principle is as follows: if you don’t know, you stay another year to repeat all the material you had so you learn it. And what happens if the second part of the premise does not happen? The students fail, they repeat the year; they repeat it but do not learn. On the contrary, they unlearn (Government/Education website, 2008).

This is how the rhetorical use of the survey can exercise a kind of regulation, that takes place essentially at the discursive level, and which is based not on much on the validation of specific policies, but on the social construction of an educational philosophy that interferes with the way of thinking and conceiving educational problems. The rhetoric surrounding PISA, which is part of the grammar of government, constitutes a form of “soft” regulation, which was not always translated into express policies, had repercussions in the political debate, in school, in the press, and on public opinion (Afonso & Costa, 2009). An opinion given by the Minister based on an OECD “truth-teller” (Noaksson & Jacobsson, 2003, p. 42) exemplifies a manner of regulation that has an impact, above all, on the discursive domain, with repercussions on the rhetoric of the political decision makers.

## LEGITIMISING GOVERNMENT ACTION: BETWEEN QUALITY AND EQUITY

The mobilisation of PISA in drawing up policies is visible in the legislation and is present in the official government discourses. According to MLR, the

Programme has political influence in the preparation of the policy measures; and in practical terms in the implementation of these measures:

I think it has to have two kinds of impact: impact on the policy decision, on the organisation of intervention programmes aimed at improving the quality of the learning, which strive precisely to respond to the anxiety or perplexity that triggers the need for PISA, and it also has to have another kind of impact, at a more localised level (E1, 2009, p. 6).

The set of policies introduced/consolidated by the government, and legitimised by citing the Programme, include two aspects focused on by the OECD/PISA: on the one hand, the fight against the inefficacy and inefficiency of the education systems; on the other hand, an answer to the questions of inequity and segregation of the pupils. It is pointed out that, from the political point of view, the governments that take part in the study home in on 4 topical areas: (a) the quality of the learning results; (b) equality in the learning results and equal educational opportunities; (c) the efficacy and efficiency of the educational processes, and (d) the impact of the learning results on social and economic well-being (Schleicher, 2006, p. 23, p. 31; OECD, 2007, p. 7). These options are echoed in the national contexts, and are visible in the mobilisation, undertaken by the governments, of this argument, although in different ways and in different degrees of depth (Carvalho *et al.*, 2009).

In Portugal, as regards efficacy and quality of the systems, two measures were undertaken by the Sócrates Government, based on PISA: The Mathematics Action Plan (PAM) and the Training Programme in Experimental Science Teaching.

The PAM is legitimised by the need to improve the performance of the Portuguese pupils in the mathematical literacy cognitive tests, and involves several components, such as the involvement of the “Mathematics teachers, the subject coordinators and the executive boards, to open a process of reflection, debate and proposals for specific measures, aimed at improving the results” (DAR, 6/9/2005). Furthermore, it implies “a specialised analysis regarding the suitability of the Mathematics teaching instruments in the 3<sup>rd</sup> cycle of primary teaching, i.e.

an analysis concerning the appropriateness of the curriculum given the programmes, textbooks and exams” (DAR, 6/9/2005). Finally, it encompasses the processing and “statistical analysis of the exam results, with a view to detecting the explanations of regularities at a more aggregated level” (DAR, 6/9/2005).

In relation to the teaching of the sciences, “the Portuguese pupils show a considerably lower performance in the scientific literacy area than the average of the OECD countries — a situation that has not shown significant signs of improvement in recent years” (Dispatch no. 2143/2007); an effort was therefore made to increase its experimental nature, through the implementation of the Training Programme for 1<sup>st</sup>-Cycle Teachers of Primary Education.

In the second domain, equity, the policy measures drawn up fell within the scope of school social action, Educational Territories of Priority Intervention, the refurbishment of school buildings, the Technological Plan and the concept of the Full-Time School.

The first case is linked to the fact that the poor Portuguese results in PISA are heavily attributed to the socioeconomic context of the schools and families. The government mobilised these indicators to implement “policies that intervene at the territorial level and the social welfare level to improve these conditions, so that schools snap out of the situation and produce better results” (E1, 2009, p. 13). These measures consist of the broadening of the school welfare action, which is brought about by enlarging the number of pupils who benefit from this support and increasing the amount of benefits to extend to secondary education pupils; in re-launching the Priority Intervention Education Territories and in refurbishing the schools, through projects to enhance the environment and school results, and solutions that involve the direct contracting of teachers and refurbishment work to conserve or enlarge the schools.

Moreover, PISA takes the view that rather than social and economic origin, a more important factor is the socio-cultural condition of the pupil, i.e. even if in economic hardship the children have access to school and educational resources, they will obtain better results (E1, 2009, pp. 11-12). Therefore, another measure mentioned is the “e-school” initiative, which is part of the Technological Plan,

which consists of attributing each 1<sup>st</sup>-cycle child with a computer that has access to the Internet; this is decisive “for the family support policies” (E1, 2009, p. 12). “Children that do not have books at home will now be able to access information that they would never have been able to, hence access to these resources, even from home, is essential” (E1, 2009, p. 12).

Another example consists of the concept of Full-Time School, i.e. in the lengthening of the school timetable of 1<sup>st</sup>-cycle schools. In 2005, Valter Lemos, Secretary of State of Education, pointed out in Parliament that in relation to pupil support Portugal was one of the lowest ranked countries (the OECD average is 61% and the Portuguese average is 5%) (DAR, 6/5/2005). The Full-Time School is therefore justified as “a facility to support pupils with difficulties and also to carry out a set of extracurricular activities, (...) which are very important for the average performance of the pupils (...)” (DAR, 6/5/2005).

## CONCLUSION

The use of PISA to legitimise the implementation of policy measures is a relatively recent phenomenon in the Portuguese education panorama (Afonso & Costa, 2009), which reconfigures government action through new representations of the way public policies are conceived, and the way the relationships between the governors and the governed are organised (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2004). The greater visibility of PISA, in public action in education policy occurred in Portugal under the 17<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Government. The degree of influence of the Programme in certain policies enables us to recognise, under the tutelage of the first Sócrates Government, signals pointing towards a new mode of drawing up policy based on data, numbers and results, and essentially guided by pragmatic criteria. This mobilisation of the survey, in the policy decision making process, comes to the fore in the legislative texts, in the parliamentary debates, in official speeches, in institutional texts, and also in the interview with the Minister of Education.

The Programme’s results are cited to legitimise the policy decision in different education policies:



the readjustment of the framework of qualifications to become a teacher; changes to the conditions giving access to teacher training courses for 1<sup>st</sup>-cycle teachers; the Teacher Training programmes; the ongoing training and the change of the teaching group for Mathematics teaching in the 2<sup>nd</sup> cycle, as well as new rules to enter and obtain promotion in the teaching career; the implementation of the Mathematics Action Plan, the National Reading Plan and the New Teacher Performance Assessment Model; the reworking of the hourly workloads and the changes to the curricular organisation; the lengthening of the timetable of the 1<sup>st</sup>-cycle schools, which includes the concept of Full-Time School; the “e-school” initiative; the broadening of the school social welfare action; the re-launching of the Educational Territories and the refurbishment of the school buildings.

Furnished with a policy orientation — present in the OECD intention to help governments make decisions — PISA exercises influence on policy decision making in several countries, although with different degrees of intensity (Carvalho *et al.*, 2009). This influence, on the national political contexts in general, and on the Portuguese case in particular, translates into the “soft” method of governance, exercised by the OECD, based on “consensus-based ‘soft’ regulation” (Marcussen, 2004, p. 31), which should be understood within the framework of the new modes of governing, which are backed up on the management of supranational information (Rinne *et al.*, 2004, pp. 455-456).

Making it possible to identify problems which help to legitimise it, PISA adapts to the contexts, is appropriated by the governments and is re-politicized, in line with a pre-existing agenda. The setting of the agenda emerges as a mode of regulation (Jacobsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2006, pp. 255-256) and the policy decision process acquires new configurations, perceptible in the different forms of organising the political relationships, involving a renewal of the foundations of political legitimacy itself.

The high degree of expertise that is behind the survey seems to point in the direction of a tecnicization and de-politicization of public action (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2004, p. 367), making the government’s mission easier, as it enables more comfortable justification of pre-existing political options. Moreover, its alleged credibility and neutrality aids governments to emphasise the urgency of the governmental measures it wishes to implement and helps lend solidity to the arguments used.

We are witnessing a decline in political regulation, in favour of more emphasis on the information that the instrument supplies and on criteria of a more incremental and pragmatic nature (Costa, 2009); which represents a certain de-politicization of the policy decision process, grounded especially on data and numbers, and not so much on policy decision making of a more ideological nature.

However, while it is true that the technical sophistication of PISA contributes to diminishing the political dimension itself, one has to take into account the values and visions regarding education that it embodies and question the political dynamics it hides. To sum up, behind the apparent neutral and factual behaviour of the instrument, collateral effects are established. As well as pushing political regulation somewhat into the background, one can glean the re-politicization of the instrument, as a result of the interrelation between the politicians’ agenda and the values, visions and directions that the instrument embodies.

In the final analysis, we are talking about a relationship that occurs between a re-politicization of the instrument and another one, of de-politicization of public action; the technical knowledge, backed up in educational policy, enables the substitution of the more ideological debate, giving way to the creation of policy decision processes based on technical information, data and numbers.

## ENDNOTES

1. Identified as E1.

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