

Capítulo 28

The “education quality” policies in Southern Europe and its impacts over teachers’ and students’ lives

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Abstract

In this paper, we analyse the policies for the promotion of education quality, launched during the last decade, in Portugal, Spain, Italy and Greece, focusing particularly on the development of external mechanisms of monitorization and assessment, as well as on its impacts over teachers’ and students’ lives. This work is part of a wider project, titled *Educational Challenges in Southern Europe. Equity and Efficiency in a Time of Crisis*, financed by Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia, coordinated by João Sebastião (CIES-IUL) and involving 14 researchers, in the four countries. The presentation includes five sections. Firstly, we discuss how the management principles are being introduced in the educational policies, all over the world, during the last decades, as well as the criticism and resistance raised among the educational communities. Here, we will focus the importance of the assessment systems over schools, teachers and students. Secondly, some remarks on the comparison between education policies in Portugal, Spain, Italy and Greece are sketched. Then, the paper analyse if (and how) quality management policies are reframing educational experiences in these four countries, focusing on students’ assessment programs (section 3.1), evaluation of teachers (section 3.2) and schools evaluation (section 3.3).

Keywords: quality, education management and education policies.

Introduction

If educational policies were dominated throughout the 20th century, all over the world, by concepts as universal access, development and

equality, from the 80s on, there is a growing emphasis on concepts as quality and assessment. This doesn't mean that the latter concern is necessarily opposed to the former, and the most enthusiastic actually sustain this is an essential path to achieve the former orientations, but one shall accept that there is a new approach.

Such approach, as it is happening also in other traditionally public sectors of the welfare systems as health or social security, is clearly influenced by the management framework, not only in the way efficiency is pursued in the use of the minimum resources to maximize the goal achievement, but also as education and the agents involved are conceived: education as a service to be provided; parents, teachers and principals as users, providers and managers. Although there is a discussion over in which measure the ultimate goals are specific for education and/or for the public sector, the tools used to reach them are based on developments taking place in the management field. Therefore, quality — a vague concept that everybody agrees with — is systematically used as a way to legitimate standardized assessment programs over students', teachers' and schools' performances, carried out by international organizations, national governments or external agencies, enabling the conversion of learning and teaching in tangible products (Sallis, 2005). Educational quality is then presented as a duty of educational professionals and institutions (the providers), and simultaneously as one of the main parents' right (the users), as well as a key for economic growth and social development, although such relation is not always evident.

Although such changes were documented (and often criticized) by scholars in many countries, during the last decades, usually taken as part of a "global agenda" (Popkewitz, 1991; Carnoy and Rothen, 2002; Teodoro, 2008), dominated by capitalist and neoliberal forces, it is not evident that education policies are converging all over the world, and that their outcomes for students and teachers are homogeneous, even within Europe (Martins, 2012). As noted by Archer (1979) or Petitat (1982), education policies are the result of the interaction between multiple agents and forces, acting at different scales. Or, as Stephen Ball (1998) put it, there are common elements in contemporary international policies, but one shall also examine the translation and recontextualization processes, at national and local levels. Including in the core.

Besides, it is particularly useful to analyse the recent developments taking place in educational assessment in Portugal, Spain, Italy and Greece, at least for three major reasons.

Firstly, avoiding moral judgments, this new agenda introduces a huge shift in the way education was socially constructed, in the Southern Europe. Rooted over the influence of religious and military institutions, educationalists gave sense to their work and position in the world, based on a humanist and illuminist ideology. Schools and teachers were those who were taking civilization and culture to the people. Obviously, the authoritarian regimes during the 20th century (in Portugal, Spain and Greece these regimes lasted until the 1970s; in Italy, it was particularly severe in the 1930s and 1940s but it was abolished after the II World War) developed strong systems of control, but they were based on political and moral concerns, and the expectations of many educationalists was that they would be removed in a democratic era. Besides, the development of educational systems in these countries was considerably delayed, in comparison with the other European countries, and it occurred through a state-based, centralized and nationalist framework, highly influenced by the Church, especially in Spain (Enguita, 2001).

Secondly, the economic crisis from 2010 on was particularly severe in these countries, and its effects over education policies are not lineal. On the one hand, the national states became more vulnerable to European Union and other powerful international organizations, so that pressures to accelerate "structural reforms", in order to reduce costs and to improve efficiency in the public sector, to expand the markets and to attract external investment, were magnified. On the other hand, the European Union orientation to increase investment in education and to achieve ambitious goals of universal education was a landmark for the education development in these countries during the last decades, it was reinforced by the Lisbon Agenda, in 2001, and it was not abolished since the beginning of the economic crisis. Moreover, the huge cuts over education (as well as other sectors) and the permanent political instability generated by such austerity policies since 2010 has affected the (economic, social and political) viability of some reforms that were planned or already taking place.

And thirdly, one shall not take for sure that educational trends are homogenous in these four countries. Although Portugal, Spain, Italy and Greece are currently taken as similar in many international debates, especially at European level, this eludes the important differences between them. For instance: (a) in Portugal, Spain and Greece, authoritarian regimes ruled until the late 1970s and EU integration just

occurred in the 1980s, but this is not the case in Italy, (b) the Catholic Church is traditionally powerful in Portugal, Spain and Italy, but in Greece the Orthodox Church is dominant; (c) Portugal and Greece were committed (and supervised) during the recent years by an international financial assistance program; (d) Italy and Spain are bigger countries where the public systems, including education, are partially organized by regional structures; (e) governmental instability during the last years was higher in Greece and Italy, than in Portugal and Spain; (f) and so on. One shall wonder if some of these factors have influenced the educational policies, especially on assessment measures.

The project

Monitoring education in Southern Europe

Quality-based educational policies were carried out in Portugal, Spain, Italy and Greece during the last decade. A common standpoint is that national assessment systems in the four countries were weak during the previous decades, characterized by a huge increase in the number of educational institutions and professionals. However, according to our data analysis, there are considerable differences concerning the intensity of such policies and also the programs carried out in each country to achieve “quality”. Though a European Qualifications Framework has been developed, only in higher education, after Bologna settlement, it is possible to observe a consistent process of convergence concerning the assessment of institutions and graduations, in the four countries. Still, such assessment system appears to be focused in so far on formal aspects of institutions, teachers and graduations, rather than over learning patterns and outcomes. In basic and secondary education the evolutions taking place are more diversified.

In Portugal, quality became a key concept in political agenda from the 90s, especially in relation to a strong criticism over teachers in the media. From 2005 on, national programs for assessment of schools, teachers and students were carried out, through very different methodologies and the relations between them are not evident. Although students' scores in PISA tests have increased considerably during the last decade, such assessment systems were a huge focus of controversy. Especially, the assessment of teachers generated massive demonstrations in the streets and it was partially removed, not being clear

their effects over the improvement of teachers' pedagogical practices. Meanwhile, while schools evaluation system is often neglected, national exams over students in the end of each educational stage are used by the media to generate annual rankings of schools, contributing for competition between schools, pressure over teachers and stigmatization of those with lower scores. From 2011 on, under a right-wing government with a more conservative vision of education, national exams were reinforced, and they were criticized as a mean of pressure over teachers and children, back-to-basics orientation, exclusion of vulnerable groups and increase of retention rates.

The Spanish education has a regional autonomy within a centralized framework. It is a relatively decentralized system. Through the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport (Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte, MECD), the central government designs the legal framework regulating the principles, objectives, and organization of the different school levels, as well as a proportion of the contents and subjects studied. Ministries (or departments) of education from the 17 regions develop and manage their education systems based on these guidelines. Other bodies also shape education policy.

Italy, compared to other OECD countries, is characterized by underdevelopment in terms of monitoring and evaluation practices of the educational system. However, the demand of evaluation of the educational system in Italy increased over the last ten years (Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli, 2014). First, the disappointing results collected by OCDE PISA 2003 about Italian students compared to international data. Second, the increasing autonomy of schools that required a wider control from central authorities. Third, the Philosophy of the New Public Management. According by Brunetta Law (n. 15 / 2009) the work of all public administrations has to be evaluated according to efficiency criteria. Forth, the effects of Internet Culture: families require more information and data on the quality of schools in order to make the correct school choice.

The Greek education system has been monitored according to the principles of public management until today. The formal education system is wholly managed and controlled by the ministry of education. There is little autonomy given to schools and these only refer to extracurricular events and other such activities. The lack of autonomy at a large scale goes today hand in hand with evaluation perceived more as an instrument of control than of attempting to improve the education system. Changes related to evaluation and quality assurance

were introduced in 2005 and 2007 and started being implemented at a large scale after the law 4009/2011.

Students' competences assessment

During the last decade, Portugal, Spain, Italy and Greece were involved in international inquiries of students' competences, and some of their results had a considerable impact over public awareness and governmental policies on education. Still, the results of these countries and the effects of the reports publishing were not always similar. Besides, influenced by these international studies, the national assessment of students' competences was also reinforced in Portugal, Spain and Italy, but through distinct models and tools. In Greece, such evolution is not apparent.

In the Portuguese context, several institutions and international tests have played their part in through studies and recommendations, but the OCDE PISA program is clearly the most influential. It was from these international studies and models that the current external evaluation system was built in Portugal (Lemos, 2014). Briefly, the OCDE, the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) and the European Commission (CE) have promoted international programs evaluating children's and youth's performance worldwide, in math's, sciences, reading and foreign languages. Since 1991, Portugal has participated in comparative studies on educational achievements.¹ These participations revealed a major influence in the development of OCDE's instruments for examining national policies worldwide, focusing in the organization of each educational system and recommending specific public policies. The main aim has been to construct, compile, consolidate and disseminate international comparable indicators, through what later became the IIEES, for further uses on governance mechanisms, standards and benchmarks, and into detail of prescribing behavior and to influence convergence processes between countries.

The results of 2009 and 2012 PISA studies indicated that the general school performance in Portugal was converging to the OCDE's average,

1 (the International Assessment of Educational Progress (IAEP I and II); IIEES ? International Indicators and Evaluation of Educational Systems; PISA ? Program for International Students Assessment; TIMSS — Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study; PIRLS ? Progress in International Reading Literacy Study; ESLC — European Survey on Language Competences; IECL; EAG — Education at a Glance, PIACC etc...)

particularly for mathematics and science — decreasing the differences in at least in 30% from 2000-2012, while for reading skills, in about 18%. In addition, there was a decreasing on the number of students with the lowest performance — of about 5% less in general, and 8% less in reading, while increasing the numbers of those with highest performance. Nevertheless, PISA studies have continuously emphasized that the Portuguese case still indicates a close relation between PISA performance and students' retention (though also slightly decreasing).

Meanwhile, national exams in the end of each educational stage (at 4th, 6th, 9th grade) was progressively implemented, as it was the case only in the end of secondary education (12th grade), and their impacts in students' and schools' evaluation were also reinforced, during the last decade. A large criticism

In Spain, PISA has a strong influence in public debates on education. As it happens in Germany or USA, almost every regional government has its own PISA, by paying OECD the cost of increasing students sample. However, despite a 35 percent increase in funding since 2003, the national scores remain below OECD average. While 15-year-olds notched up marginal improvements in reading and science scores, mathematics results for the test of students near their end of their compulsory education remained at 2009 levels. Scores for reading climbed from 481 in 2009 to 488 points in the latest PISA study. There was also a slight improvement in science results from 488 to 496. But mathematics scores barely shifted for Spain — moving from 483 points to 488.

The PISA reports have also concluded that Spain could improve its scores by giving schools greater autonomy over their curriculum. They also said low teacher morale could be prevented by linking positive professional appraisals to higher salaries. On a positive note, the PISA study found that 87 percent of Spanish students were "happy at school" compared with an OECD average of 80 percent. The, till now, country's largest opposition group, the socialist party (PSOE) used the results to attack new government reforms, saying cuts would undo all the good work done by Spain over the last few years. But the Popular Party government pointed out higher spending wasn't necessarily linked to better performance.

The last PISA report has been issued in 2012 and reported a worse performance of Italy compared with the average of OCDE countries. Nevertheless comparing this wave with the previous data collections, Italy shows some improvement: from 2006 to 2009 average scores

increased and 2012 confirms this trend. However, a great territorial divide still features the educational performances of Italian students and national surveys, which confirm it. This difference is very significant if we consider performances in mathematics and in readings in some Italian region (Trentino, Friuli Venezia Giulia, Veneto, Lombardia) where students are among the best performing students in OECD area, compared to very poor performances in Southern regions.

Italy participates also to IEA surveys in the collection of PIRLS and TIMMS data. Despite this participation, limited efforts are dedicated to further analysis and reflections on results. Not many studies have been developed based on this data and their dissemination usually occurs with a consistent delay compared to the time of collection. INVALSI (National Institution for the Evaluation of the Educational System) for the first time in 2011 published the national report in conjunction with the international one aiming to enhance the wider use of these surveys². It reports also the main features of Italy in terms of student characteristics (especially familiar background) and learning skills, educational practices and schools structure. However, PISA, and especially IEA data, does not seem to be used in an appropriate manner when it comes to educational policies in Italy. First of all, they have often declared the willingness to use data collected by these international surveys for purposes that the same surveys do not consider feasible, as the evaluation of the single schools. But the most significant point is that Italian political representatives systematically ignore the results of these surveys to reform the scholastic system (Gentile e Rubino, 2011, p.197).

Since 1999, INVALSI is the Ministerial agency charged of three main tasks: evaluation of efficacy and efficiency of the national educational system; progressive improvement of the quality of the educational system in order to provide an equal distribution through the territory; Collection and diffusion of quantitative data on national school system and the results of students learning. More in details, INVALSI has been charged by the Ministry Directive n. 85/2012 of: Periodic and Systematic (every 12 months) evaluations on students' knowledge and skills and on the whole educational offer; Studying the causes of drop-outs and early school

2 The 2011 INVALSI Report on PIRLS and TIMMS data presents the main results of the five surveys: comprehension on readings, mathematics and science in the four grade of primary school and mathematics and science in the third grade of lower secondary schools.

leaving; Elaborating the written national tests to assess the general and specific students' learning at the end of the lower secondary school; providing models and guidelines to facilitate schools in the formulation of the "standard test" (the so called "Third test") at the end of the upper secondary school; Evaluating the performance of students terminating the upper secondary school according to international criteria in order to ensure the comparison with other countries. Providing support and technical assistance to school administrations, regions, provinces, territorial agencies, training agencies for improving independent practices of monitoring and evaluation; Education and training activities for teachers and principals; Research activities; Ensuring the Italian participation to European and International research projects in the field of evaluation; Counselling and assisting schools for self-evaluation projects.

Since their introduction, INVALSI tests have been under discussion. Criticisms are moved towards the inspirational models, because they are rooted in cultural contexts different to Italy (such as the Northern European and the Anglo-Saxon area). Then these kinds of tests would be not suitable to evaluate the Italian system. The incoherence between the teaching model and the evaluation system would lead to risks such as cheating, teaching to the test and other issues that affect data validity and affordability. Nevertheless, these tests are the only evaluation tools currently existing in Italy, standardised and on an individual basis. It needs to be remembered that in the past in Italy there was total absence of evaluation practices, due to cultural and financial reasons. MIUR instead manages the National Registry of University Students providing open access to data on a basis of single academic unit.

Concerning student's performance at an international level by which the system could be indirectly evaluated, apart from the PISA study, Greece does not participate in other international assessments, such as TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science) that studies trends in competencies in mathematics and physics at the last year of secondary education, nor at PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) that documents trends in reading comprehension at fourth grade of primary education (more details, see at timssandpirls.bc.edu). Although the results of PISA are rather controversial in public opinion and it is not evident its role to the education policies carried out by recent Greek governments, the students' scores in this program remains far below the OECD average, especially in

Mathematics, but they slightly increased during the last decade (OECD, 2013).

Teachers in Italy enjoy a wide autonomy in students' evaluation, which includes the definition of the evaluation criteria, the decision of repeating one year and the elaboration of tracking/final exams. Since 2007/08, the final exam at the end of the 1st cycle of the education in Italy includes a set of tests elaborated directly by teachers (Italian language, two European foreign languages, mathematics, science, arts-technology and a multidisciplinary oral exam) and, only since 2008, in addition, a national written exam (INVALSI test) composed by open and close questions in reading and mathematics is compulsory.

In Greece, it is not clear how primary and secondary education is being controlled: there are no official reports written, unless a director of a school or a school advisor drafts one because s/he wants to point to a problem. The responsibility of running the education system lies within the Ministry of Education: such is the case with the PISA results, in which Greek students do not perform so well; in such a case, there are no formal organization structures responsible to carry out a discussion, only the Ministry of Education could issue a report or plan a study into this.

Evaluation has been the subject of vehement debate. Some consider it a means to control education, to enforce conformity, to punish those who disagree with the decisions of the education authorities, or simply who are different from their department heads or school directors. In the words of an education policy expert: "Research in the European context has shown that quality assurance policies (strongly promoted by the EU) are associated with reduction of public funding due to the withdrawal from welfare states... It is therefore important that the social actors (academics, students etc.) resist the above policies through their active participation in decision making both in national and international contexts" (Prokou 2014a, expert interview, 2-12-14).

Briefly, the four countries have participated intensely in international tests assessing students' competences, and such participation, especially in the PISA program, has an important impact over public debates and evaluation systems, although the linkage to broader educational policies is not always evident. Besides, the national scores in the four countries were near de OECD average in Spain, and below this average in the other countries, but they have been improved during

the last decade, especially in Portugal and Italy, while in Spain such scores were stable (OECD, 2013). Therefore, some convergence is apparent, especially if one considers that most central and northern European countries has decreased PISA average scores during the last decade.

Teachers evaluation

The assessment of teachers' professional performances is one of the most controversial topics of political agenda in Portugal. In 2008 and 2009, the Socialist Party government planned a national program to the compulsory assessment of all teachers by school principals and coordinators, included in the existing system of public employees' annual assessment. However, it generated a huge opposition among educationalists, well-organized by teachers' unions and supported by all parties in opposition, so that this program was simplified (Abrantes, 2010). The former assessment system based on administrative data and self-evaluation was restored, and just those who are candidates to the highest classifications and to grade promotion has to apply to the complete process. Still, since grade promotion is blocked, due to austerity policies, few teachers apply to such evaluation. Besides, the right-wing coalition elected in 2011 was committed to their opposition to the teachers' assessment program, so in spite of a huge moral discourse on the need to restore rigour, discipline and accuracy in schools, their policies concerning teachers were focused on appliance of a national test of common knowledge. Once again, after a huge resistance of unions, the Ministry of Education decided that only young teachers (with no experience or less than 5-years of teaching experience) are obliged to apply to this exam and they have to be approved to be allowed to teach in public schools.

In Spain, the evaluation of teachers is made on a regular basis by school principals. Still, since they are at the same time teachers and eventually they will return to their former position as teachers, not specialized in this area, have little time to spend on it, and school teachers participate regularly in their election, few principals are committed to an effective assessment of their "colleagues" (Enguita, 2001). The inspectorate is only involved in evaluation of teachers under specific circumstances, such as career promotion (EACEA, 2013).

Italy is characterized by the absence of evaluation of teachers (Eurydice Italia, 2009; EACEA, 2013). The topic of education, training

and recruitment of teachers in Italy has always been a delicate one. It became even more controversial since the abolition of the SSIS (High school for Teaching) in 2008. Until 2008 SSIS (since 1999) it was the only available pathway for future secondary teachers while a Degree in Primary Education (since 1998) was requested to become a primary teacher. This new system has been characterized since its beginning by a high degree of precariousness, especially affecting SSIS that has suffered from the uncertainty of continuity at the end of each academic year (Luzzatto, 2011). Once abolished, this specialization school has not been substituted by another institution so that many future teachers have been for years in a limbo waiting for their qualification and working in very precarious conditions, even if fully qualified. In 2010, new guidelines for obtaining the qualification have been issued.

According to the European patterns, teachers' education is divided in general and professional component (Eurydice, 2013). In Italy, teachers at primary or pre-primary levels of education are trained under the concurrent model, which means that they acquire general and professional competencies right from the start of their tertiary education. Lower and upper secondary teacher instead are trained according to the consecutive model, so that they acquired their professional competencies at the end of their degree. While in most of the European countries, an upper secondary certificate is enough to access the teacher education, in Italy teacher students are required to take a specific examination decided by the national education authorities. So, Italian teachers in fact enter into the labour market through a competitive examination alongside with a candidate list. These lists, set at provincial level, include not only prospective teachers who have passed competitive examinations, but also those who obtained their qualified teacher status through sporadic one-off qualification procedures (specifically reserved for unqualified teachers with at least 360 days of teaching experience), or through attendance at SSIS (the former post-degree specialisation schools for teaching at secondary level) (Eurydice, 2013, p.47).

The employment authority varies according to the typology of contract: teachers with a permanent contract are employed by the Regional School Office, a branch of the Ministry of Education. Teachers with a fixed-term contract are recruited instead from a regional list and the contract is made directly with the school (Eurydice, 2013, p.49). In Italy, as in most of the European countries teachers have to pass through a probationary period that implies 180 days of valid service in

12 months. This period thus is fixed and valid for all ISCED levels. Despite the attempt to reform the educational track for teachers, a critical issue in Italy remains the lack of coherence between education pathways and recruitment practices. One other weakness point for the teacher's career is the scarce supply for training on-the-job.

In Greece, teachers — an integral part of the education system — are treated as a 'necessary evil': lowly paid, their work is not highly estimated by education authorities, and their opinion is not asked whenever education reforms are planned. They do keep a necessary degree of autonomy to carry out their work. Teachers' reaction to the planned evaluation was therefore massive and negative. Issues, such as recruitment and in-service training continue to be a matter of concern, for on the whole are evaluated as 'insufficient'. Until 2007, the Greek education system is monitored and managed according to the principles set by public management. After 2011, new laws plan different management structures, and introduce evaluation as an instrument for quality assurance, according to international standards. However, due to the past, uses of the instrument of teachers' evaluation, today it is still perceived as a means of control, enforcing conformity and punishing rather than as a means of improving effective quality education.

For the evaluation work, funds were made available, as well as for other administration structures that are new within higher education. In addition, evaluation does not include departments or universities, but it extends to evaluation of personnel that it has been planned, but partly implemented, with the exception of academic staff members, who are being every year evaluated by their students since 2011. The plan for evaluating public servants remains to be carried out, together with the administration personnel in schools and teachers of the other two educational levels.

In conclusion, the evaluation of teachers is a controversial topic in Southern European countries, and any of these four countries have a consolidated system to assess all teachers, in a regular basis. Although some policies were launched during the last decade, a strong resistance was apparent from teachers, and the austerity policies taking place made such policies hardly feasible. The erosion of teachers' working conditions and the absence of promotions and rewards, in a context of privatization policies, pave the stage for a common idea that a new program for the evaluation of teachers would be merely used to dismiss and to demote many teachers.

School evaluation

According to a recent Eurydice Report (EACEA, 2015), external school evaluation is carried out in most European countries, although a great diversity of models is in use. In Southern Europe, such heterogeneity is apparent. This report concludes that while in Portugal and Spain there are national systems of school evaluation, in Italy there is also a pilot project and in Greece (as for instance in Finland) there is no national system for the schools evaluation. Besides, the Portuguese system is considered the most complete one, among this group, since the external evaluation is developed by a team of inspectors and other experts in education, school teachers, pupils and community participate in the evaluation process, external evaluation is linked to the self-evaluation, the school board is consulted before the end of the evaluation report, and the each school external evaluation is publicly disseminated. For instance, in Spain, the external evaluation is carried out by the Inspectorate, but community members are not consulted and the evaluation reports are not public.

In parallel to the international evaluations, national Law n.º 31/2002 defines the non-high education evaluation system (pre-school, basic and secondary education) in Portugal, based on self-evaluation in all schools, and external evaluation — with multiple initiatives from private and public entities, not rarely related to the existing international evaluation assessments. After some experimental programs, the schools evaluation system was launched in 2005 and it was developed during the last decade by the General Inspection for Education (IGE), linked to the school autonomy policies (Coelho, Sarrico, & Rosa, 2008, Sarrico, 2014). It was influenced by school evaluation systems in other European countries, especially in Scotland, but it was also carried out in the context of the media annual publication of the “rankings of schools”, based on the average scores of students in national tests.

The corresponding advices and recommendations of CNE from 2006-2011 evaluation focused in autonomy and participation issues, and can be divided in three moments. Firstly, the Parecer n.º 5/2008 (of 13th June) underscored negative effects of school rankings but giving importance in continuing the schools’ evaluation model and the different responsibility levels within the system — local, regional and national, while coordinating auto-evaluation with the external one. Secondly, the CNE Parecer n.º 3/2010 (of 9th June), recommending the extension and

deepening of the consultation mechanisms, namely reinforcing the municipalities and parents participation. Finally, the n.º 1/2011 CNE Recommendation (of 7th January), focusing on the three main aims of schools' external evaluations: the training of the school community; the regulation allowing elements that support schools' decisions; the participation of all elements in schools through a formative perspective that reinforces auto-evaluation. Last but not least, these recommendations raised the need to include private, cooperative and solidarity networks, in complement with external evaluation. In sum, focusing the attention on students as well as on the need to adapt the trajectories proposed by the system, they define these priorities in close relationship with the local community, thus, calling different agents for their responsibilities while reinforcing also the need for social certification, efficient management of the existing resources and of the regulation mechanisms producing relevant information.

However, there seems to exist, still, an apparent homogenization of schools in the external evaluation reports, which contributes to the social construction of schools strongly dependent from policy measures and administrative choices for their management and organization. Such construction of a specific school model has shown potential effects in segregation schools accordingly to the evaluation results, when it should, on the contrary, contribute to improve the school activities, and learning practices (Velooso, Abrantes & Craveiro, 2011).

Indeed, in Lemos (2014) view, schools' external evaluations may lead to two essential functions, retroactive information, meaning creating monitoring practices to adapt policies and the management of the pedagogic process, as well as social certifications, i.e., creating social trust in society. Lemos (2014) sustains that the current national evaluations have been the main changes of educational policies possible to be identified in the short term. As also expressed in Velooso, Abrantes & Craveiro (2011), Lemos also argues that current national examinations, being currently based on tests in the end of each cycle and national exams, give considerably more priority to the social impact of school certification, producing, thus, external and irrecoverable information. This is so because, the author continuous, such external evaluation does not allow to act upon the learning process of the students under evaluation (because it does not allow retroactive actions) and, consequently, being of no use to work on the need for school's equity. In this sense, these are mechanisms to promote social

trust because certificating knowledge but not allowing to convert and transform the outcomes — exams do not improve education quality as they do not allow to act upon the conditions that promote their outcomes. And even if social trust may in some cases improve, this occurs at the cost of quality and equity mechanisms and needs. Thus, national evaluations have become, in this sense, less efficient in terms of resources management, and its consequences in terms of society transformations on equity. Differently, international evaluations have allowed mechanisms to improve the quality of the system, in terms of resources efficiency and access. Indeed, many of the improvement of equity conditions for education access have resulted from OECD pressures and the common international indicators (IIIES, through their studies and recommendations, though experiencing significant internal resistances).

In Spain, most schooling decisions are taken by the regions or the central government (approximately 43% of decisions in lower secondary education), and about one-quarter of decisions are taken by schools. Regional authorities have responsibility for organizing and delivering education and maintaining schools, and for decisions on funding (including teachers' salaries), on part of the curriculum, among others. Targeted capacity-building at these levels to support decision-making and implementation of these decisions can help to promote better results. School Councils (*Consejos Escolares*), which formally participate in decision-making in schools, include representatives of the teaching and student body, the town council, parents (slightly more than a tiny ten percent of them vote for selecting their representatives) and non-teaching staff. In vocational training schools, the councils might include representatives from labour institutions or employers' organizations.

In Italy, despite the Law n. 59 /1997 which ruled the school autonomy, schools have little autonomy over matters such as hiring teachers, dismissing teachers, formulating the school budget and deciding its allocation within the school,³ comparing to other OECD countries. According to the Eurydice Report (2009), if we consider the autonomy of schools in accessing and utilizing public funding, Italian schools report

3 86% of students attend schools whose principals report that only regional and national education authorities have the responsibility for selecting teachers to employ (compared to 24% across OECD countries). Furthermore, 78% of students in Italy attend schools whose principals report that only regional and national education authorities are responsible for firing teachers.

a full autonomy concerning the purchasing of ICT technologies and in the operating expenses, but a total lack of autonomy concerning properties purchasing. On the contrary, Italian schools benefit from a wide autonomy in accessing and utilizing private funding, that can be allocated to many functions such as acquiring goods, hiring teaching staff for extra-curricular activities. Instead, schools benefit from a full autonomy in defining the optional curriculum, even if teachers are not alone in this decision-making process but they are expected to work in team with the rest of the teaching staff and to follow local and regional guidelines. Schools are instead fully autonomous in terms of educational methods and schoolbooks choice.

Together with the raising of the school autonomy in Europe, the need for accountability has increased as well. Nevertheless, accountability practices in Italy are still very rare and backward, leaving the country at the margins of this tendency towards external evaluation systems. Thus, schools in Italy are not compelled to account for their own work in front of external actors, even if they are strongly fostered in promoting internal evaluation.

In Greece, the internal evaluation of every department is followed by an external organization. The relevant committee of the external evaluation is comprised by academics from universities abroad, who understand the Greek language. All the relevant reports are published on the internet page of the institution (see www.hqaa.gr). The criticism addressed to such a concentrated system is manifold. It is worth noting that the law of 1985, which was considered a landmark for introducing democratic structures of governance in schools, permits various civil society and professional organisations (e.g. farmers', workers', middle business' etc.) to write reports or recommendations addressing them to the education authorities. This seemingly democratic measure, means according to some authors that actually no one has the responsibility to do so (see Kantzara 2001: ch. 3).

A significant part of running an education system is to have statistical information. Availability of statistical data has been improved considerably *after 2012*; part of it is due to the measures issued conforming to the 'Memorandum of Understanding' agreement with the troika which promotes 'transparency' in the public sector. Still statistics are not up to date on a number of subjects, and most notably on education.

It was thought that one of the main mechanisms to combat corruption and facilitate public control over finances and other aspects

has been to make public every decision made by public authorities; for this purpose there is a site on the internet, called 'diaygeia' (transparency). This measure has already bared some fruits as very often one can read articles that judge public spending, but this is another issue and we put aside for the moment.

Final remarks

In this paper, we sketched the major changes in the education assessment system in Portugal, Spain, Italy and Greece, during the last decade. Our main idea is that, in spite of significant divergences between countries, there was in all of them a reinforcement of the management systems of monitorization and assessment, based on a restrict concept of quality and hardly able to generate an effective improvement of quality of teachers' and students' work. As a compensation for huge cuts in public education budgets, such mechanisms has generated an intensification and standardization of teachers' and students' work, focused on a limited set of skills and only assessed in the short-term.

Still, our analysis does not confirm the homogeneity thesis. Actually, assessment systems carried out in these countries are clearly distinct and although international pressures and trends were important in their development, they are following different models.

Besides, especially in Greece, but in some measure in the other countries too, the austerity policies blocked the economic and political conditions to settle consistent and constructive assessment programs, not only because such they require a considerable investment, but also because in a such a context they are not able to reward and to support school agents, but they are conceived as a tool to stress and to dismiss them.

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