

Knowledge, actors and policy

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ABSTRACT:

The involvement of different actors and different kinds of knowledge, in different scenes, is one of the features of all public action¹. In this case an analysis was carried out of the way the different actors (members of parliament, ministers, unions, working groups, press, schools) took part in the public action regarding school management and the reinforcement of the autonomy of pre-school, primary school and secondary school establishments in Portugal between 1986 and 2009. The intention is to illustrate through the analysis how the articulation takes place between knowledge and policy and the central role of the actors in the process. The study was carried out as part of the *Knowandpol* research project.

KEYWORDS:

Educational Administration, Knowledge, “Knowledge based Policy”, Public action.

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between knowledge and policy tends to be seen as a relationship between “producers” (academics and specialists) and “consumers” (policy decision makers) which takes place either directly, or through middle men who circulate and work in the two “worlds”. Therefore, politicians have to base their decisions on evidence (evidence based policy) and scientists have to produce useful knowledge for action, often promoting what Correia (2001, p. 31) calls, in the case of education, the “methodological simplification of the ontological complexity of educational action”. The failure of this relationship is usually attributed to the following factors: lack of rationalisation (by the politicians); lack of pertinence (by the researchers); shortfalls in the process of dissemination and capturing of knowledge by both parties.

The existence of a linear, causal and one-way relationship that underpins the approaches mentioned above is one of the presuppositions of the traditional studies of “knowledge based policy” in which the knowledge is considered a resource, or a way of legitimising policy decisions, in order to “rationalise” the working relationships between the knowledge producers and the policy producers (Callon *et al.*, 2001).

A different perspective is advocated in this article. The “knowledge” is seen, rather, as an essential component of “policy” (and vice-versa) meaning that what is in question is, above all, the reciprocal

production of meaning and the use of the knowledge as a regulation tool (“knowledge based regulation tools”)². Therefore, instead of talking about “knowledge based policy” we should talk about “knowledge transformed by (into) policy”, which, in a “public action” perspective, means knowledge that result from the interaction among different actors, at different levels of action. The knowledge does not “hover” above the politicians waiting to be “captured” by the “decision makers”. It is produced, apprehended, transformed, transported and applied, by actors who are committed to a specific public action. The incorporation of knowledge in public action is therefore simultaneously a cognitive, political and social process that implies a transformation of the knowledge itself and the very actors in the different scenes they are involved in.

This theoretical perspective is a consequence of the reflection produced within the scope of the Knowandpol³ research project, the overriding purpose of which is to describe and analyse the role of the knowledge in the construction and regulation of the public education and health policies in Europe. Within the scope of the aforementioned project a study was carried out by the Portuguese team on school management policies and the reinforcement of the autonomy of the pre-school, primary and secondary school teaching establishments in Portugal between 1986 and 2009⁴. The analysis adopted the conceptual framework of the Knowandpol project, by approaching the policy from the perspective of public action which is not centred exclusively on

State intervention and its administration, but takes into account the diversity of the scenes and actors involved in the policy process, at different levels, as well as their multiple interdependencies. The main aim of the study focused on the articulation between knowledge and public action and was developed through the following analytical dimensions: the actors and their narratives (who are they, what do they say, what scenes do they act in, how do they act, how do they describe the policies, what do they know, or say they know, what ideas circulate, are adopted or are rejected, where and by whom, etc.); the interaction between knowledge and public action (how do the different ideas and the knowledge, whether scientific or non-scientific, circulate and structure the formulation and implementation of the policies, and what is the influence of the power relations in this process, what is the role of the knowledge in the regulation of the policies).

In line with this reference framework, and in the case of the public action under analysis, the methodology adopted combined the extensive and intensive approaches, essentially using document analysis techniques and interviews.

The extensive approach was used, above all, to compile a general description of the emergence and development of the policies related to school autonomy and management in Portugal, from a holistic and diachronic perspective.

The intensive approach was used to analyse the case studies or critical episodes, in order to understand the specificity, in this public action, of the articulation between knowledge and policy and the action of given categories of actors, located in different scenes and decision-making bodies: the parliamentary debate between 1986 and 2008⁵; the debate in the *Público* newspaper on the legislative process that gave rise to the passing of Decree-Law 75/2008; the implementation and negotiation with schools of the autonomy contracts⁶.

This article gives an interpretative summary of the kinds of knowledge used by different actors in this process, in particular the articulation between the academic knowledge produced within the scope of Education Sciences in the policy decision-making process⁷.

Academic knowledge, particularly research knowledge, seems to have had little impact on the public action process regarding school autonomy and management. As with Education Sciences in general, this is due to the “problematic status, from the scientific point of view, of the research conducted in this field”, as referred by Van Zanten (2006, p. 261). Furthermore, research in the field of education is regarded as being unsuitable for accommodating the needs of both policy makers and practitioners, owing to “generally low levels of research capacity, especially in quantitative research” and “weak links among research, policy and innovation” (OECD/CERI, 2007).

Thus, it is not surprising that few references to studies in this field in Portugal or abroad emerge in the analysis of parliamentary debates, the discourse of the various interviewees, or information disseminated by the media. On the one hand, most of the arguments used to justify or criticise the political measures adopted in this field are primarily based on opinions backed up more by beliefs than actual evidence. On the other hand, the knowledge that is actually expressed stems from a variety of sources, namely “state knowledge” and “practical knowledge”, according to the types of actors and scenes around which it circulates.

We will now go on to present a brief characterisation of the types of knowledge and other justification modalities that may be identified in the various public action scenes under study: parliament; ministers of education; working group; teacher unions; press; schools.

MPS

An analysis of the various parliamentary debate speeches on school autonomy and management does not bring to light direct evidence of specific knowledge used by MPs to orient/determine their political action as far as this issue is concerned. However, on the basis of units content analysis where MPs set out to argue in favour of or against the measures or proposals under discussion, a number of justification types may be identified:

- *Legal*, when MPs base justification on adherence/non-adherence to the legislation in force (e.g. LBSE, Constitution of the Republic).
- *Ideological*, when they base justification on political and ideological values and principles (e.g. respect for democracy, importance of participation, equal opportunities).
- “*Good practices*”, when they base justification on the need to follow “good” foreign examples (“democratic countries”, “Anglo-Saxon countries”, LODE [school-based management and education reform in Spain], etc.) or national examples.
- *Technical and Scientific*, when justification is based on studies and findings of a technical and/or scientific nature (e.g. improvement, quality, efficacy, etc.).
- *Truisms*, when justification is based on “common sense” generalizations and undemonstrated evidence (e.g. “good sense”, “evidence”, etc.).
- *Experience*, when justification is based on the concrete or general experience of practitioners, professionals or citizens.

Such justifications usually take on a kind of intuitive “tacit knowledge”, frequently based on the professional experience of former teacher MPs, or stemming from their connections with other professionals in the sector (particularly members of their party) and, on occasions, university experts.

Sometimes justifications are based on specialized legal knowledge, particularly in relation to the hermeneutics of legal texts and their compatibility with the various decrees. The fact that a large number of law graduates are among the MPs is proof of this and often gives rise to criticism of political choices based on technical arguments.

The influence of foreign models (and the reinforcement of a transnational regulation) may be observed in the reference to what goes on in other countries. Nevertheless, the use of such examples is based neither on concrete, explicit facts nor deductive knowledge (based on the rationalisation of facts), but rather on authority arguments, in line with the relevance of the countries used as examples. References are seldom made to government commissioned studies and even less so to their authors. They generally focus on very generic arguments, with rhetorical functions to stress

or legitimise a supposed rationality of decisions already made or long defended positions.

To sum up, it would be fair to say that the register used in parliamentary debates is not particularly propitious to the mobilisation of “rational”, scientifically grounded knowledge. Parliamentary rhetoric gives priority to ideological dimensions, macro-political conjecture, conflicts based on interest and the impact on the mass media. Even when academic or scientific knowledge is mobilised in the discourse of MPs, it is not conveyed in explicit knowledge, but rather in general frames of reference for the construction of an opinion, the defence or criticism of a policy. The dominant way of thinking is more speculative than reflective, more intuitive than rational. Nevertheless, this discourse contrasts with the constant, recurring criticism put forward by the MPs of various parties, of governments’ decisions to alter “management models” without having evaluated the application of the previous model. Such criticism equally conveys perception, on the part of policy-makers, of a deficit in scientific research, in evaluation studies (particularly those of a quantitative nature) which make it possible to “measure” the effect of policies on the functioning of the education system.

MINISTERS OF EDUCATION

The relationship between knowledge and policy is viewed by the interviewed ministers in an instrumental way, from the perspective of a “knowledge based policy.” In this context, the problems are always seen as a result of a mismatch between supply and demand. As stated by David Justino, Education minister: “(...) let us say there is a part of policy-making that is lacking in grounding and based primarily on intuition, since the actual studies that exist either focus on something else or do not provide suitable answers”.

This binary conception of the relationship between knowledge and policy is at the root of the widespread criticism the ministers interviewed make concerning the existing scientific production, especially as regards Education Sciences. The declarations transcribed below show that what is in question is not so much the merit or lack of merit of the scientific production (although this is also mentioned), but rather its usefulness.

As far as Education Minister Júlio Pedrosa is concerned, this deficit stems, mainly, from the fact that the universities are not “an autonomous, independent, free and knowledgeable voice that public opinion recognises when they speak”. He goes on to add “there is no knowledgeable, informed, coherent and consistent discourse to explain the meaning of things to us”. Education Minister David Justino has exactly the same position and, with regard to the existing knowledge on school autonomy, affirms that “it is extremely rare” and “there is a need for greater output, namely in terms of empirical research.” However, he believes that “as far as political discourse analysis is concerned, there are known things and “great advances”, but “research still needs to be carried out.”

David Justino goes on to say that this deficit is aggravated by a lack of quality and usefulness of much of the academic output in this field. In order to illustrate this fact, he says that one day he ordered a collection of all the books published by the Institute of Educational Innovation⁸. “Three boxes of books were delivered and I took them all home over the weekend and started to browse through each book, one at a time. I’d look at the index, conclusion, see what it was composed of, what methodology was used. There were only 3 or 4 decent books discussing important issues in those three boxes”. According to the minister, the problem had nothing to do “with the scientific or academic quality”, but rather with the contributions such literature made to policy making: “what does this actually clarify for me? What contribution does it make towards my being able to think about things? I must say I was hugely disappointed”.

However, as far as the specific field of Education Sciences is concerned, the Education Minister, Maria de Lurdes Rodrigues is of the opinion that one of the main negative aspects results from the fact that the texts produced in this area are generally “hyper-critical, hyper-destructive and hyper-corrosive”. “The most shocking argument is sought after”, but also “total insensitivity to the facts” may be observed, as if the facts were irrelevant. Now, “when the fact is irrelevant we are no longer talking about Social Sciences, we are talking about something else”. She does, however, confess that in spite of everything, these sciences continue to inspire her and “useful

contributions and texts are constantly emerging”. She ends by referring to the huge discrepancy between what goes on “abroad” as “we still have a very restricted critical mass”. Such criticism is so extensive due to the fact that, unlike Sociology, for instance, Education Sciences have manifested a lack of “availability in the support and definition of public policies”. According to the interviewee, this is the result of a predominantly “critical spirit” which she regards as being important so as to guarantee distance, but when cultivated “generally means that it is completely inconsequential to the attribution of public policies and “may, indeed, be of no use whatsoever”.

As for the Education Minister, Marçal Grilo, although he did not refer to this fact in the interview, he has also tried to distance himself from this disciplinary area in a number of public statements: “I am not a big fan of Education Sciences and the people involved in this area know that this is what I say, have always said and will continue to say” (Grilo, 2004, p. 116).

Finally, it is worth stressing two inferences that can be drawn from the impact the above mentioned criticism has on the circulation of knowledge between the political field and the academic field:

- There is a clear desire, on the part of the interviewed ministers, for the research agenda, in the field of education, to be subordinated to the needs and demands of the political agenda. This misalignment between the two agendas is at the root of a growing tendency to use specific studies commissioned by the government (giving priority to certain items and authors), as well as a reinforcement of data collection and process centres within the government or under its control.
- Despite an abundance of specialized literature in this field, namely within the scope of the public action under study, the knowledge included in these texts is not, in general, considered useful by the policy makers. If, on the one hand, this may be connected to the “quality” of the work produced (which is variable and often the object of criticism in the field of Education Sciences, itself), the main argument put forward is based on the fact that such research uses mainly qualitative methods, adopts a critical epistemology and

does not contribute to “problem solving.” This fact leads to the assumption that there is “important academic knowledge” that is not used in policy making (with regard to Education ministers), since it neither adapts itself to their procedural models nor to the problems considered the most important.

TEACHER’ UNIONS

The data gathered regarding the intervention of the unions in the public action under analysis is not sufficient to describe in detail the modalities of knowledge that their action encompasses. However, the intervention of the unions in this process is marked above all by the different political-ideological conceptions that divide the two teachers’ union federations. It is pointed out, however, in both cases, that a lot of weight is attached to the teachers in the construction of the reference points that guide the union intervention, both those who exercise management positions and those who are subordinated to them.

The use of academic knowledge is visible in the participation of the different researchers and higher education teachers, with work produced in this area in several events organised by the union federations to discuss the issue of school autonomy and management. This presence is also visible in the union press (especially FENPROF) which sometimes uses studies carried out by these experts to back up the opinions it defends. Many of these researchers and teachers also take part at different times and with different governments, in committees or working groups to support the policy decision on this matter. As is evident, in both cases, this kind of specialised knowledge is always used in line with positions previously adopted by the respective union leaders. However, albeit in less significant dimensions, it sometimes becomes perceptible throughout the process that there is a degree of inflection and adjustment that reflects the influence of studies or positions advocated by some of these academics. As one of the union representatives interviewed says on this topic: “(...) we also incorporate into the positions, into the proposals, part of the research that is carried out. Especially as we often feel the need for some scientific credibility as regards some of the things we argue for; it does not have the same force

if there is no researcher backing it up at another level, does it?”

As well as this academic knowledge, the union organisations organise surveys with the teachers and school managers, aimed at justifying their results and positions.

It is also pointed out that, at times, the union federations run training courses for their members or teachers in general, which the FNE has been particularly active at doing, building links with a higher education institution for this purpose. The presence of academic knowledge in the union action is also visible through the post-graduate training in the domain of Education Sciences (at PhD and Masters levels) of some union leaders and activists, which in addition to the contribution of specific theoretical knowledge, also allows the creation of networks among higher education teachers and these activities with medium and long-term effects.

A final note is pointed out concerning the knowledge that the unions have acquired over the last two decades in terms of legal aspects and school management practices. This knowledge means that often, and regardless of the opposition to the ministerial proposals, the unions are an important “resource” in the legislative production. In truth, during the negotiating process, the union representatives (whose continuation in the process is much higher than that of the government members and their advisors) guarantee know-how about the legal issues and practices that prove decisive in the drawing up of the various decree-laws, even if they do not support the final version.

WORKING GROUPS

The working groups created by the Ministers of Education, within the scope of the public action under analysis, were to produce knowledge that could be mobilised in the policy decision process. This knowledge could be linked both to the “diagnosis of the situation” and the identification of problems and proposed solutions, or to the assessment of the implementation of the decrees, or monitoring the experiences or innovative situations. For this purpose the working groups can be grouped into three kinds of actors: teachers with experience in school management; senior staff of the educational administration; higher education teachers who have done

research in the area of educational administration. This categorisation of actors assumes the valuing of the three different types of knowledge: practical knowledge, state knowledge, scientific knowledge. It is pointed out, however, that there is no automatic transposition between the results of these working groups and the final decrees that are produced. In truth, in all the situations analysed the policy decision occurs in a different panorama, restricted to the members of the government and their advisors, who are responsible for negotiating with the different social forces (unions, parties, interest groups) in order to arrive at compatibility among the proposals presented by the working groups and the policy aims and strategies of the government. This means that, in relation to the knowledge available, two filtering devices become available in this relationship between knowledge and policy. The first derives from the selection criteria of the working groups (based on personal and/or political confidence, and/or on the convergence of opinions). The second results from the filtering that the members of the ministerial offices or state secretaries carry out of the various proposals in line with the beliefs, ideas and interests of the government for the sector.

Regardless of the greater or lesser contribution that these working groups make to the final decision, it is important to recognise that their function is split essentially into two domains: practical experience and scientific credibility. In the first case an attempt is made to seek specialised knowledge that guarantees the congruence of the solutions with the “reality on the ground” (of the administration and the schools). In the second case an attempt is made to guarantee the legitimacy of the solutions because they are based on the academic and scientific knowledge. In either case, there is an underlying conception of a political rationality based on the idea that it is necessary to first collect the information so that one can subsequently decide, even if this decision is, essentially, taken in advance and only the information that is in accordance with what is decided is taken into account.

As is obvious in the results on the different working groups activity, that were analysed, there is an important influence of the contribution of the knowledge produced by researchers and higher education, both directly because they take part in

the working groups, and indirectly because the function attributed to the working groups consists, essentially, in implementing the proposals drawn up in advance by these experts. One of the reasons for the coexistence, in the working groups, of different actors and knowledge may result from the aim to anticipate and solve potential conflicts in perspectives and approaches (like the “opposition” between theory and practice), in a search for more “consensual” solutions adapted to the diversity of the existing situations.

THE PRESS

The data gathered in the study carried out on the *Público* newspaper on Decree-Law no. 75/2008, enables one to perceive the diversity of knowledge and actors that circulate in this domain, in the media. On the one hand, this knowledge results from the privileged role attributed to the Ministry of Education officials and the Teachers’ Unions as the source of information and the public voice regarding this process. On the other hand, the knowledge mobilised derives from the editorial line adopted by the newspaper (which takes a formal standpoint on this matter against the proposals of the government) and which is translated not only in the editorials written by its editor, but also in the positions adopted by the permanent commentators who opine on the issue. The opening up to other kinds of actors and knowledge only comes about in the “letters to the editor”, in some opinion pieces about the draft decree, among a set of experts, or in the audience given to the chair of the National Educational Council.

One has to point out that, in general, the journalistic work carried out regarding the preparation of this legislative decree was poorly informed given the low level of explicit knowledge based on the practice of the professionals (in the schools or in the administration), on academic knowledge, or on the experience of other countries. In most cases, what predominates are opinions inspired on political or ideological conceptions about the purposes of education and the start of its governability whereby school autonomy and management would be mere tools of its execution.

It is also pointed out that in some editorials and opinion articles there is a recurring criticism of the “education sciences” and the influence held by the

experts in this area in the policies of the education ministry, as well as use of the “foreign example” argument to criticise the measures proposed by the government.

THE SCHOOLS

The process of negotiating the autonomy contracts between technicians of the regional education boards (decentralised structures of the Ministry of Education) and the management of the schools constituted a moment of confrontation of ideas and knowledge about the limits and means of autonomy of the schools. The knowledge mobilised by the Ministry of Education was above all of a legal nature and its purpose was to identify the limits that the legal framework imposed on the schools’ intentions regarding autonomy. The knowledge mobilised by the schools was based on the practical experience of the school managers and its purpose was to show the need for original and flexible solutions, even if they did not fit into the existing legal framework. As is obvious, and as recognised by the different interviewees, the differences between the knowledge matched the differences in the powers and ended up being solved, not in line with rational criteria, but rather in line with criteria of authority.

The contracting process, as mentioned earlier, also involved heavy participation of some experts coming from higher education institutions which constituted the School Autonomy Development Project Working group, coordinated by João Formosinho from Minho University. This working group oversaw the introduction of some theoretical issues in the framework of the contracts, relative to the public service mission of the schools, as well as issues regarding the methods used to diagnose or plan through objectives. This is one of the main domains in which the autonomy contracts affirmed themselves as regulatory tools based on knowledge. The signing of the autonomy contracts forced the school management to change a lot of their intuitive practices, based on the preparation of the educational projects and to introduce innovation and change into the schools. The conceptualisation and modelling of the contracts by the Working group, in articulation with the Ministry of Education’s office and the Secretaries of State, forced the schools to adopt planning methods,

to use statistical data (supplied by the central administration), to define priorities, resource management rules which in general require knowledge about the public education service and school organisation and management, which did not exist in the schools.

Paradoxically, the contracts implemented to consecrate autonomy turned into a control tool (legal and procedural) that often led to constraints in the initiative of the schools. The contracts forced the schools to adopt a “technical” and “legal” approach that they were not used to and to carry out collective learning in these fields, replacing “what I want to do” (of the “clandestine autonomy”) with the “what I have to do” (of the “contracted autonomy”).

The analysis carried out on the contracting process is enlightening with regard to the circulation of knowledge generated by this process, both at the core of the multidisciplinary teams created in the Regional Education Departments, and inside the very working group, among the experts, technicians and practitioners. This circulation of knowledge is made easier by (and is dependent on) the sporadic changes in the bureaucratic regulation processes, which are still prevalent in the administration, through the creation of post-bureaucratic structures (the “project teams”), thus replacing “regulation through rules” with “regulation through results” (assessment of the contracts), and by broadening the decision-making process to a greater diversity of actors.

In this particular aspect one has to underline the fact that the experts’ knowledge is more evident and influential at the start of the contracting process, when the schools define a general diagnosis framework and what they intend to do upon gaining autonomy. However, as the process is formalised towards a contract to be signed by the administration, the legal knowledge of the technicians of the regional education department play a bigger role. Nevertheless, the final word is given by the political power (Minister of Education and her advisors) who, in the final instance, decide in line with rational criteria which may be completely unconnected to the scientific or technical knowledge mobilised previously.

IN CONCLUSION

The involvement of different actors and different kinds of knowledge, in different scenes, is one of the features of all public action. In this process it is natural that actors with different interests and points of view, and acting in “different scenes” do not produce and do not use the same knowledge. This diversity is, very often, a source of conflict and dispute, as shown in the case of public action on school autonomy and management, in Portugal.

As we saw, one of the main conflicts concerning the knowledge that is mobilised and registered by the different actors in the case under analysis results from the lack of common ground between the “supply” existing in the academic world of Education Sciences, in the Educational Administration Area, and the “demand” by the Ministry of Education staff for “useful” knowledge to guide the policy decision. On the one hand, the academic production is dominated by a critical perspective that is heavily influenced by the sociology of organisations (“sociology of the school”) and by the political study to educational phenomena. On the other hand, the Education Ministers call for the need, above all to undertake “evaluation research” studies, in order to identify “problems” and to formulate decisions. This mismatch (which is a source of potential conflicts) is further accentuated by the fact that the “timing” of the academic research is very often not compatible with the “timing” of the policy decision, which causes dissatisfaction as it was described in the report about this matter.

Obviously, these differences in opinion (potentially antagonistic) are not always translated into expressed conflicts, and there is sometimes an attempt at convergence (or at least joint mobilisation) of knowledge woven to the different scenes of public action. This is the case, for example, of the creation (on the initiative of the Ministers of Education) of committees or taskforces to support for decision making and which brings together different kinds of actors (academics, school managers and civil servants, at central or regional level). These taskforces sometimes produce “hybrid knowledge” that mixes scientific approaches inspired on “new public management”, “bureaucracy”, “pedagogy”, “organisational analysis” and “studies on schools

effectiveness”, etc, and which simultaneously cross-reference “academic” knowledge with the knowledge derived from the practices of actors, from given policies and from the legal-administrative framework, as it was particularly visible in the negotiation of the “autonomy contracts”.

While these knowledge conflicts were evident as regards the articulation between the academic environment and the Ministry of Education decision makers, they also emerged in other scenes (deliberative and non-deliberative) where the public debate was played out concerning school autonomy and management, especially in Parliament, newspapers, “talk events” and higher education institutions. This debate included the mobilisation of a wide range of knowledge and actors, although it was common for the same actors to take part (above all certain academics and specialists) in different debates and in different scenes.

As we saw, the kind of knowledge that was mobilised in these debates is wide-ranging but the use of scientific knowledge is extremely scarce.

In the case of Parliamentary debates, the MPs (who participated in the plenary meetings where this theme was addressed) only rarely made general references to studies or experts to back up their criticism or proposals, and never presented information or data derived from studies of a scientific nature or to studies produced by experts. Their interventions were mainly supported by beliefs and ideas generated by their ideological convictions or by political party strategies. The argument in favour or against the proposals of the various governments and parties was often based on foreign examples or on experiences of teachers or schools, but with no reference to empirical data or to evidence.

As far as the press is concerned, the aforementioned newspaper case highlights the existence of an “advocacy coalition” which defends positions favouring “school choice” by families, “vouchers”, the creation of “education markets”, professional management, etc, and these are expressed through editorials, opinion articles, interviews, reports and letters to the director. In these type of texts the arguments put forward tend generally to refer to a technical rationality (supposedly neutral from a political point of view) and that would separate “right” from “wrong” and “good policy” from “bad policy”.

Nevertheless, in this case the use of studies and information grounded in research or academic knowledge is reduced and even more so if it is knowledge from “Education Sciences”.

Talk events are the public space where by its nature it is possible to find the highest number of references to studies and to research produced by academics or by experts. Testimonies from those with school management responsibilities that refer to practical knowledge derived from their personal experiences or from the knowledge produced in their post-graduate studies are also frequent at these events.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that the public debate promoted by higher education institutions (per se or in articulation with professional and scientific associations) is relevant, but not many initiatives have been organised (since there aren't also many institutions). It is in this type of event that we find the highest concentration of people and texts related to research and specialized knowledge production. However, one cannot exactly say that there is a debate (the confrontation of ideas within this academic and scientific community is reduced), but rather a combined presentation of studies, findings and different points of view.

A final word must be mentioned about the impact that the growing use of “scientific evidence” as a means of legitimisation or information for the decision maker (“knowledge or evidence based policy”) has on the increased political conditioning of the scientific production itself. This conditioning exercises its influence on the topics that are studied (quality assessment, leadership effects, effectiveness of management models, good practices, international comparisons, etc.), on the methodologies adopted (operational research, input-output analyses, extensive studies, use of indicators, etc), and on the presentation of the results (short reports, containing little “theory” and geared towards the identification and solving of problems).

However, as the ministers interviewed said, the characteristics of the academic production in Education Sciences, in the area of Educational Administration, has not shown itself to be “suitable” for problems that they deem to exist and which have to be solved. Therefore, after an initial phase, in which the drawing up of the legislation was preceded by prior studies carried out by specialists and university teachers (albeit with the collaboration of ministerial officers), one has recently witnessed the temptation to create, in the Ministry of Education, a “techno-structure” able to produce its own “state knowledge”, which is compatible with the “needs” of the Ministry of Education (see Barroso *et al.*, 2008). This knowledge is based, above all, on “evaluation research” and on the recognition of the “good practices” (Lessard, 2008, pp. 562-563) and very often involves different disciplinary areas to Education Sciences (statistics, company management, social psychology, etc). In this process we are not in the presence of a mere “transfer of knowledge”, but rather the creation of applied transdisciplinary knowledge. Or, as Nassehi puts it (2008): “We are increasingly aware that we are in the presence of a transformation process, more than a transportation process” (n.p.).

As such, on the one hand there is knowledge that is produced and is not used by decision makers in the Ministry of Education (either because it does not “converge” with the political orientations, or because it is excessively critical or not able to be put into practice). However, this same knowledge can be used to guide the intervention of the unions, schools and experts in the public action process. On the other hand, there is a “lack of knowledge” that is at the heart of the specific jobs commissioned by the Ministry (but also by the unions and other associations) and which is at the origin of the creation of its own centres of knowledge production within the techno-structure of the Ministry of Education.

ENDNOTES

1. This text is an adapted and enlarged version of the talk given in the “*Research in Education between the social, the professional and the political*” panel during the Research Forum on Education Sciences held in the Education Institute of Lisbon University, on 17 October 2009.

2. See among others, on this point, Pons and van Zanten (2007).

3. The *KNOWandPOL* project — “*The role of knowledge in the construction and regulation of health and education policy in Europe: convergences and specificities among nations and sectors*” — is a research project funded by the European Union within the scope of the “Sixth Framework Programme Research, Technological Development and Demonstration — Priority 7 — Citizens and governance” and includes 12 research teams from 8 countries (Germany, Belgium, France, Hungary, Norway, Portugal, United Kingdom, Romania), distributed in the sectors of health and education. The Portuguese team is coordinated by João Barroso, full professor at the Education Institute of Lisbon University, and includes the professors Luís Miguel Carvalho, Natércio Afonso, from the same Institute, the research scholarship students Estela Costa (PhD) and Carla Menitra (masters), as well as collaboration from professors António Nóvoa and Rui Canário. The students who attended the 1st course (2005/06), and 2nd course (2007/08) and the 3rd course (2009/10) of Advanced PhD Training in Education, specialist area of Educational Administration and Policy, run by the Education Institute of Lisbon University, carried out their research projects on the same topic and in articulation with the *KNOWandPOL* project.

4. The study gave rise to a report (Barroso & Menitra, 2009), the English version of which can be found on the project website www.knowandpol.eu. A summary of this study and its main findings was published in Barroso, 2009.

5. The analysis of the parliamentary debate was carried out by Carla Menitra (scholarship researcher of the project) and gave rise to a Master’s dissertation (Menitra, 2009).

6. The study on the implementation and negotiation of the autonomy contracts was carried out by José Hipólito within the scope of preparation

of his PhD thesis in Education, in the specialist area of Educational Administration and Policy, at the Education Institute of Lisbon University.

7. The data was compiled from the analysis of 624 units of content analysis selected from 86 plenary sessions of Parliament and the analysis of 18 interviews carried out (4 ministers of education; 4 members of working groups; 4 miscellaneous participants; 6 direct actors in the negotiation process of the autonomy contracts. For further information see the methodological annex that is part of the Report on the study (Barroso & Menitra, 2009).

8. The Institute of Educational Innovation was a Ministry of Education office that published a collection of educational research and innovation studies. It was made up of academic work produced in the context of Master or PhD examinations or by research reports, many of which financed by the Institute itself.

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