

Self-assessment of schools and regulation of public action in education

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ABSTRACT:

Self-assessment of schools emerges in education policies in the background of new references and new instruments of governance, linked to concepts such as efficacy, efficiency and quality. However, other concepts are thrown into the mix, such as control, subjection, coercion, etc. Focusing on the contexts of action and assuming the diversity of the social constructions, the intention is to research their impact on the regulation of educational action, based on looking into the school organisations of public education schools within a theoretical interval that puts conformity and emancipation face to face.

KEYWORDS:

Public Policies of Education, Self-Assessment of schools, Regulation, Logics of Action.

STARTING POINT: THE INSTITUTED SELF-ASSESSMENT — WHAT CHANGES DOES IT BRING AND BUILD?

Our field of study will be the self-assessment of public schools and our starting point will be to seek to understand what effects have been and are being produced by the public policies in the “locus” they are aimed at, from a constructivist policy perspective, which separates it from the upper spheres of power and disseminates it in all spheres of action.

The dilemmas of decentralisation and autonomy, in tension with the challenges of the European community and globalisation, lead to the designing of a paradigm of governance at all levels of political decision making. Defined by Jessop (2003, p. 1) as the “complex art of directing multiple agencies, institutions and systems, which are simultaneously autonomous from one another and structurally grouped together through various forms of interdependence,” this governance requires that “the social partners commit themselves to self-regulation in conduct, in the name of a social project,” with the State functioning as a partner among others, legitimising itself in its capacity for “moral persuasion” and “mediation of the collective intelligence” (ibid., pp. 12-13).

The self-assessment of public schools regulated (and practically dormant) in law since December 2002 (Law no. 31/2002), is today a major issue, along with other measures of the package of “great changes”. Instead of universal regulatory control,

the option for positive discrimination is taken, with the existence of self-assessment devices one of the conditions to enter the ministerial pilot project of external assessment, which ran throughout the year of 2006¹ and is now being continued by the General Education Inspection Board². It has not yet been clarified how the inclusion of the schools in this External Assessment Programme will give access to the autonomy contracts, and hence the interest in wanting to apply. Regardless of the self-assessment device of the school, the framework of the Programme leads to the need for prior collection and analysis of data, which calls for the actors to implement internal systems that make this task viable. The pressure for self-assessment is therefore greater, intensifying the search for knowledge by the educational actors and also the offer of ready-to-use (and ready-to-buy) “models”. In tandem with this unifying movement focussed on controlling results, in the life of the schools other ideas and other practices are in place, deriving from histories and meanings constructed in differentiated contexts, either voluntarily or involuntarily, with a greater or lesser degree of cognitive support. One would assume that the meeting of these ideas would be reflected in the internal regulation of the schools, and consequently in the regulation of the educational action, and it is important to understand to what extent and how.

“To study the current practice which is at the same time cognitive, cultural and strategic, is to perfect our knowledge of organised human action” (Demailly *et al.*, 1998, p. 54). And in the Portuguese

case this work is yet to be done, which becomes even more important in such an open context of options riddled with contradictions. We believe it is important to produce knowledge not in an instrumental and pragmatic sense, telling schools what to do, but in a comprehensive sense, raising questions that increase the “critical reflection of the actors” (Martuccelli, 2002, p. 28) and which strengthen the cognitive aspect of the self-assessment and regulation processes. Furthermore, with studies located but inserted in an organised or global representation, they should make more sense for the actors, leading to better formulation and formalisation of the knowledge of experience and greater commitment in the action (*ibid.*, p. 34).

The chief purpose of the research will therefore be to obtain empirical data, in an intensive perspective, which taking into account the problem and in the light of the theoretical background which will be explained below, will contribute to a better understanding of the self-assessment processes and a questioning of their role as a social regulation tool, with all their potential to bring together and cross-reference knowledge, decision and action. This purpose also fits into the broader goal of contributing to setting out educational policies in the background of the new trends of the State and public action.

SUSTAINING THE PATH: GUIDE TO A PROBLEM

REFERENCES AND INSTRUMENTS IN THE RECONFIGURATION OF PUBLIC ACTION

The reference concept, which is central in one of the cognitivist approaches of public policy, describes the frameworks of representation and intelligibility of the world that sustain public policies and explain their changes. Muller (2003) proposed it as an answer to the question of the “order factory” in today’s complex societies, and the way they maintain a unity or identity, connecting the actors to the global structures of meaning that will condition and guide their action. This perspective, focussed more on unifying than fragmenting power, although it considers the coexistence and substitution of references, will help us to understand, for example, the predominance and dissemination of the neo-liberal and European references, in what is

usually labelled “contamination” or “borrowing” (Barroso, 2003, pp. 24-29)³.

Considering that the references match “the beliefs of the actors” and that they change when “they are no longer true, when they do not enable understanding of their connection to the world and how to act on it, when they are stripped of meaning” (Muller, 2003, p. 9), a generalised agreement of society is supposed — a global reference — or at least of the sector reference. How these references are constructed and are or are not generalised, and how the collective action is constructed in contexts of strong heterogeneity are the complex issues of this theorisation. Thinking of the schools, we can suppose misalignments of meaning are also produced in them, which lead to a change in the references, but also it is likely that the most obvious aspect is the coexistence of various references, some institutionalised to a greater or lesser degree by the historicity, others more fluid and recent. With regard to the self-assessment policies, easily read along the lines of these neo-liberal references and based on the idea of the need to obtain results, it is certain that others will be revealed and translated into action ideas that will influence in their effects. The global reference, or global references, should therefore influence not only the way of perceiving and living the assessment by the actors, but also in the very referencing of devices and tools.

The instrument concept will be another of our theoretical tools that, in analysing public policies, enables the false technical neutrality or scientific rationality to be revealed and even its power of coercion, albeit based on a negotiated elaboration. According to Lascoumes and Le Galès (2004), all instruments, as well as their pragmatic or administrative function, have symbolic functions of legitimising authority and axiologies or the transmission of values, therefore they imply political options. This incursion using the instruments accentuates the pragmatic aspect of the policies and their tendency towards stability, insofar as “the innovation lies not so much in creation but rather in the capacity to gather, in the recombination of techniques and in the production of minimal changes” (van Zanten, 2004, p. 26). The instruments, as institutions or “a set of rules and procedures coordinated to a greater or lesser degree that govern the interactions

and behaviours of the actors and the organisations” (Lascoumes, Le Galès, 2004: 18, p. 15), can be understood as being at the service of the reconfiguration of the State, which in giving the appearance of removing through the use of more informative and communicational and less directive instruments and more participatory regulation, gaining legitimacy, also gains control, imposing goals and strategies. The advantage of using the instruments is that they are relatively easy to access, in contrast to the references, whose relation to the learning processes and policy changes are much more distant.

In any event, both concepts — reference and instrument — play an important role in building the problem centred on self-assessment: should it be an instrument of public policy, or in a more constructivist reading, an instrument of public action (Duran, 1999, cited by van Zanten, 2004, p. 25) — the decentralisation and autonomy of schools; should it also be the translation and implementation of the dominant references, at the same time as political action in itself, adapting or recreating these references.

JOINT ACTION AND REGULATION LOGICS:

DYNAMICS OF CONFORMITY AND EMANCIPATION

Self-assessment can be questioned as a part of global political formulation, more paradigmatic or more incrementalist, but also as a political process in itself, localised organisationally, with *self-reference building* and *self-instrumentation*. We can consider the dominant references as backdrops representing the world, i.e. the problems and the conditions to overcome them, explicit or implicit in the political measures, subsequently translated into the *logics of action*, by cross-referencing with other references either already ingrained (institutionalised) or alternative (competitive).

Lise Demailly (1998) refers to the *four logics present in school assessment*: the persistent logic of the means; the logic of organisational modernism with a strong centrality and senior contracted teachers; the neo-liberal logic and the school market; the logic of the critical and democratising project, fighting against failure, through intra and inter-professional teamwork, with both central and local political regulation. In our case it seems clear that a centralising logic is followed, both through the articulation that is announced between exter-

nal assessment and self-assessment, and though the aforementioned articulation with the autonomy contracts. As for the others, regardless of whether they are explicit or implicit in the policy, what is important is their implementation in the contexts. Hence, from a strategic point of view, it is supposed that the meeting of different logics in an organisational context regulates and to a certain extent enlarges the rationality of action and its degree of satisfaction. However, problems remain with regard to regulation, above all in terms of effects, and especially in terms of the global social effects.

In view of the current public policies, the dichotomy between regulation of control and autonomy (Reynaud, 2003) will not prove much help in understanding the regulation. The regulation of control may well be based on autonomy and autonomy may well be based on the predominance of self-control. It seems to us therefore that any distinction made between regulations will benefit more from focusing on its goals and its effects than on its origin or its localisation in relation to the geography of power that is today so indistinct and so fluid. In this background of crossed political-social regulation, in which there is a play of references whereby the logics are implemented and the action is submitted to instruments, the overriding question seems to us to lie on the meanings that are attributed and fetched. And if all the regulation, like all social action, should have the two faces of Janus — that of control, stability, safety and that of autonomy, change, risk — it is important that its effect empowers and translates into effective change and wider social offers. In this “improvement” we include the economic aspects to boost resources, but also the human aspects to perfect justice and equality. We can therefore suppose two kinds of regulation — that of conformity and that of emancipation. The former has a resigned, constricting sense of “changing so that everything remains the same”; the latter has a sense of voluntarism, liberation, ongoing improvement. The question is what conditions favour one or other of these trends.

THE COMBINATION OF APPROACHES

FROM A CONSTRUCTIVIST PERSPECTIVE

We are not interested in evaluating the self-assessment, but rather its study as a social practice

and its potential to produce new representations and induce transformations. It is therefore necessary to focus closely and deeply on the contexts, specifically questioning what will escape any theoretical model, or rather, which of the several approaches should be combined. The strategic approach will be important to understand the plays of interest that are characteristic of any organisational context, deducing in its implementation a process of assessment. The cognitive approach will also be indispensable, with the assessment itself a process heavily rooted in knowledge and as this is one of the foremost aspects in the axis of analysis of its potential for transformation, as an instrument, which is also political, for construction of references that back up, but also liberate, the plays of interest. The institutional approach can also help in the reading of the history of some ideas, both in a sense centralised on the educational system and more decentralised on the specific organisations.

This positioning is justified for two orders of reasoning. On the one hand, as a study embedded on the analysis of public policies, accepting “intellectual transversality” and inter-disciplines (Baudouin, 2000), and hence “theoretical and methodological openness” to take “a different look over policies and the State, another way of seizing the political object to understand its functioning” (Muller, 2004, pp. 20-21), entering through the effects of the political action and not through the decisions, from which one questions the reasoning and the objective of solving problems (Muller, 2003). On the other hand, in giving preference to an inductive strategy, this does not lie well with the option through a theory, but only with “discreet paradigmatic references (...) jointly mobilising a kind of theoretical serenity” (Fabre, 2005, p. 190). We are therefore in the field of analysis of the public policies, in a constructivist perspective, which enlarges the looks and the readings of the political processes, combining macro politics with micro politics, i.e. “integrating the contexts of formulation and production and putting them into practice”, with the inevitable reinterpretation, adaptation and transformation of the policies (van Zanten, 2004, p. 14).

To sum up, in a constructivist perspective and in an attempt to cross-reference the approaches of the “three i’s” — interests, institutions and ideas

(Surel, 2004, p. 452), we intend to study the field of self-assessment of the schools as an instrument and political process, assuming that it can be central in the regulation of public action in education, comparing knowledge, power and desires, in a framework of development of collective competences, more able to meet the needs of the educational qualities required for a democratic construction.

ANCHORING THE STUDY: RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND STRATEGIES

The research problem is concerned with unveiling, analysing and interpreting the changes that take place in schools, with the introduction of a new political measure which serves as an instrument to change the policy of autonomy and management of the public schools. What is of interest to us is to understand the following two aspects: the cognitive and strategic component that guides the actions and the effects of these actions on the political and social regulation of the organisation. An effort to relate the nature of the political proposal to the conditions of its reception and development and to the effects it produces, is hence our research problem, translating the first lines of enquiry that will guide the research: what changes are perceived and lived in public schools as a consequence of introducing formal and institutionalised processes of self-assessment; to what extent and how does self-assessment serve as an instrument of horizontal and autonomous regulation of the school; what conditions favour a more conformist regulation or a more emancipating regulation.

The case study is the most suitable method to approximate an action context, above all when aiming to detect and describe organisational relations in a global perspective. Only in a case study can we gain access to the integral actors and their logics of action, as well as a global and complex context, in which one can observe the real effects of a policy, above all in the case we are studying which has a specifically organisational destination at its origin.

Reaffirming the inductive positioning and dependence on the empirical observations to analyse the policy and question theorists, i.e. removing the purpose of any broadened theorisation, we believe

it is methodologically pertinent to multiply the cases to be studied, based on the principal that it will widen the conditions that can influence the execution of this policy and its effects, making the data richer, conferring the analyses greater scope and making the interpretations more valid. We believe that three case studies will combine the aforementioned need to “ensure greater coverage and plausibility in the building of theories or more solid approximate generalisations” (Afonso, 2005, p. 72), with practical feasibility in accordance with the resources that may be available.

In choosing the contexts no special care will be taken in selecting samples, which makes no sense in this qualitative and interpretative positioning, but some criteria will be defined to aid the conditions to carry out the research, with regard to prolonged access and making open and voluntary collaboration easier.

To collect data a combined device is planned that allows a deep and at the same time broad focus on the logics of action, both in terms of discourses and perceptions, and in terms of concrete processes and undertakings. Hence, participant or semi-participant observation will be essential in gathering the data, but also as a strategy to prepare the ground in order to create a social relation of confidence. The collection and analysis of documents, likewise, will serve both the direct aim of collecting data, and preparation of the ground for the interaction, through contextualisation and questioning. Finally, the interview will be a central tool, structured to a greater or lesser degree in accordance with the positioning of the informer and questions that each respondent will be able to opine on. The “conversations with a purpose” (Burgess, 1997, p. 112) will hence be numerous and are likely to take multiple formats, in scope, amplitude and depth, taking into account the multiplicity of actors that are to be heard.

FREEING DESIRES IN SEARCH OF THE POSSIBILITIES

It is known that the “self” can be a prisoner and “dominator of souls”, substituting direct control with a “productive subjection” in the Foucaultian

sense (Clarke & Newman, 1997, p. 30). It is known how the growing “concrete individualism”, borne out of a weakening of the principle of authority (Vandanberghe, 2001, p. 115), presupposes more responsibility for the options. It has been shown how this spiral of control “from the exterior of the devices to the interior of people” (Mangez, 2001, p. 91) can cause suffering and solitude (Correia Matos, 2001) and together with the pressure for efficacy and efficiency, can lead to schizophrenia of performance, in which the subjects live their lives like “companies of oneself” (Ball, 2002). Some also draw attention to the “ideologisation of the scientific concept” in appealing for reflexive thought (Soleaux, 2005, p. 28), making cognitive competence more coercive than liberating. Others even link organisational learning to generalist technologies of control (Bolívar, 2000, p. 56).

However, with everything relative in the reading of the complexities that escape cause-effect relations, all these formulations can have their opposites. As studies have found in the area of assessment and organisational self-assessment, there are no perfect processes, or even perfect conditions that determine the success of these practices as an instrument of improvement. However, albeit theoretically, there are always the possibilities left for any process of social construction, above all when motivated by the need and by the desire for progress and not only an adaptation. This would equate to “changing what has to be done” or “doing something else”, instead of “changing the way of doing things” (Vial, 2001, p. 74). This author suggests the image of the spiral instead of the circle to refer to regulation — “a to-and-fro of the whole to the parts and the parts to the whole”; “passing from the level of things given, to the level of the transformation” (ibid., p. 74).

What one “glimpses” as a possibility in a process of self-assessment or school organisation is the “ideal” of integration of assessment into the political processes, which, in spite of everything, will always be of the schools, based on the starting point that it will also always be a process of building knowledge and hence a mirror of arguments for negotiation and for action. The “culture of assessment” can therefore be understood as an intrinsic process of construction, and not as a condition or goal of the assessment.

ENDNOTES

1. Joint Dispatch no. 370/2006, of 3 May.

2. In 2007 the 2nd phase of the programme was undertaken, involving 102 schools, and for 2007/2008 applications are now open for schools, limited to a total of 350 — information available at the IGE site.

3. The use of this theoretical tool does not cloud our awareness of the criticisms of these cognitivist perspectives, that have arisen in studies that show that “the cognitivist and normative references, instead of encompassing the institutional changes and relations of power, can be determined by them”, in “post-hoc rationalisations” (Surel, 2000, p. 509). Another criticism of the cognitivist and normative approaches of public policies is that they are closely intertwined with the functionalist perspective of integration, legitimisation of practices, production of identities and distribution of power, in the sense of managing social tensions (ibid., pp. 499-500).

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