Intermediate Leaderships perceptions on Schools’ External Evaluation

Costa, Natália
University of Minho
Email: nataliacosta.costa6@gmail.com

Sousa, Joana
University of Minho
Email: joanarfousa@gmail.com

Abstract
Education is a place where evaluation is a priority in all levels. Schools as an organization, are not disengaged of reality. Schools’ External Evaluation (SEE), framed by national and international educational policies that promote the legitimacy of evaluation placing accountability, quality, improvement, results and success as main objectives, represents the answer of Portugal to this need. According to the Law no. 31/2002, it was created a lasting and systematic culture of quality and improvement through levels of efficiency and efficacy to achieve credibility and success in the educational system. Since 2005/06 it has being implemented by the General Inspection of Education and Science (IGEC).

The paper focuses on Portuguese school’s department coordinators experiences, and their perceptions of SEE. To understand it two focus group with department coordinators (n=17) were realized and the results were analyzed with content analysis based on Nevo’s (2007) evaluation perspective. For Nevo (2007) educational evaluation include five functions: decision making, improvement, accountability, professionalism and certification. The results suggest that exists a connection between SEE and the functions identified by Nevo (2007), since it is a process of legitimization of intermediate leaders decision-making looking for improvement, holding educational actors responsible, certifying organizational, pedagogical and curricular practices carried out by schools.

Keywords: Schools’ external evaluation; Decision making; Accountability; Improvement; Certification.

Introduction
In recent years, educational evaluation has become a practice publicly debated, based on different concepts that promoted the idea of a State-evaluator and regulator of education. The need for setting goals and mensuration evolved alongside a new public management, based in a globalized economy. Thus, evaluation focuses on performativity and accountability, following neo-liberal ideals (Carpenter, Diem & Young, 2014). This view has been promoting the idea that schools are public services, accountable to society and national and transnational organizations. Evaluation is recognized as a key tool in the reform of the educational institutions which seek to respond to a market logic to “produce more quality, relevance and public order to all the academic, scientific, technical and administrative activities, as well as, social, inter-institutional and
inter-institutional relations” (Sobrinho, 2003, p. 10). In response, schools changed their administrative practices, adapting to the market management “focusing mainly on the future demand for labor, social efficiency, market competition, and league tables of performance between schools, systems of educational testing that are tied to the criteria for market competition.” (Saari, Salmela & Vilkilä, 2014, p. 184). In its diversity and questioning, educational evaluation has obeyed almost exclusively to a regulatory function, weighing summative evaluation, as noted in several international reports (OECD, 2013; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015).

**Nevo’s five functions of evaluation**

According to the theoretical framework, evaluation is essentially formative and summative (Scriven, 1967; Nevo, 2007) being one that provides the improvement, development and learning (Scheerens, 2003; Pacheco, 2010) while the other promotes accountability (Afonso, 2009; Fullan, Rincon-Gallardo & Hargreaves, 2015). Concepts such as quality, effectiveness and efficiency improve a logic of results and competitiveness (Ozga & Grek, 2012). Even if in certain models and practices there is a tendency to focus one, evaluation presupposes school improvement contributing reflexively to the internal continuous sharing (Bolívar, 2003; 2012).

In Nevo’s (2007) perspective evaluation has five functions: decision making, improvement, accountability, professionalism and certification. These functions are related to the needs, purposes and levels of education, and are present throughout the educational domain, reflecting on the decision-making function that involves students, teachers, parents and administrators. In a logic of innovation and modernization arises the function of improvement which promotes student learning and teachers’ skills, as well as, the update and the constant development of educational resources. The function of accountability becomes incomplete when used only as the interpretation of results, either of students or external evaluation, but becomes complete if it resorts to the ongoing dialogue between teachers, schools and external evaluation. At the level of professionalism it is intended that the professional needs of teachers have a positive impact on education and promotes continuous self-assessment practices that intentionally support curricular options, fostering the active participation of teachers in SEE as a fundamental tool for their development. Evaluation is a widely used resource for certification of educational institutions, school administrations, educational programs and teachers.

In conclusion, this evaluative sphere legitimizes education and justifies it to society as a form of accreditation or formal recognition.

**Schools’ External Evaluation in Portugal**

The model that evaluates pre-school establishments, primary and secondary levels of education, in Portugal, was implemented by the Law 31/2002, of 20th December and framed by transnational and supranational regulation processes and policies that promote accountability and responsibility.
(Afonso, 2009), linked with the autonomy of schools, teacher’s professional development and the effectiveness and school improvement.

The evaluation of schools is an activity developed by the General Inspection of Education and Science (IGEC) that assumes it "as a contribution to the development of schools" (IGEC, 2011, p. 51), competing at the National Board of Education (CNE) to review it. Being presented as a formative tool for assessing school quality, SEE model takes into account the first experiences of this central organization linked to the institutional assessment, following the European guidelines set by the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM), and adopting the principles of the Scottish model How Good is Our School (Rodrigues, Queirós, Sousa & Costa, 2014).

In Portugal, SEE's system has already two cycles and the third cycle started in 2016. The first cycle started in 2006 and finished in 2011, focused in the results, the performance of educational services, school organization and management, leadership and the capacity of self-regulation and school/clusters' improvement. The second cycle, which began in 2012, was centered on the results, performance of educational service, leadership and management. Each of these domains is based on factors and indicators that result on a mark that is currently the following: Excellent, Very Good, Good, Sufficient and Insufficient. This assessment is published as a report made by IGEC in collaboration with one teacher from a Portuguese University. After the analysis of the published report schools' clusters can present their opinion and arguments about the SEE results by sending a document to IGEC that is called a contradictory outcome report.

The Portuguese model of SEE it is intrinsically related to the educational policies of the State (Pacheco, 2014) as well as a family context and surrounding environment (Bessa, 2013) therefore it is a social field influenced by concepts generators of changes at the organizational, curricular and pedagogical practices levels (Rodrigues et al, 2014).

**Methodology**

In order to answer the research question, it was chosen a qualitative approach of interpretative nature "that allows us to establish a more insightful understanding of our object of study." (Bodgan & Biklen, 1994, p. 49). As a resource it was used content analysis (Esteves, 2006) for the interpretation of the focus group data (n=2) carried out with the department coordinators of two schools’ clusters localized in the north of Portugal. To analyze the data (I1, I2) it was established semantic registration units (Esteves, 2006) which are connected with the functions referred by Nevo (2007): decision making, improvement, accountability, professionalism and certification.

The data collected was organized on a table where the functions mentioned by Nevo (2007) were registered and where content of the semantic registration units appeared. According to it was established the relationship between the speech of the department coordinators, the functions of evaluation (Nevo, 2007) and the SEE consequences, in order to "isolate the various meanings present" (Esteves, 2006, p. 114).

Regarding ethical issues, several principles were used, namely in terms of informed consent and ensuring the confidentiality and anonymity of the
institutions and respondents (Lima, 2006; Quivy & Campenhoudt, 2005; Tuckman, 2002).

Results and discussion

The content analysis carried out had, as main objective, to comprehend the perspective of the department coordinators regarding the consequences of SEE framed in a logic of evaluation argued by Nevo (2007). To understand the analysis of the overall results and promote a discussion, was used some direct quotes from the focus group of the department coordinators, which we called: Interview 1 (I1) and Interview 2 (I2).

As it was already said, this study was carried out on two different areas of the north of Portugal, however both lead us to similar practices. Nevertheless one of the differences between the schools’ clusters is the practice of self-assessment because in one of the schools it is supported by an external team and in the other school cluster there is a team composed with teachers from the school.

Framed on Nevo’s (2007) functions it is presented below the analysis and discussion of the results collected.

As regards the decision-making function described by Nevo (2007) it was observed that the department coordinators show an interest in the decisions taken by the leadership, since their greater involvement is carried out, mainly, in the pedagogical council, on virtual platforms or through general meetings of teachers. For example, the analysis of IGEC final report is performed by all the school teachers, and only after that discussion is carried out the contradictory outcome report as showed by the interviewees: "If you review our schedule you will see how we dealt with the analysis of the strengths and weaknesses mentioned in the SEE report" (I1); "(...) in this general meeting we analyzed the most controversial issues that we considered inconsistent. And then the contradictory outcome report emerges" (I2). Responding to the question “Do you know the contradictory outcome report?” I1 answered emphatically: “Yes. It was collaborative!".

Therefore, data from interviews tends to an exogenous effect of the SEE (Ehren & Visscher, 2006) since the model leads to a standardization of organizational practices prescribed by central management that unify and centralize. Despite the legislation pointing only to the compulsory self-evaluation practices, the absence of a team in one of the schools’ clusters, turns out to be penalizing for that school, as its stated in I2: "(...) for many years now we do self-assessment. Maybe not in the way that IGEC wants, the way it’s legislated".

One of the issues raised by the department coordinators from I1 reflects the function of accountability, since there is an attempt to approach the processes and results to the expectation that each school cluster has on the process of SEE: "(...) we have worked in the sense of approaching the external evaluation criteria, we aren’t here to work things that aren’t evaluated ... SEE is just that. We have to produce in terms of what we are asked" (I1). However, during the interview recognized that: "We cannot say we started working more because of the SEE (...) or overthrow our attitudes and practices". In this regard, in the I2 interview, the department coordinators consider that "(...) SEE doesn’t condition
our conduct or influence our daily routines", showing some resistance in recognizing the impact that SEE had on their schools’ clusters.

On the curricular level, in both interviews, it is clear the concern to approach students assessment criteria with the criteria of external evaluation assessment (examinations and national tests): "(...) the attitudes and values worth 20%, but we thought we were valuing too much this domain because it was not included in the external evaluation assessment (...)" (I1). In I2 it is claimed: "(...) we are getting closer to the criteria of the national tests". At pedagogical level the focused on results is not beneficial, however, as they demonstrate to be prevalent in the results of SEE, the school seeks to channel its resources to control the supporting practices that result in improved academic performance: "I think the results of external evaluation is conditioned by the assessment of students". This data result demonstrates the perverse effect of distracting the educational actors and the surrounding community for a short-term, resulting in myopia effect (Ehren & Visscher, 2006). Considering the data gathered from the interviews, there is a propensity for making pragmatic decisions centered on schools’ results which promotes the continuous targeting and school particularization, reflecting itself in increased bureaucracy.

In the function of improvement, to the department coordinators SEE does not cause an obvious improvement: "They said that our school had improved from the first to the second cycle of SEE and we don’t agree anything with it! (...) we think that we were as good at the first cycle of SEE, but the marks have been different..." (I1). According to the data schools’ improvement and development are driven by external guidance led by the SEE process: "(...) two years before we had another inspector which resulted in an improvement plan" (I1). It is evident the concern shown by one of the department coordinators who says: "It worries me the importance given to the school and educational success" (I2). This particular speech that shows that the reality is still far from IGEC intentions that aims to "contribute to the development of schools" (IGEC, 2011) with the process of SEE.

At the level of professionalism, the interviews refer the differences of the SEE’s teams between the 1st and the 2nd cycle of evaluation. It is highlighted by the I2 school the existence self-assessment consolidated practices and, therefore, the 1st cycle of SEE was felt as an opportunity for improvement. In the perspective of I1, the 1st cycle of SEE was regarded as a threat that promoted the creation and rooting of the identity of the school and caused the adoption of the external references for self-assessment. Crossing the analysis of the interviews and the schools’ characteristics the inspection’s approach in the 1st SEE’s cycle tended to be directive (Pacheco, Seabra & Morgado, 2014) as shown in the I1: "It was so unpleasant and arrogant (…) I didn’t find their attitude intelligent...", whereas in the 2nd SEE’s cycle, the interviewees envisioned this process in a more optimistic way, a fact supported by Rodrigues and Moreira (2016).

Regarding the certification function in I1 is argued that there is a stigma attached to SEE: "If there isn’t stigma or prejudice, and the Inspection comes without fixed ideas, I think this school cannot be misjudged". From the perspective of the Coordinators (I2) the "formatting" of the SEE’s process doesn’t allows the educational context to be a weighting factor in the evaluation of the
school. There is a gap between the results of the SEE and what is experienced in schools: "I think sometimes they come too shaped for certain things (...) and sometimes I think they don't give a margin of differentiation between schools". Both interviews are unanimous on the issue that SEE's reflects in the school and so, on I1, is assumed a critical position to the model used by IGEC: "I think there isn’t a model that can reach this level (...) for that arise such inconsistencies with the results of other schools". For being considered a process far from reality, the speech of the department coordinators illustrates the minimal formative characteristics of SEE's, stating that the prior existence of a self-assessment culture in schools is what addresses the systemic needs felt in the educational context: "(...) we have always done our self-evaluation" (I2). One of the potential functions of SEE’s is the schools social image perceived by the community and this is reflected in both interviews: "It is a prestigious point for the community and it doesn’t result from SEE's, because our families will not read the report of external evaluation" (I2) and "I think the community recognizes our work". About the changes at organizational level there is an ossification effect (Ehren & Visscher, 2006), since there is a demand for school to match the internal dynamics of assessment with the SEE’s guidelines published by IGEC.

Conclusion

Through the analysis of the interviews it was founded a connection between SEE and the functions identified by Nevo (2007). SEE is a process that legitimizes the decision-making of the intermediate schools leaders as an important part of the improvement of the organizational, pedagogical and curricular practices carried out by schools supporting the school image before society. The data points to the recognition of the importance of the educational context and the work done by the department coordinators.

For the intermediate leaderships the SEE’s processes are more effective when there are self-assessment practices carried out by the schools.

Notes

2. According to the Decree-Law no. 137/2012, 2nd July, 31st article, the pedagogical council is responsible for the coordination, pedagogical supervision and educational orientation of each school cluster.

References


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