

2.1. Education governance, autonomy and accountability

SP - (18742) - CONTROLLED OR AUTONOMOUS INNOVATION? THE CASE OF THE INNOVATION PLANS IN THE EYES OF THE SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

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Short Abstract

Existing legal framework of “autonomy and flexibility” points to the possibility for schools to manage curriculum and to develop initiatives to promote students’ achievement, and to meet their specific characteristics and learning needs (see Decree-Law nº55/2018, 6thJuly and Decree-Law nº54/2018, 6thJuly). Within this legal framework, schools are also granted the opportunity to develop “innovation plans” in order to benefit from higher levels of autonomy (greater than 25%) to provide curricular and pedagogical responses aimed at fostering students’ success and inclusion (see Portaria 181/2019, 11thJune). Innovation is, however, a concept which is subject to various interpretations. It goes beyond a mere reform and it implies a process which is associated with a certain level of flexibility “oriented to the resolution of locally identified problems” (Canário,2005,p.95). As such a bottom-up movement is advocated which is dependent upon the autonomy and flexibility given to teachers (OECD,2018) within a perspective of school improvement and institutional capacity to learn (Bolívar,2017).

This paper reports on findings from a 3-year research project (funded by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology “IMPACT-Investigating the Impact of School Leadership on Pupil Outcomes” (PTDC/CED-EDG/28570/2017) aimed at examining leadership practices and their impact on teachers' work and students' learning and achievement. This paper focuses on school principals’ perceptions about the “innovation plans” and the reasons put forward to (or not to) submit them.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews (n=25) and a survey (n=379) between September 2019 and September 2021. Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS (version26). Content analysis was used to analyse qualitative data and to look at emerging categories based on the semantic criterion (Esteves,2006). In order to ensure accuracy, 'verification' strategies (Creswell,1998) were used through which research team members engaged in a process of systematic analysis of the categories and sub-categories in order to reduce and make sense of the data (Miles & Huberman,1994). The research project was approved by the Committee of Ethics for Research in Social and Human Sciences at the University of Minho (CEICSH 009/2020) and by the DGE/Ministry of Education (Ref.º0555900002).

Findings point to a rather skeptical and critical view from the part of the school principals regarding the submission of “innovation plans”. The vast majority of principals responding to the survey (76.8%,f=291 out of379) did not submit an “innovation plan”, although it should be noted that they are not mandatory. Only 1 principal (out of the25 interviewees) claimed having submitted an “innovation plan”. The reasons put forward are associated with a skeptical perspective in regard to the proposed concept of “innovation plan”. They question its relevance and effectiveness which they relate to a logic of control. The bureaucratic and normative dimension, teachers’ resistance to change, inadequate timing of the proposal and the amount of projects going on in the schools are at the forefront of the respondents’ accounts. A minority of principals identified with the initiative which they relate to issues of improvement, the image of the school and the promotion of educational success. These and other issues will be explored in the paper.

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