The construction of meaning in Educational Policy: the Full Time School case

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ABSTRACT:

The following text aims to briefly present the main arguments of a research project on the political measures which form the idea of full time school in the 1st cycle of basic education. This is accomplished through an approach based on the "analysis of public policies" and particular focus on the formulation and implementation of these measures. It is, therefore, our intention to ground the study on two interconnected "types of approach": one based on the analysis of the *policy-making process,* by which we will endeavour to understand how the policy emerged and was transformed/is transformed; the other on the implementation aimed, at an examination of the State's action and the stance of its agents in interaction with other social agents. We have opted for *the cognitive analysis of public policies as our choice of public policy* with particular recourse to the concept of *frame of reference* and by means of an approach through *instruments of public action.*

KEYWORDS:
Educational policies, Basic Education — 1st cycle, Frames of reference, Instruments of public action.

Political measures carrying implications for the 1st cycle of basic education have marked the intervention of the current government which justifies them as being geared towards *giving value to* this educational level. From our perspective, most of them, whether articulated, complementary or overlapping form and sustain the idea of Full Time School (ETI) [*Escola a Tempo Inteiro* – Full Time School], since they are both directly and indirectly fully related to the educational occupation of pupils throughout their time at school and within the school premises.

Our study focuses on the measures which sustain the idea of full time school. Within the "public policy analysis" framework, research focuses mainly on the observation of the contexts of their formulation and implementation. For such effect, it is based on two interpenetrative types of approach (Muller, 2004a; van Zanten, 2004): one centred on the analysis of the *policy-making process,* through which we will seek to understand how the policy emerged and was/is transformed, in other words, to discover its origin; the other, on its "management and operationalisation" or implementation, focusing on the State's "black box". The aim here is to become familiar with how administration functions and the stance of its agents in their interaction with other social agents (Muller, 2004a).

CONTEXTUALISATION AND
QUESTIONING OF POLITICAL MEASURES

Since it is not a new idea, the expression *ETI* is currently associated with the creation and generalisation of conditions which enable the pupils to remain in a state school with accompaniment and integration in educational activities throughout the duration of the daily school period. There is a broad set of initiatives associated with *ETI*: the functioning of educational activities in a "normal regime" (morning and afternoon), where "core subject areas" are prioritised and for which minimum weekly periods are established to take up 70% of the school timetable[1]; "educational occupation" in "Curriculum Enrichment Activities" (AEC) [*Actividades de Enriquecimento Curricular* – Curriculum Enrichment Activities] which ensure systematised study aid, the teaching of English, Art Education (particularly the teaching of Music) and physical and sports activities[2]; the non-teaching occupation of teachers involved in pupil support activities and *AEC* supervision*;* the generalisation of meal provision; improvements and adaptations to already existing school premises or the construction of new buildings as well as the closing down of small schools. Simultaneously, the professional valorisation of 1st cycle teachers is beginning to focus on the so-called "core subject areas", by means of continuous national training programmes in articulation with state institutions of higher education[3].

Therefore, on behalf of a need to improve school results and provide equal opportunities for all pupils, the Ministry of Education (ME) anchors itself to measures which, according to the texts it has come to publish, aim to guarantee full timetable coverage within the context of modernised schools

offering pupils new learning opportunities, including *AEC*. Subsequently, this has led to the full centralisation and use of contact hours for the Portuguese Language, Mathematics and Environmental Studies (particularly Experimental Science Education), demanding greater professional competences on the part of teachers and focusing on their training in these areas[4].

The articulation established among the aforementioned measures leads us to consider the emergence of a reconfiguring perspective of the 1st cycle of basic education, particularly in terms of pedagogical organisation and curriculum management; however, it also shows signs of alterations in the actions of the Ministry of Education, thus, suggesting a kind of reconfiguration of the State's role and actions. Indeed, these signs have given rise to the questioning of certain issues on which we will now focus our attention.

The principle based on the integral occupation of time seems to underlie the idea of full time school, whereby time is taken to be an extended period, dedicated to structured and institutionalised school education (Coelho & Cavalieri, 2002). This principle has adopted an influential role in curriculum management and pedagogical and school organisation. On the one hand it presents the (difficult) challenge of "curriculum integration" during two distinct periods of time: the *teaching* period, part of the compulsory curriculum guaranteed by the State and the *non-teaching* period included in curriculum enrichment, where attendance is optional and activities guaranteed primarily by local authorities with financial support from the State. On the other hand, in terms of flexibility, it legitimises both the "infiltration" of curriculum enrichment activities in the time periods usually occupied by compulsory subjects as well as the (unofficial) transference of the artistic and physical education areas from the compulsory curriculum sphere to the curriculum enrichment sphere. This situation is reinforced by the introduction of a "market-oriented logic" which leads to selection on the part of local authorities (as "promoting entities") of the three activity "pack", offering greater financial advantages (English –a compulsory offer-, Music, Physical and Sports Education) over other possibly less academic activities with no conceptual or methodological connection to curriculum

subject areas[5]. Consequently, this scenario favours a kind of scholarisation of curriculum enrichment activities. In other words, the implementation and generalisation of the "school form" as "a way of conceiving learning" (see Canário, 2005), and thus, intensifying the duration of the pupil's "school work" (see Perrenoud, 1995; Sembel, 2003) and reducing the possibility of there being real "free time", as portions of time open to any occupation chosen by the person who benefits from it (see Herrero, 1995)[6]. We accept, therefore, that we are confronted with an idea of full time school which seems to represent, on a local level, the (re)monopolisation of educational services within schools, thus, contributing to the perpetuation of a "scholarcentric" view which has been questioned by other proposals, namely the defenders of "community education" (see Ferreira, 2005).

As for the type of state action played by the Ministry of Education in the conception and implementation process of the measures underlying full time school, we have tried to establish clues from possible interpretations of the reconfiguration of its role and action. So, in initiatives related to curriculum enrichment activities, school meals or teacher training, the assumption of *contracting logics* with local authorities is brought to light (and the latter with private entities) and, occasionally, with Parent Associations (AP) [*Associação de Pais* — Parent Association], with certain Social Solidarity Institutions (IPSS) [Social Solidarity Institution] and with state institutions of higher education. It means there is an emergence of forms of action through "public action contracts", based on explicit negotiations as a new way of making public policies, in other words, the logic of "governing by contract" (Gaudin, 1999). So, are we in the presence of a new way of governing where the State loses its centrality to the benefit of partnerships and becomes the mediator destined to trigger off a network of tasks (Haecht, 2005)? Are we confronted with the "emergence of an active social State" (*op. cit.*) which encourages the existence of privatisation forms contextualised in the State school by means of "specific service contracting" (Belfield & Levin, 2004)? – something similar to what Ball (2004) calls *Public-Private Partnerships*? Or, in the case of the prevalent idea that the State should guarantee services such as education, assur-

ing *fairness* while simultaneously setting out to provide sustained support to the mechanisms which guarantee *effectiveness,* are we confronted with a state that is the "coordinator of coordination" (Dale, 2005)? Another aspect which should be taken into account is based on the fact that the implementation of curriculum enrichment activities has come to lose "users" of spaces and time periods to the private "free time activity centres" (including those controlled by the AP and IPSS, both inside and outside school) or council centres, leading to their delocalisation, reorganisation, re-conceptualisation and even extinction. As far as parents and guardians are concerned, this is an invasion, on the part of the State or local councils, of their own conquered "territories", particularly for the parents of the "new middle class" which, before this point, they had been able to control (Stoer & Magalhães, 2003).

STUDY ISSUE

We will begin with the assumption that the principle of full time school highlights, at least on the surface, two perspectives: (1) a social response for all families (regardless of their resources) regarding the full occupation of children attending the 1st cycle of basic education for the entire school day; (2) the improvement of teaching quality with a view to improving results, by means of modernising processes and taking into account the search for strategic plans related to competitiveness, productivity and entrepreneurism and, furthermore, with a suitable response to the demands of the knowledge society. We are, therefore, faced with an attempt to promote and articulate principles such as *fairness* and *effectiveness,* found in decision processes and the implementation of particular measures, where it is necessary to understand how they are configured, operationalised and justified by public power and also, how they are grasped by the different social agents. Once again, such concerns channel our attention to the understanding of the State's way of acting, especially as far as the conduction of educational policies is concerned.

"Generalisation program" is a recurrent expression in the titles given to the above-mentioned political measures, which, on the one hand, denounces a kind of impositive attitude and, on the other, the

admission that what is meant to be implemented already exists, even if rarely (or, at least, there is already a legal framework for its implementation). It refers to a set of measures represented in "adaptations" and intentions, already expressed in formerly constructed programs" (Jönsson, 2004). Apparently "the decisions made consequently tend to be strongly orientated by the policies, values and behaviour that are already in force". In other words, from a more boosting perspective, they set out to "improve the already existing public action, without actually questioning it" (Jönsson, 2004). However, the way in which this "legacy" is interpreted by educational administration and conveyed through actions and specific measures seems to be in confrontation with other interpretations and action logics, giving rise to disturbances and contestation. Therefore, it becomes fundamental to identify and understand the underlying meanings, on which values and ideologies they are effectively based, what ideas sustain and support them, what symbols and images represent them, as well as to identify and analyse the chosen and used devices so that they become carriers of these meanings and representations in social relations with different agents. It is even more important to understand if there is room for the mobilisation of knowledge resulting from the research produced and to understand how it is conveyed, interpreted and integrated in the dimensions of public action.

It is in this scenario that the "analysis of public policies" makes sense to the study of the construction and implementation of educational policies (Haecht, 1998; van Zanten, 2004), since it provides a theoretical framework which, among other aspects, supports the integration of the "study of ideas and values which guide decision-making" (van Zanten, 2004, p. 24). Furthermore, the analysis of public policies also helps to highlight the recomposition processes of the State and its forms of governmental intervention, bearing in mind that it is still attributed an important role in the definition, piloting and carrying out of public policies and action, although it is seen as being forced to "share this role with the increasing intervention of other entities and agents which are based on different frames of reference, places and decision processes" (Barroso, 2006, p. 11). For this reason we have opted to focus on an approach which centres on the notion of "public

action" where, at the same time, the actions of the public institutions as well as those from a number of public and private agents are taken into account. They may come from civil society or the State sphere but act in unison, by means of mutual interdependencies, in order to produce ways of regulating collective activities (Comaille, 2004, p. 413), namely, in the field of full time school. So, in view of these indicators which denounce the reconfiguration of its role, a comprehensive analysis of the "State in action" is necessary, taking into account the existence of circles of agents within the State (government members and staff, administration structures…) and outside it (councils, associations, movements, both professional and non-professional, unions, research and development centres, businesses…).

In a process characterised by the search for and construction of the meanings underlying political measures, we have chosen the concept frames *of reference* (Muller, 1995, 2004a, 2004b) as one of the theoretical tools to use in research, since it fits both into a cognitive process which makes the understanding of reality possible, limiting its complexity (decoding), and also a prescriptive process which makes it possible to act on this reality (re-coding). Based on the *frame of reference* – defined by Bruno Jobert and Pierre Muller, as a "set of reference norms or images according to which the criteria of State intervention are defined, as well as the aims of the public policy in question" (Baudouin, 2000, p. 285) – the agents ("mediators" or "mediation networks") construct their perception of issues, through which they define their aims, confront solutions and direct their action. However, there does seem to be a need for the presence of aspects which unveil and carry such representations, according to which specific social relations are organised between public power and its addressees – *the instruments of public action* (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2004a, 2004b). It is, therefore, our aim to attempt to establish a relationship between the two theoretical tools we have selected for this study, with a view to questioning levels of articulation, adequacy and trustworthiness of the instruments used in the construction and implementation of the afore-mentioned political measures, in relation to the frames of reference of which, theoretically, they may be carriers. However, the fact that sometimes the *instruments* are unex-

pected, independent of the aims being followed and structure public action in terms of their own logic must be taken into consideration (*op. cit.*). So, on the one hand, the approach through the *frame of reference* may enable us to understand the processes of meaning construction, the fabrication of images, ideas and values which will be part of a "vision of the world" (Muller, 1995, p. 157): conceptions of education and educational reality, namely in terms of the (re)-definition of the concept of school and its functioning; the concepts of pupil and teacher and their respective roles; the concepts of school dropout, curriculum, organisation and pedagogical management… On the other hand the approach through the *instrument of public action* enables us, first and foremost, "to understand the State through its action" (Barroso, 2006, p. 13), in other words, to characterise and comprehend it in view of the instruments it uses in governing processes.

TESTING CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

As far as the *frame of reference* is concerned, it is important to point out two aspects which should be taken into account in the study's development: relations among the agents in the construction, legitimation, imposition/acceptance of meanings; levels of reality perception which enable characterisation and understanding of a specific frame of reference.

As regards the first aspect, the fact that the *frame of reference* may be considered a *true* representation of the world does not mean the end of all conflict (Muller, 1995, p. 160). Indeed, conflict exists *on* and *in the frame of reference,* crystallising itself around two dimensions: the cognitive/normative and the intellectual/power fields (pp. 163-164). The former focuses on a reality decoding process, making it intelligible, attributing meaning to it and, furthermore, a "re-coding" process through the definition of action aims. The latter focuses on the production of meanings and the structuring of a force field, where there is room for the construction of interests by the different agents. So, in this context, power relations emerge among the agents for the assumption of leadership in meaning construction which tend to be imposed in a hegemonic way. From this perspective, it is fundamental to reinforce the pertinence of

identifying and characterising the agents in the construction of this research project, since they guarantee the mediation processes in the construction of meanings for the idea of full time school.

As for the second aspect (as "a structure of meanings"), the *frame of reference* articulates four levels of perception of the world: the *values* (define a global framework of public action); the *norms* (define the shifting phases between perceived reality and desired reality); the *algorithms* (causal relations expressing a theory of action); the *images* (implicit vectors of values, norms and algorithms) (Muller, 1995, pp. 158-159, 2004b, pp. 371-372). So, in order to get closer to the field of inquiry, we have tried to define certain aspects which reinforce the relevance of this approach in the understanding of the concept of full time school: 1) with regard to the *values*, as already mentioned, the debate is apparently established between the relationship between *fairness* and *effectiveness*. 2) The *norms* are hugely important in the definition of action principles. In this particular case, we could put forward expressions such as: *State school should be instituted as a platform for equal opportunities; State school should be the answer to the needs of families and the community*. 3) According to the author, *algorithms*, may be expressed under the form "if…then" (Muller, 1995). In order to exemplify, we have used expressions such as: " if all pupils are given the opportunity to attend after-school educational activities, then results will improve"; " if small-scale establishments are closed and their pupils transferred to larger schools with suitable conditions, then the quality of teaching will improve, as well as the results of these pupils."; "if the pupils of the 1st cycle learn English, then there will be greater competitiveness among future generations; " if curriculum enrichment activities are provided, then the teaching hours for core curriculum areas might be fully profited"… From the perspective of Pierre Muller, the *images* are a central aspect of the *frame of reference*. They *construct meanings* and, from this perspective, they are extraordinarily effective. They may be presented in the form of *slogans* in which the three previous levels are implicit: "to educate on a full time basis"; "the full time school is a modern school"; "more time in school, better pupil accompaniment"; "valorisation of curriculum knowledge in the 1st cycle"; the offer of new learning opportunities to all pupils"; "full time school is the place for all children to have access to resources".

As far as *instruments of public action* are concerned, we have tried to focus our attention on issues such as the nature and properties of the instruments which structure, condition and operationalise the measures which give body to full time school, the understanding of the reasons for their choice and respective effects, the identification of the agents responsible for their construction and coordination and, moreover, from a boosting perspective, their origin.

Lascoumes and Le Galès (2004b) defend that the choice and conception of the *instruments* are not merely technical issues, since there is a political dimension in this process, in that these instruments are not neutral. So, in their cognitive dimension, the *instruments of public action* are carriers of values, fuelled by an interpretation of the social and by precise conceptions of target regulation form(s). Through choosing a particular type of instrument they consider to be suitable – the above-mentioned authors differentiate five types of instruments, between "old" (legislative and regulating; economic and fiscal) and "new" (conventional and challenging; informative and communicational; norms and *good practices*) – the State tries to impose the rules of the game, according to the types of political relations and types of legitimacy. So, the instruments reveal the characteristics of the State and its configuration. Hence, in the specific case regarding the idea of full time school, the *regulations for access to financing* on the part of non-state entities, which take over certain education services, are examples of instruments that reveal characteristic signs of a State close to being the "stimulator" of negotiated governing" (*op. cit.*). In their turn, the *commissions* responsible for the accompaniment of the programs which make the implementation of the political measures under study feasible, are formed as politicised instruments for making feasible forms of distance control and assessment ("regulating and controlling State") and development and dissemination of "norms and good practices", thus, bringing to light the characteristics of a "coordinating" State of public action. Nevertheless, they are instruments that can be rendered autonomous by acting according to their own

logic and by producing their own instruments (studies, reports, deliberations…), to the point of being able to construct new meanings, since the nature and autonomy of the collective agents which are part of them must be taken into account.

Finally, we consider the already identified instruments (accompanying commissions, regulations, devices for State communication and information…) to be the "starting point" of this study, for the construction of a research object, while bearing in mind that a policy is a research "construct" (Muller, 2004a), whose identity and content are constructed by the successive aggregation of empirical elements (Mény & Thoenig, 1992), thus, giving priority to research with the agents in their own space of "policy contextualisation and transformation" (van Zanten, 2004).

ENDNOTES

1. Order no. 19 575/06, 25/09 – Portuguese Language (8 hours), Mathematics (7 hours), Environmental Studies (5 hours, from which half should be applied to Experimental Science Education), artistic and physical/motor expression and reinforcement of other subject areas (5 hours).

2. Order no. 12 591/06, 16th June – creates and regulates the Generalisation of the Teaching of the English Programme in Years 3 and 4 and other Curriculum Enrichment Activities in the 1st Cycle of Basic Education.

3. Joint Order no. 812/05, 24/10 (Mathematics), Order no. 546/07, 11/01 (Portuguese Language) and Order no. 2143/07, 09/02 (Experimental Science Education).

4. See *Boletim dos Professores*, no. 1 (November 2005) and no. 4 (September 2006), available on the Education site (www.min-edu.pt/np3/103).

5. See "Relatório Intercalar das Actividades de Enriquecimento Curricular" [Interim Report of Curriculum Enrichment Activities] (available on the Ministry of Education site at www.min-edu.pt).

6. Note that the institutionalisation of the "non curricular" is an idea defended in the Education System Reform and set out in the Basic Law of the Portuguese Education System at the end of the 1980s. However, it was believed that the so-called "complementary curriculum activities" should be geared towards the practice and learning of the creative use of free time. This principle prevailed up to the Reorganisation of the Basic Education Curriculum in 2001, after which the expression "curriculum enrichment" was used, the legal and conceptual basis which went on to sustain the afore-mentioned generalisation program.

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