

Internal assessment of schools and circulation of public policies in a European educational space

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ABSTRACT:

This article presents guidelines of a study that proposes to obtain an understanding of the dissemination and use of the internal assessment devices of schools, as well as where they come from and how they are circulated as mechanisms of political regulation of the school subsystem, based on the analytical principle that guidelines of action implicitly contain a regulatory exercising of knowledge. Following the 2000 Lisbon Summit, the European Council established the target of making the education and training systems in the European Union “a worldwide benchmark as regards quality by 2010”, leading to the drawing up of a set of tools of public action in order to achieve this political goal. Among these devices, as the central object of study, was the emergence of internal assessment policies of schools, their dissemination, the adoption of international references and their relation with specialised knowledge in the framework of a European educational strategy.

KEYWORDS:

Public Policies of Education, Self-Assessment of Schools, Europe, Policy transfer.

INTERNAL ASSESSMENT OF SCHOOLS AS A POLICY STRATEGY

In the context of the European Union (EU), modernisation and improvement in the provision of public services has been a topic expressed at different institutional levels and the object of several recommendations by Parliament and the European Council. The declared goal is to change and rationalise the public management systems (Löffler, 2001; Lundgren, 2000), so that the quality of the services provided is reflected in the social fabric in a constructive manner towards a society geared for a knowledge-based economy. The educational systems and school subsystems occupy an especially important role¹. Portugal, as an integrated partner, has made an effort to achieve convergence, abiding by and seeking to implement different directives and recommendations from the supra-national authorities of the EU. This has led to policies that require public action instruments, such as the expression of a political goal, based on a transnational concept of quality gauged by references and the endeavour of consensual governance, grounded on the rationality of knowledge.

The most recent national public policies, focussing on the duties of the local administration of schools, have moved in the direction of progressive transfer of a set of management techniques, shifting powers or procedures from more centralised bodies to local territories, closer to the school management units, and on which they have a power to influence (Haecht, 1998). These changes in the mechanisms

of administrative regulation suggest a shift from the national “responsibility/accountability” centre to the local, together with a vast range of assessment tools of results, whereby diversity mobilises the respect for the European principle of subsidiarity.

Public schools are therefore exposed to the demands of adopting a regulatory proposal — using benchmarks as a standard, of national and transnational coverage — which value the need for self-assessment, having been simultaneously provided with a political justification and the suggestion of a means of local regulation (Mangez, 2001). Tracing this political goal in the widened EU space enables a different angle to the approaches of the educational policies, exploiting a field of studies that does not produce the “official” language of the European institutions but which adopts a multidisciplinary and critical perspective, based on a new theoretical attitude. Only as such can one deconstruct an appearance created by the amalgam of the official political discourse with that transmitted by the media and thus understand the new educational problems facing Europe (Nóvoa, 2002).

Most work carried out on school assessment instruments have focussed on the assessment apparatus itself and its qualifying capacity, not including the context of its application, its political meaning or an exploration through the genealogy of this specific means of regulation. To sum up, it is above all the *modus operandi* that attracts the interest of the researchers and local actors. In focussing the research on the sociology of public policies, guided

by the role that knowledge plays in defining these policies and the way the State uses the instruments of effective political action, this approach gives a differentiated perspective to the understanding of how knowledge becomes regulation, circulation and specific political action.

GENEALOGY AND TRANSFUSION OF EDUCATIONAL POLICIES SUSTAINED IN KNOWLEDGE

The adoption of common policies among States and the circulation of specialised knowledge is not an unprecedented phenomenon, especially in the educational field, either through curricular diffusion, the pedagogical discourses prevailing at different epochs or even among the models of composition and distribution of people and tasks in the school *locus* (Carvalho, 2005). There have always been domestic and foreign reference models but what distinguishes this current wave of globalisation is essentially the “compression” of time, due to the technological advances that have accelerated and multiplied the global communication possibilities, and consequent economic relations that this facility attracts (Bhagwati, 2005), and moreover the emergence of unprecedented potential in the constitution of networks in the digital medium that are able to act simultaneously, above all in a concerted manner (Castells, 2004; Stoer & Magalhães, 2003; Stone, 2000).

These new possibilities, indiscriminately labelled “globalisation”, have contributed decisively to a deep-rooted turnaround in the context of communication articulation out of which has emerged the paradigm of relations between the State and its citizens in post-war Europe. In the educational field, studies on the effects of globalisation have been undertaken in several forms, ranging from the work of John Mayer and the theories developed about the world mass school (Mayer, Kamens & Benavot, 1992), to the conjectures regarding the self-referencing systems (Schriewer, 2001), to the most recent propositions on the consequences of these effects in the building of a world educational culture (Dale, 2004).

The aforementioned need for reconfiguration, together with the economic constraints of the Social State, seem to have accelerated the urgency for re-

form in public policies, encouraging the trends that first sprouted in the New Public Management (Carvalho, 2001; Finger & Ruchat, 1997) with two clear characteristics that combine: one, the rapid circulation of enticing policies ratified by specialised knowledge; another the concerted political decision making at the heart of the EU (Radaelli, 2000).

Analysis of the public policies has paved the way for a new opening for political sociology and for understanding the nature and exercise of the State, bringing new possibilities for the study of construction of a given “order” in multiple-polar and consequently more complex societies. The cognitive approaches of public action are not restricted to a vision of social engineering geared towards solving practical problems but, following a different line, they view public policies as the vehicle of a framework for interpreting the world, with the epistemological root the questioning of the connections between political action and the construction of a renewed social order in a complex and widespread field, given that the exercise of governance is not confined to the processes of legitimisation and political representation (Muller, 2000a, 2000b; Surel, 2000).

In the last two decades analysis has been made of the choices and the evolution of educational policies that can be separated into three epistemological branches (see Gale, 2001; van Zanten, 2004): the perspectives deriving from the sociological and socio-economic models; the historical and socio-historical analysis and the analysis of the public policies. Although some authors adopt an analysis of the policies through the “public action” side, and prefer even this term to the label of “public policies”, this approach focuses on the results of the concrete application, involving not only the institutions but also the local actors and their representations, as well as the terminal contexts in which they occur and the kinds of solutions chosen for their practical implementation (Commaille, 2004; van Zanten, 2004).

The role of knowledge in political decision making has taken on growing relevance, not only through strengthening the grounding of the choices but also because of the need for public justification of the options made, which consecrates knowledge, even if not explicitly, as an instrument of influence and exercise of power. Its study must take into account that in these processes “knowledge about

policies, institutional administrative arrangements and ideas in a political system” is used in the development of the same scope of another political system (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000).

The conceptual approach that shapes this study is therefore based on a reflection about the theoretical constructions around a circulation of discourses and knowledge that influence one another and are transferred between the different social dimensions and between different societies. The object of analysis is centred on the relation between the knowledge and the production and political justification of instruments of political power and their trajectory from a supranational dimension to a national and local one.

For analytical purposes, the process of adopting policies is organised into four distinct phases (Phillips, 2004; Phillips & Ochs, 2003): (a) Cross-national policy attraction — which contains a drive and potential for externalisation, where the “impulses” correspond to a desire to adopt policies which reflect the motivations of the actors involved in the political process. This “attraction” can be interpreted as an international convergence, in accordance with a neo-institutional perspective, or, in the light of the theory of systems, as a competitive trend between States emphasising their differences. Motivations of attraction include factors such as the occurrence of a political change, a need due to the failure of policies already implemented, the negative assessment through international comparative analyses, compliance with transnational commitments, the evolution of knowledge and technologies, the desire for modernisation, etc. (b) Decision — consists of a set of measures through which the governments and agencies begin the process of adoption and change. (c) Implementation — a phase of adaptation of alien models to local contexts, which is very much dependent on the qualification and importance of actors with political weight in the decisions. (d) Internalization/indigenisation — when the policies adopted become an integral part of the national regulation, starting to produce effects on the pre-existing models.

Remodelling of political activity also calls for discussion of the questions related to the so-called governance (Bevir, 2003), which, despite the theoretical and semantic flexibility and proliferation of its use, is generally linked to the dispersion of the hierarchies and decision making bodies on ex-

tremely wide-ranging social grounds, consequently leading to the loss of influence of the central authority of the State and the elimination of political leaderships (Hooghe & Marks, 2001). The morphology of public exercising can also be seen as a set of policies ratified supranationally and organised in a network, with the EU a “factory” of policies that need to be expanded in the name of political cohesion and European integration (Hooghe, 1996).

The new forms of regulation and integration of these public systems become instrumental applications of processes of knowledge that act as comparison references and efficiency logics that influence the political decision (policy learning) (Ozga, 2006). Between the conception of public policies (policy-making) at a supranational dimension and the specific action in local contexts (policy implementation) a vertical circulation and translation of knowledge can be observed between the different levels of decision making and public action and a horizontal and mimetic expansion that translates the transnationality of the new modes of political regulation (Silva, 2006; Solaux, 2005).

In this theoretical background, the self-assessment of schools as a public regulation instrument is taken as the expression of references of knowledge that induce new modes of governance. The analysis of public action instruments exposes a political rationality present in the relationship between the governors and the governed, with each instrument considered a bearer of knowledge, a social power and a capacity to exercise (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2004). They are the instruments of production of social effects, which transport beliefs and civic values, i.e. the willingness to change the educational institutions in the EU has guided the stimulus of this instrumentality for the notions of competence and quality (Bovaird & Löffler, 2003), while the concern to ground the transnational legitimacy has led to the educational institutions having to bear responsibility for actively taking part in the construction of a European citizenship (van Zanten, 2004, pp. 66-67).

Standardisation, benchmarks or other quality indicators² are also instruments of public action insofar as they are bearers, on the one hand, of a form of knowledge about social power, and on the other hand they produce effects that do not always coincide with the intended goals. These references con-

stitute an instrument category emerging from relations of endogenous forces of civil society, endowed with legitimacy based on scientific and technical reasoning, supposedly reducing disagreement, and on a democratic rationality characterised by the derivation of work undertaken by the interested parties, grounded on scientific and technical data and supported by a consensus of voluntary application (Borraz, 2004). Hence, knowledge focussed on the performance of the schools is not exercised exclusively in a “technical” background: its dissemination also transports a regulatory potential that proposes alternative modes of regulation to the actors that replace the compulsion through persuasion and arise associated to an idea of quality and good practices in the provision of a public service. It is a regime that, as observed by Barroso (2005), substitutes direct and prioritised control of processes with a remote control, and, *a posteriori*, focuses on results.

TOWARDS TRACING THE POLICIES OF ACCOUNTABILITY OF SCHOOL ORGANISATIONS

It is hereby clarified that the proposed matter under study— although focussing on the issues of assessment and guidance towards quality — does not embrace speculative issues of a general quality concept nor the specificities of the so-called quality of teaching or overall education, tackling rather political regulation through the use of self-assessment instruments as a backup to the “quality management” demanded for schools (Bonstingl, 1996), in the background of the integrating construction of a European educational space (Lawn & Keiner, 2006; Nóvoa, 2002, 2005; Nóvoa & Lawn, 2002).

The internal assessment mechanisms are considered instruments of public action, not only owing to the local dimension where they are applied but also because they outline, through their indicators, a quality benchmark determined by a set of values established by the political domain and safeguarded by knowledge. This vision blends in with the definition of the public action instrument as “a device that is both technical and social, which organises specific social relations between the public powers and their targets in line with the representations

and meanings that it transports” (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2004, p. 13). As such, the self-assessment models of the teaching establishments constitute an ideal object of analysis regarding the influence of knowledge not only in the definition of the political agenda but also as the strategy of specific public action. This thematic and theoretical sketch enables the testing of some lines of research on the appearance and circulation of new forms of regulation and local accountability and the transformations in the structures of power in a background of reconfiguring the nature of the State and the construction and harmonisation of the educational spaces of the EU.

Also to be taken into consideration is the relationship between the knowledge that sustains the internal assessment indicators of the organisations and their instrumental expression, materialised in the configuration and application of the indicators that these tables give rise to, as well as the transnational dissemination of their references and methodologies. It is assumed that the table of quality indicators of an assessment instrument expresses values underpinning the political objectives, revealing the intended meaning of the modelling of the object where they are applied.

As a methodological instrument, the use of the interview, whether semi-directive, informative or retrospective, has become one of the most widely used tools in research into public policies, even under the different theoretical options adopted, becoming an essential practice to obtain qualitative data in social sciences (Bongrand & Laborier, 2005; Creswell, 2003). The target actors will be those that the literature deems elites, liable to favour the “importation/exportation” of political instrumentality: political and administrative staff, specialists, political parties and pressure groups, study groups, government institutions, to sum up bodies where the exchange and dissemination of ideas is made easier by the existence of informal networks of staff and specialists and policy makers, mobilised by a lack of satisfaction with the system in force and possessing alternative solutions (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000; Russel, 2004).

The zones of knowledge involved in the assessment instruments are associated to the definition and diffusion of quality standards, “good practices” or benchmarking, indicators, statistics, a whole vast range of references that intend to scrutinise and

statistically rank different local realities³, while the political dimension intertwines with the knowledge and the need to produce new modes of regulation associated with a justifying reasoning that reinforces the inevitability of its application. The knowledge would therefore be a compass of the political decision, combining public action with a political direction. It will apparently be cybernetic knowledge, making readings and interpretations of the local effects, collecting information and producing more knowledge, so as to suggest inflections and new justifications of action in the light of this new knowledge, intending as such to build a virtuous circularity.

The study was carried out along two analytical lines that corresponded to two moments of public action: production, as the genesis and learning and decision process that will embody a public action, and the circulation, as the disseminating effect of the political product through transfer phenomena (Steiner-Khamsi, 2002). A third moment, which corresponds to the reception through the sphere of the local actors will not be included in an in-depth manner, but only in possible connections concerning the two previous “times”.

In this background it is possible to outline the following main aims of this research:

1. Identification of the changes in the structures and means of exercising power as well as the relation between these mutations and the influence of the knowledge on the production of regulatory changes. This operational allomorphism cannot be separated from the transfer of knowledge inside the macro dimension of the political decision and under the mediation of intermediate bodies, between this level and the local contexts where the different strata of the institutions and autonomous actors interpret these decisions⁴.

2. Considering the circulation of knowledge between the centralised supra-national dimension, and its progressive national and local atomisation, it is necessary to map out the transfers of policies and their intersection with the knowledge, from the decision made to the instruments of regulation that it gives rise to, which enable the clarification of the learning and political interpretation mechanisms, as well as their effects on public action, i.e. identifying the origin, diffusion and influence of the knowledge in the local devices and regulation. According to

Dolowitz & Marsh (2000) to obtain this mapping it is necessary to determine the following variables, or questions within a question: a) What actors and institutions are involved in the policy transfer processes? Do they refer to governors, political parties, public sector managers, experts, international and supranational organisations (government and non-government), academics, etc.; b) What is transferred? Does it refer to political goals, ideologies, institutions, instruments, content or political programmes, frameworks of action, etc; c) How is political learning undertaken? Do they refer to the levels of governance that are the benchmark for other levels to adopt similar policies, grouping into international, national and local dimensions; d) Degrees of transfer. Does it refer to the type of grading of transfer, which can be categorised into emulation, copy, combination of political partialities or simple inspiration of action.

The analysis will be carried out in the political dimension, with institutions and political actors using qualitative interviews whose content will be compared with the written documentation (Muller, 2000b). With regard to the legal-normative aspect, a documental genealogical analysis will be carried out — legislation and operational regulation — of the quality assessment policies implemented for non-higher education public schools. In the supranational dimension of the political field, the normative production issued by the EU bodies will be analysed and the use of knowledge as an argument to backup political decision making (presidency, council and EU parliament, assessment and standards entities, OECD, IEA — International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement — academic and others). As regards the national dimension, the regulatory production shall be analysed of the bodies that interpret the supranational reference frameworks and which translate them, deciding on the suitable instruments of action (legislation and regulations, Ministry of Education and its regional agencies, Inspectorate-General of Education, National Administration Institution, scientific research and others).

It is therefore expected that a better understanding will be arrived at regarding the public policies of internal assessment of the school network and their links with European strategies of development that propose the implementation of a European educational space of excellence.

ENDNOTES

1. Cf. Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on European cooperation in quality evaluation in school education (2001). *Official Journal of the European Communities* (2001/66/EC). Education and Training for 2010 — The urgent need for reform for the success of the Lisbon strategy. Project of interspersed joint report of the Council and the Commission on the undertaking of the detailed work programme in relation to following the aims of the educational and training systems in Europe. (2004). (Vol. 6236/04 EDUC 32 + COR 1 — 14358/03 EDUC 168 — COM (2003) 685 final of 26 February): Council of European Union.

2. Cf. *European benchmarks in education and training: follow-up to the Lisbon European Council*. (Communication from the Commission — COM(2002) 629 final) (2002). Communication from the Commission — COM (2002). Brussels: Commission of the European Communities.

3. Cf. UE. (2004). *Key Data on Education in Europe 2005-List of indicators* (Meeting of the Education and Training Statistics Working Group No. Doc. ESTAT/D5/2004-ETS-06.01-EN). Luxembourg: European Commission-Eurostat.

4. See, for example: Law of the Assessment System of Education and non-higher Education — Law no. 31/2002 (2002).

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