

The Construction of the role of School Head in the local regulation of educational public policies

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ABSTRACT:

In this article, we deal with the school head as an object of educational policies within the context of changes occurring in the field of the regulation of public policies and State's regulation modes. These changes are connected to changes in school organization and management and, therefore, in the work of heads. From our point of view, changes in management enable us to understand the new modes of regulation. In this way, the analysis of changes in the processes of regulation of educational policies may be carried out via analysis of the changes in the interpretative schemes and guidelines for the heads' actions, which constitute elements of interpretation of such modes of regulation. The study project presented here analyses the school head as the object of the policy and public action starting with the question: "What are the roles of school heads and how are they constructed within the local regulation of educational public policies?". Therefore, we will examine different sources and tools for such a construction so as to describe and analyse both the referentials of head and of regulation of the public action, and the knowledge mobilized in this process.

KEYWORDS:

Educational Public Policies, School Administration, School Head, Regulation.

PRESENTATION OF THE PROBLEM AND THE FIELD OF STUDY

“Autonomy of schools only on paper”
(OECD, 2006, cited in ‘Público’, April 21, 2006).

“Schools should be granted more autonomy. The present is legal fiction.”
(CNE, 2007, cited in ‘Público’, March 7, 2007).

Throughout the last two decades, the so-called policies for strengthening the autonomy of Portuguese state schools have encountered difficulties in going beyond the discursive rhetoric, even when ratified by law. It is recognised that there is a world of difference between “decreed autonomy and autonomy in practice” (Barroso, 2005c). The above examples of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the National Council of Education (CNE) are only two of the more recent tallies of this extraordinary and not exactly unfamiliar insufficiency. Nor is the weight attributed to the figure and performance of the school head in the process of developing autonomy unfamiliar. In fact, the school head¹ has been one of the key figures in these discussions. Thence, simultaneously with strengthening autonomy, the reinforcement of training programmes and selection of school heads, their professionalization or, alternatively, their qualification always emerge as recommended.

There are, however, various questions to answer as to how the head’s role can be so decisive in this process. For example, the quality of educational performance in schools has long been associated with the importance of the head’s performance, but the answers are inconclusive. It has been difficult to demonstrate empirically the strong association between leadership and efficiency, expressed in the recurrent question “will leaders make a difference?”. Evers and Lakomski (2000, p. 65) summarised in the following way: “The question, which from the beginning has fascinated and motivated researchers, on whether leaders do or do not make a difference has not to date been answered satisfactorily. The best we can say — based on the empirical studies carried out until now — is that we think so but we do not know exactly how”².

The emphasis given by the specialists to the role of the head in the development of the process of school autonomy and, consequently, in the local implementation of public educational policies and in the actors’ appropriation and contextualization of these policies, depends on their understanding of school as the context where the transformation of these policies takes place. However, this understanding has not been clear in political discourse, or in the legal devices, or in the practices of central administration. On the contrary, investment in decentralization and school autonomy has always been patent, at least at the level of discourse and regulations, with all governments since the end of the 80’s (date of the juridical regime of school au-

tonomy consecrated in the Decree-Law 43/89 of February 3, 1989).

The reinforcement of these policies, associated with the emergence of post-bureaucratic forms of coordination and management, has been leading to significant changes in the work of school heads and in the type of leadership practiced, emphasizing the diversity and complexity of the functions and duties attributed to them and also their frequently contradictory and antagonistic character (Barroso, 2005b), to which the contradiction mentioned between the autonomic discourse of the policy makers and the centralizing practices of the administrative structure of the Ministry of Education is not unknown. In a context where the State is the main source of ambiguous signs and, therefore, the prime responsible for the conflicting and contradictory nature of the roles to be played by the school head, there are many dilemmas to be faced by the head, among which is being agent of conformity and change, of administrative rationality and pedagogic rationality, being a chief executive and a pedagogic leader, a local administrator representing the State and a professional leader, guaranteeing obedience to the law and the strict execution of public policies and also mediator for the local interests that contextualize and transform them (Barroso, 2005b).

The policies of “school autonomy reinforcement” obviously have to be understood in the wider framework of the transformation of the State’s methods of action and its concomitant recomposition and reorganization. In the educational field, the debate more State/less State has been symbolized by the metaphorical expression of the present *Regulating State* as opposed to the old *Educating State* (Barroso, 2005a). Besides, many of the changes occurring in the modes of organization and management of schools and, therefore, in the work of the respective heads are the result of the great changes occurring in the field of regulation of educational policies.

Thus, we start with the idea that the changes in management allow us to question and perceive the new regulation processes. The analysis of the changes in the regulation processes of educational policies can be carried out through the analysis of the changes in the management processes, thus becoming elements of interpretation of these regu-

lation processes. In the case of regulation of State schools, there is a true system of cross-regulation or multi-regulation, where the roles of institutions cross with those of the individual and where the reinforcement of autonomy is itself a form of regulation (Barroso, 2005a). These new modes of regulation and the interaction between them, reshape the head’s role, which in its turn can also be considered a new way of regulation.

The theoretic approach to be used in this study has as its core elements the analysis of educational public policies starting with the knowledge mobilized for their design and regulation tools; the reshaping of school management and the role of the head, his/her functions and competencies; and the emergence of new representations and justifying principles for their performance.

DISCUSSION OF THE PROBLEM

Regulation is one of the most relevant issues in the analysis of public policies in education, since their overall purpose in the last decades has been precisely that of altering the modes of regulation of the educational system, based on various justifications such as the need to modernize and debureaucratize the State, free civil society from its control, encourage the participation of local communities or even centre the teaching of pupils and the educational policies in the schools (Barroso, 2005a). It is important therefore to briefly clarify the concept of regulation we will use to describe two phenomena, which are distinct but interdependent: the ways the rules which guide the actions of the participants are produced and applied — institutional, standard or control regulation (Barroso, 2006) — and the ways they are appropriated and transformed by these same participants — situational, active and autonomous regulation, producing the “rules of the game” (Reynaud, 1997 and 2003, cited by Barroso, 2006).

A policy is never, or rarely, mono instrumental. This is particularly obvious in educational policies, which also means we are always confronted by various forms of regulation, the aims of which might not be concurrent. Thus, educational policies always mobilize complex devices of multi-regulation. Understanding the regulation of the educational

system as a system of regulations, it is important to value the role mediation instances (individual, formal or informal structures) play in the way it functions, since it is there that the synthesis is formed or the conflicts between the various regulations are overcome (Barroso, 2005a).

The school steering committee is one of these structures and the head is, of all the local participants, certainly the one who has the most central and determining role in the local regulation of public educational policies and their contextualization. It is important to briefly point out the situation relative to the school manager, his functions and responsibilities, the conceptions on “what should be” the responsibility of the school head and the emergence of new representations and justified principles for his/her performance.

According to Barroso (2005a, 2005b), from a politico-administrative point of view, it is possible to find four different conceptions of school leaders: a) bureaucratic, state and administrative, where the leader is seen as a State representative in the school; b) corporative, professional and pedagogic, where the leader is seen as a *primus inter pares* (the Anglo-Saxon “head teacher” or “principal”) and intermediary between teachers and the regional or central administration; c) managerial, where the leader is seen as the manager of a business, with the aim of guaranteeing the efficacy and efficiency of the results to be attained; and d) politico-social, where the head is seen as a negotiator, a mediator between logics and different interests, having in view the obtaining of a commitment regarding the acquisition of the educational “common good” to guarantee to the pupils. Each of these conceptions usually emerges associated to a referential. The bureaucratic, state and administrative is associated to the *Educator State* referential; the corporative, professional and pedagogic to the *Professionalism* referential; the managerial to the *Market* and the politico-social conception to the *Regulatory State*.

According to the model proposed by Manuel Lisboa (2002) in his work on Portuguese industry and its leaders, it can be affirmed that to different referentials correspond different functions as inherent to a school steering committee. To each of these functions corresponds a specific role, which is socially conditioned by the individual itinerary

of its head and by the school interior and exterior contexts. The concept of social role is important because it allows an aggregate and simultaneous view of the diverse functions due to a school steering committee and because it presents the idea that there is a set of values, rules and norms which make up specific models of performance of each of these functions³.

A large part of the complexity in fulfilling a position and the ambiguity of the images projected lies in the possibility of the diverse conceptions co-existing in the daily lives of the heads of schools. If it is possible to delineate the typical profiles of the attitudes and ways of being of the professionals when carrying out their duties, it is also true that in their performance, the heads often activate different roles and referentials alternately, according to the problems and protagonists to be dealt with (Dubar & Lucas, 1994, cited by Dutercq & Lang, 2001). Effectively, everything happens as if there were no different roles, but rather a *continuum* or a close link between them which some heads assume more, others less, according to their view of the duties of a head and of the circumstances of the context (Dutercq, 2002).

Several writers (Barroso, 1999, 2003, 2005a, 2005b, 2006; Derouet, 1999; Dutercq, 2002; Dutercq & Lang, 2001; Mangez, 2001; Taylor *et al.*, 1997; van Zanten, 2004, among others) have given great importance to the role of the head of the school steering committee in the local regulation of educational public policies and, consequently, in the contextualized transformation of these policies operated in and by schools via the participants. This operation results in a balance of power among the various influential people at school level, namely leaders, teachers, parents, pupils and other members of the local community and, to obtain this balance, the function of the head is essential and therein lies the main challenge to his leadership (Barroso, 2005b).

In countries with a more centralist political tradition, such as France and Portugal, the process of educational decentralization has been accompanied by a parallel administrative process of deconcentration, whose main aim seems to be to limit or control the effects of decentralization. This process, sometimes called “*deconcentration*”, has little by little

given rise to a new way of local regulation of the educational action, which Ives Dutercq (2002, p. 1) calls “regulation of proximity”, which is exercised by the school heads and which is characterised by assuming a “discretely managerial nature though strongly relying on the figure of mediation” (idem, p. 1) through which the head exercises a work of regulation in his school, which consists not of imposing his ideas and projects, but of supporting local opportunities:

He listens, gathers or recovers information from teachers, parents and pupils and, for this, also uses the connections he establishes with different networks his action is inscribed in and his school belongs to. The head positions himself as an unavoidable connection to reach to other participants (idem, p. 5).

The “regulator of proximity” rarely intervenes as initiator, he exercises his action above all to give opportunities to others, or re-orientates processes which his privileged position allows him to reveal in advance.

The chief of the establishment encourages, aids, facilitates, is responsible for and promotes the initiatives of the other members of the school community, giving them backing to vitalize his school. The chief of the establishment carries out a true strategy of involvement and proximity (Thévenot, 1999, cited by Dutercq, 2002, p. 6).

The ambiguity of the roles of the head is also expressed, for example, in the nature of the decisions to be taken, decisions on complex situations, which may need technical answers and, at the same time, may involve ethics and morality. A large number of the dilemmas in school administration arise from this crossroads — Which path to follow? Should it be the one which is technically correct but morally unjust, or the morally just but technically less efficient? (Sanches, 1996, p. 13).

The complex nature of the head’s duties raises the question of his preparation and training specific to the respective performance. The question is as important as admitting that this could be a relevant factor in the way the head himself perceives and constructs his roles.

Rather than professionalizing the administration, it seems to be more important to qualify teachers in this sphere so as to guarantee good coordination in the public action, without putting in question the democratic functioning of the school, the primacy of justice and the equity of educational public service (Barroso, 2005a). The logical assumption is that, by specific training and pedagogic sensitivity, teachers will be better able to guarantee these ends. The great attention which has been given to the question of leadership in schools, together with the pressure put on school leaders by international entities, by central governments, by local authorities and by the public in general, has underlined the need to promote and improve training and backup for the heads, either before or in-service⁴.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND QUESTIONS — AN OUTLINE

The conceptualization of the learning of the role of school leaders, such as briefly presented, is of evident interest for this study, since the concept of learning is envisaged in a self-building perspective, induced by the local context, by scientific and political discourse. This is precisely the issue we are dealing with, that is, the construction of the role of head as the central actor in the local regulation of educational policies, which is a regulation by proximity, strongly contextualized and, therefore, exercised in strict articulation with leadership competences. How and for whom is this role formed? By the State, by the governors and intermediate leader and by their discourse? And what is the role to be played by the scientific discourse in this process of construction and in the elaboration of political discourse, in policy making and in the legal text on the issue of school management? And what knowledge is mobilized in the training and practice of school heads, bearing in mind that it is the structural element in the way heads construct their own roles and performance? Finally, how do the three discourses (political, scientific and the heads) articulate their performance as heads? How can the referentials contained in the discourses be projected into concrete practice, moulding it?⁵

This set of questions is systemised in a central question deriving from three axes for analysis:

What is the role of the school head in the local regulation of public educational policies and how is it constructed? Axis 1: The political construction of the role of school head. Axis 2: The scientific construction of the role of school head. Axis 3: The self-construction of the role of school head.

Considering the nature of the research, its aims and the theory of the formulated questions of research, the strategy to follow will imply four dimensions or research methods: 1st.) analysis of scientific documents; 2nd.) analysis of political and legislative documents; 3rd.) devising and analysis of inquiries and interviews to the heads; and 4th.) the formation of a panel of observers made up of school heads. The analysis of the scientific texts will question the scientific construction of the role of the head. The analysis of political and legislative texts will question the political construction of the role of the head. The inquiries and, mainly, the interviews will carry

out a double function. On the one hand, they will be an instrument to analyse the discourses of the heads and of the self-construction of their role. On the other hand, they will be a methodological tool, which will guide the composition of the group of heads to be interviewed, and afterwards, the selection of those who will be integrated on to the panel of observers. For this, we will survey about 40 to 50 heads of secondary schools in the Metropolitan Area of Lisbon. An inquiry will be conducted to the heads of all secondary schools, with or without the '3rd cycle' of basic education (equivalent to lower secondary education), in the pedagogic areas of the Metropolitan Area of Lisbon.

The strategy of research will analyse, therefore, by cross-checking, the political discourse, the scientific discourse and the discourse and practices of the heads, with the aim of conceptualizing the role the school head plays in the regulation of educational public policies.

1. The designation head (of the school steering committee), although not the most convenient in terms of language, is the one preferred from now on and not because the difference between a head of a collective body and a school director is irrelevant. However, in quotations, the original designation is maintained.

2. For a more recent and “optimistic” balance see Leithwood and Riehl (2003).

3. As an academic exercise, the role of *Administrator* can be related to the bureaucratic conception associated to the *Educator State* referential, the role of *Leader* to the corporative conception associated to the *Professionalism* referential, the role of *Manager* to the managerial conception associated to the *Market* referential and the role of *Negotiator* to the politico-social concept associated to the *Regulator State* referential.

4. The learning of new roles associated with school leadership has been one of the methods followed in Anglo-Saxon countries, namely the United States, Australia, Canada and England. “These training programmes have in common the fact that they concentrate on leadership and not management, on the leader and not the school although the scholastic context specific to each participant in the programmes has been taken into account and has, moreover, enabled the observation of the way the heads, in their first years of their professional career, face and resolve the challenges encountered in the new role they have taken on” (Briggs *et al.*, 2006, p. 258).

5. For reasons of space, the concept of referential has not been developed here. Briefly and in accord with Muller (2004), the public policies are not only spaces where the participants confront each other in the performance of their duties, but are also a place where a society builds its relationship with the world and, consequently, the representations with which it is bestowed to understand and act on the reality as it is understood. The definition of a public policy lies in a representation of the reality which makes up the referential of that policy. The referential thus corresponds to a certain conception of place and the role of influence in question in that society.

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Translated by Robert G. Carter