

2.1. Education governance, autonomy and accountability

SP - (18876) - EXTERNALISATIONS IN THE PORTUGUESE PARLIAMENT AND PRINT MEDIA: A COMPLEXITY APPROACH TO EDUCATION POLICYMAKING PROCESSES

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Short Abstract

This paper presents the final conclusions of a large project analysing the complex dynamics emerging from the interactions between global and local actors in policymaking processes. It follows the perspective of earlier research that while taking 'the process of globalisation for granted' (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004. P. 4) recognize the importance of local features and societal conditions, and that at the national and local level, global trends are received, interpreted, and used in diversified ways (e.g., edited book Steiner-Khamsi & Waldo, 2012). The research question is: How are references to international organizations, their tools of assessment and guidance, and practices of other countries used in the discussions on education policy in Portugal?

I apply qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2014), rhetorical analysis (Edwards et al., 2004; Leach, 2011) and frame analysis (Entman, 1993) as research methods, and use the complexity thinking approach as onto-epistemological background to enable the construction of a theoretical framework composed by several theories: multiple streams approach (Kingdon, 2003), epistemic governance framework (Alasuutari & Qadir, 2019) and thematisation theory (Saperas, 1987; Luhmann, 1996). This framework enabled a multifaceted analysis of externalisations to world situations (Schriewer, 1990). These theories share an understanding of social systems and the processes within them, as being complex and non-linear (Capano, 2009). Complexity thinking enables looking into the interactions and dynamics between the elements of a system to understand complexities that are manifested at the system level (Cilliers, 1998).

Portugal is the context of this study (more specifically the parliamentary debates in education and the print media) for two main reasons. Firstly, a broad analysis of the uses of international references in education discussions remains scarce and is non-existent regarding the Portuguese parliamentary context. Secondly, I found it interesting that, unlike many other countries and regions already analysed in earlier research, PISA and its results were not incorporated in the education discussions until later rounds of the survey (after 2005), which led me to wonder if other international elements were used by political and social actors in education discussions, what were they, and why were they chosen.

The main conclusion of the study is that international elements constitute useful sources of authority that are used by social and political actors as strategic tools for the (de-)legitimation of policy ideas and proposals that are struggling to achieve the necessary consensus for the initiation of social change. This exercise's ultimate goal is to manage the policy process's contingency and reduce its complexity. However, in the Portuguese context it seems that the frequent use of the same international elements by different actors, often advocating contradictory ideas and proposals, has sustained the complexity of the policymaking process, leading to the failure of several attempts to advance comprehensive reform plans. This study therefore contributes to the understanding that processes of education policymaking are more complex than is often assumed, and that contrary to the original policymakers' intentions, attempts to reduce this complexity can actually increase it.

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