Accepted version of:

School performance management practices and school achievement

Abstract

Purpose – The literature is very rich in its discussion on how to measure school performance, but there are still a number of gaps to investigate in relation to the determinants of that performance, especially at the level of school performance management practices. The purpose of the paper is to better understand performance management practices in schools and how they may relate to school achievement.

Design/methodology/approach – Frequently, the performance of schools is evaluated using solely output measures: especially exam classifications, but also progression rates, completion rates and wastage rates. Previously, a value-added approach was used to quantitatively evaluate Portuguese secondary schools beyond output results. From the results of this exercise, a sample of schools with different levels of observed performance was chosen. In-depth case studies of the sample of schools were undertaken to gather an understanding of their performance management practices, taking Bouckaert and Halligan's (2008) framework of analysis.

Findings – Self-evaluation and performance management is not well developed in schools. Most schools monitor exam results, progression and completion rates. However, they do not seem to do it in a formal and systematic way, and find it difficult to understand the reasons for the results obtained. Incorporation of performance measures into performance management is incipient, and most acknowledge the difficulty of going from measurement of results to improvement actions. Few can demonstrate that improvement actions have resulted from self-evaluation and very few evaluate improvement actions' results. There seems to be an agreement that the external evaluation of schools has prompted the development of self-evaluation.

Originality/value – This is a study at the meso level of analysis of public sector performance, that of state education. The study contributes to a better understanding of performance management in Portuguese secondary schools. More generally, it investigates the usefulness of the Bouckaert and Halligan (2008) framework to assess progress in performance management and whether that will lead to progress in performance itself.

Keywords Performance management, secondary schools, Portugal

Paper type Research paper

Managing performance in education in an evaluative era

Since the 1980s, it has become commonplace to assert that a new contemporary public management model is emerging (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004; Ferlie et al., 2005: 1, 2). Several authors wrote and developed theories around this new paradigm, leading to an ongoing discussion where there is little consensus. Some embraced the move to "new public management", some criticized it and some argued that there is a further shift from a "new public management" perspective to a "governance" perspective (Hood, 1995). Nevertheless, they all agree with the idea that there are no "globality" and no "monoparadigmatic" character in the contemporary public management change (Osborne, 2006). In this context the concept of an "audit society" emerges, reflecting the growth of monitoring and evaluation activities, the increased demands for accountability and transparency and the rise of quality assurance models of organizational control (Power, 1997; Osborne, 2006).

Managing performance has become the subject of debates about the value of performance, its measurement and management, and has also become a growth area within public administration and management (Van de Walle, 2009; Talbot, 2010). To handle the complexity of public sector performance, Bouckaert and Halligan (2008: 15) summarize performance management as a cycle of procedures and institutional activities. They also chart the evolution of performance management models in the public sector and their impact on public sector organizations. They provide an analytical framework for understanding performance management in the public sector. In their analysis, they distinguish between the measurement, the incorporation, and the use of performance measures, and show that as performance management systems evolve, the emphasis given to each stage moves from the measurement, to the incorporation, and finally to the use of performance measurement for improvement. They develop four ideal types from Performance Administration, Managements of Performances, Performance Management, and Performance Governance as the level of consolidation and integration of performance management becomes more sophisticated.

"*Measuring* performance is systematically collecting data by observing and registering performance related issues for some performance related purpose" (Bouckaert and Halligan, 2008: 26). Therefore, we can find different goals, agents, levels and contents of performance measurement. All of these require certain performance measurement policies in order to design proper measurement systems according to the context.

"*Incorporating* is importing performance-related data into documents and procedures with the potential and purpose of using them. The purpose is to create the possibility of including performance-related information in the discourse and ultimately into the culture of the organization" (Bouckaert and Halligan, 2008: 26). In other words, "incorporating" is integrating the information into documents, procedures and stakeholders' discourses, which also means reporting, diffusing and discussing the information from the performance data.

"*Using* incorporated performance information refers to debates and institutionalized procedures for stakeholders for the purpose of designing policies, for deciding, (…) for (self) evaluating and assessing behaviour and results and for substantiating reporting and accountability mechanisms" (Bouckaert and Halligan, 2008: 42). In this way, "using" is about applying a strategy of improving decision making, results and accountability.

In synthesis, performance management includes three main elements: measurement (collection of information on organizational performance), incorporation (reporting of organizational performance information to organizational stakeholders), and use (use of organizational performance information for decision making).

According to Power (1996) the "age of inspection", the "evaluative state" or the "audit society" affect every area of social and economic life, with formalized checking, assessment, scrutiny, verification and evaluation. The education area is certainly not an exception. If, before, systematic "evaluations" of schools and the evaluation of the school as a whole were rarely a significant component in schools' life, since the early seventies much has changed in evaluation within the educational system. While many schools are not yet used to evaluating their programs and projects, some other schools systematically evaluate their programs to improve their quality. In reality, these schools are scattered around the world in many educational systems and present a very important advance in school evaluation (Nevo, 2002: ix, xx).

School self-evaluation has various driving forces and purposes. Nevertheless, the political field is one of the main driving forces, namely, the political pressure to assure quality and deliver value for money (MacBeath, 1999), together with other purposes: accountability, professional development, organizational development, the improvement of teaching and the improvement of learning (MacBeath, 1999; Kyriakides and Campbell, 2004).

However, school evaluation is not a straightforward affair. The reality shows that often the dissemination of information is not done effectively and even less is the practical use of it, in part because school self-evaluation is still something 'strange' to schools, despite the fact that internal evaluation should be an integral part of school life, embracing key aspects of a school's work (McGlynn and MacBeath, 2002). Some authors point out the importance of passing information and using the results of the evaluation (McGlynn and MacBeath, 2002; Simons, 2002), however there seems to be a focus on the measurement and the collection of information, even acknowledging that other phases are important. In fact, in practice, these phases seem to be considered secondary and are not always applied in schools, which focus on the measurement stage, thinking less how the results of the evaluation should be applied in practical terms on the school reality. McNamaraa and O'Haraa (2005) give us the example of a framework for school evaluation used in Ireland, entitled 'Looking at Our Schools', which was a very important framework for school self-evaluation but one of the limitations was that there was 'no indication as to how problems identified in schools will be resolved'. Additionally, the study of Faubert (2009) on school evaluation current practices in OECD countries, identifies obstacles on the utilization of the evaluation results, as a main consideration.

The importance given to education today and the attention to its evaluation and quality improvement, connected with the need for more adequate models for school management, are the basis for this research paper. The empirical work reported in it is based on the performance management framework proposed by Bouckaert & Halligan (2008), at the 'meso' level, defined by the authors as being at the level of a policy field (p. 18), in this case education.

The Portuguese context for school performance management

As discussed in Rhodes et al. (2012) in this issue, Portugal positions itself in the 'Performance Administration' type of performance management, albeit with some evidence of a transition to 'Managements of Performances'. This transition can also be observed in the education policy field, with a number of legislative initiatives. First schools were granted more autonomy in their administration and management in 1998, which led to concerns over accountability. A number of programmes designed to evaluate schools since the beginning of the 1990s (Coelho et al., 2007), culminated in a law of 2002 making it a requirement that all schools should self-evaluate and that should be followed by an external evaluation. Despite the legal requirement none of aforementioned programmes for school evaluation managed to complete a full cycle of evaluations of all schools under the same framework. These discontinuities were due to the rotation of education ministries and constant changes in policy. As none of these programmes was ever completed, the 2002 law on school evaluation was more a rhetoric device than an effective policy instrument.

Coincidentally, in 2001 a major national newspaper won a court battle to force the Ministry to make national exam classifications for every secondary school publicly available. This gave rise to a proliferation of school rankings published by the media, and a consequent national debate on the merits and demerits of such rankings. In part as a result of this debate, in 2006 a working group on school evaluation was nominated by the Ministry. From the report of the working group a new programme for school evaluation was launched and by the end of the school year 2010/11, all schools, from pre-school to secondary school, had been evaluated in mainland Portugal (the islands of Madeira and Azores have autonomous education systems).

The external evaluation of schools is undertaken by the General Inspectorate of Education (IGE). Generally and according to the legislative framework, the IGE is competent to intervene in the education system. In the scope of audit and control, it is responsible for the evaluation and monitoring of the technical-pedagogical and administrative-financial branches of pre-school, school-based and extra-school education activities developed in public and private schools, as well as schools and courses abroad where Portuguese is taught. In 2007, IGE took on the work developed, the year before, by the working group nominated by the Ministry. The external evaluation teams visiting the schools are formed by two IGE inspectors plus an external evaluator (a lay member, normally a retired school head or an academic). There are five domains of evaluation: 'pupils' results'; 'educational service'; 'school organization and management'; 'leadership; and 'self-regulation and school improvement capacity'. This team produces a report which is sent afterwards to the concerning school for their consideration of any aspects they might want to contradict. The programme ran on a voluntary basis up to the last year of the evaluation cycle 2009/11, where the schools that had not been evaluated in the previous years of the cycle were then evaluated.

Despite the fact that, nominally, schools had to self-evaluate in accordance with the school evaluation law of 2002, and that schools had to produce a self-evaluation report as a prerequisite for external evaluation, the analysis of the classifications awarded by IGE show that the worst assessed domain in the programme for school evaluation is that of 'self-regulation and school improvement capacity' (IGE, 2010). This fact has given added motivation for the study presented in this article.

Additionally, the issue of school evaluation in Portugal is of considerable importance given the fact that the results of the pupils are generally considered to be bad, based on the evolution of national exam classifications as well as international comparisons such as the PISA programme (please see www.pisa.oecd.org). Moreover, the results have not improved, despite a significant increase in the amount of resources allocated to the education system.

Data and methodology

This paper presents the results of a qualitative analysis, i.e. in-depth case studies of a sample of Portuguese secondary schools. This qualitative approach constitutes the second part of a research project that had an important previous quantitative stage. This quantitative analysis consisted on a benchmarking exercise of the Portuguese secondary schools' performance, evaluated externally by the Ministry of Education in 2007, taking a value-added approach, which took into consideration not only output measures, but also input variables, as well as other variables not under the direct control of schools (see Sarrico and Rosa, 2009 for more details, and a more thorough discussion on the issue of measuring performance in the education field). From the results of this exercise, a sample of schools with different levels of observed performance was chosen.

The choice of the schools was guided by a typology of school performance developed by Sarrico (2010) based on 'perceived' performance (given by national exam classification rankings) and 'true' performance (given by a value-added model in Sarrico and Rosa, 2009). Four ideal types of schools can be identified:

'Elite schools': these schools are perceived to be excellent schools, given their position in the rankings based on exam classifications, but they are also at the frontier of observed performance when it comes to value-added, i.e. no other schools, given the same inputs achieve better outputs.

'Against-all-odds schools': these schools are perceived to be failing schools given their position in the rankings of exam classifications. However, given their inputs they have remarkable performance, again being in the frontier of observed performance for their level of inputs. They clearly exceed expectations.

'Fatalistic schools': these schools have low exam classifications, which would be expected given their low level of inputs. However, they also have low measured performance given their inputs, and could be doing a lot better.

'Coasting schools': these are schools that despite their high exam classifications could be doing a lot better given their level of inputs. Their insufficient performance is disguised by their relatively high exam classification, due mostly to their high level of inputs.

Twelve secondary schools were chosen for our study, three from each type. 40 semi-structured interviews (involving 42 people, as two interviews were group interviews with two people) to strategic actors in the school, in general, and in the self-evaluation process, in particular, were conducted. Interviews took place between December 2009 and February 2010. Each interview took on average 45 minutes, with the exception of the interviews to the heads of administrative services which tended to be shorter due to their less involvement in

and knowledge of performance management. We chose to interview four people in each school (albeit in a few cases it was only possible to interview less people), which had different roles in the school: director (the managing head of the school), general council president (the head of the governance body), the person in charge of the self-evaluation process and the administrative services director. Our final sample, with all the influence factors aforementioned, can be found in Appendix 1.

The research project's main goal has been to understand the performance management process taking place in each school, considering the three main stages proposed by Bouckaert and Halligan (2008) (measurement, incorporation and use), i.e., how (or if) schools measure their performance, incorporate the results and use that information to improve their practices. In addition by selecting the above sample, we wanted to investigate whether there was evidence that elite schools and against-all-odds schools, given their better than expected value-added might have more developed performance management practices. Finally, by interviewing people with significant responsibility for school management and governance and/ or self-evaluation processes, we intended to have a representative view of performance management at the schools. By interviewing different actors with different roles, we also expected to have different perspectives on the subject.

Interview guidelines drove the semi-structured interviews. They contained questions on the stages of the performance management process (measurement, incorporation and use), the influences (internal and external) to the process, and the opinions (positive and negative) about the same process. This paper will focus on the measurement, incorporation and use dimensions. The interviews were all transcribed and content analysis was undertaken using QSR NVivo 9 software. Departing from the three dimensions that constitute the performance management process, some categories of analysis emerged. The discourse of the interviewees was coded in accordance with the categories enabling the gathering of evidence to reach our conclusions. In addition, some counting was done in relation to the number of schools and/or interviewees that referred to a certain category of analysis. Given the number of interviews, a statistical analysis of the counting is obviously not adequate. However, the numbers collated give an indication of the strength of the supporting evidence for some conclusions reached. When appropriate this counting is referred to in the article following the respective assertion.

It should be noted that, within the general guidelines for the semi-structured interviews, the questions were adjusted to the interviewees and to their level of knowledge about them. As such, in the course of the project, we felt the need to replace the expression 'performance management' by 'self-evaluation', since this was the expression with which the interviewees were familiar. This change originated in a pre-test with the goal of testing the interviews' guidelines and allowed us to adjust the final interview script accordingly.

The project culminated in a public presentation of the results. The following entities were represented: the Secretary of State for Education, the General Inspector for Education, the heads of the regional inspectorate offices, the heads of the regional education authorities, representatives of the schools involved, the head of the representative council of school heads, and representatives of several other schools, and researchers.

Performance management practices in Portuguese secondary schools

Measurement

A number of interviewees perceived measurement practices as a long-standing process (existing before the external evaluation promoted by the IGE started) that was, essentially, related to the concern with self-evaluation and/or, in some cases, to some embryonic and informal practices, and more rarely, to a formal (based on a self-evaluation framework) and systematic (occurring periodically) measurement process. In fact, if this process did exist, it was only after the external evaluation programme started that it became formal. A lot of times, the interviewees talked about an old process resorting to vague sentences, such as:

'Actually, I think this school always had a tradition of self-analysis.' (Director – School J)

Consequently, the testimonies are not so much about the beginning of a formal self-evaluation process that starts with measurements, but more of the acknowledgement of the importance of measurements and attempts to implement measurement practices:

'I think self-evaluation activities are extremely important, so much so that the year that I became part of the executive board, 2001, was the first in which self-evaluation was performed in the school.' (Director – School F)

'For me the self-evaluation process is essential and not only the production of reports that result of the data treatment, etc., but a constant and systematic thinking about what is done daily in the school even in a non-formal way.' (Director – School J)

When we compare the testimonies about the formality and informality of the measurement process, we can see that there are references to some formal self-evaluation tools.

'We, in a first stage, elaborated questionnaires directed at all the school community, to the teaching personnel, non-teaching personnel, to the parents, students and administration services. (...) We wanted to know what the school community thought about the school.' (Responsible for the self-evaluation – School D)

The references to measurement practices as a more recent process refer, mainly, to the idea that the external evaluation undertaken by IGE was the main driver for the implementation of a self-evaluation process in the school, namely in those evaluated negatively in the 'self-regulation and school improvement capacity' dimension. From that moment onwards, the incentive to correct the highlighted problem, by creating teams responsible for the self-evaluation, triggered in schools a range of practices that moved closer to a formal and systematic self-evaluation process.

'I performed that duty for 2 years when the commission was created, after an external evaluation in which the school had poor results in terms of self-evaluation. After that, the school had to create a self-regulation team, and that was when we started and that is what we have done over the last two years'. (Responsible for the self-evaluation – School D)

'Despite being in here for a long time, the self-evaluation is not something I came across a lot of times. It didn't happen many times. It was done because of the external evaluation.' (Director- School A)

The existence of some formal tools does not mean the existence of a systematic measurement process. It seems that there is some confusion regarding these two concepts in the minds of some interviewees. The systematic practices started, in most cases, only recently.

'In the history of self-evaluation, we had very superficial mechanisms. In 2007 we applied for the external evaluation and the biggest weakness which they found was the lack of systematic self-evaluation mechanisms.' (Director – School E)

'Before, we've done self-evaluation only occasionally, but with the external evaluation we now feel the need to make it more regularly.' (Director – School B)

'We had some ad-hoc practices but were not related with one another and were not associated with a systematic process.' (Director – School M)

The reference to the existence of non-formal measurement practices translates the consciousness of the absence of a structured model of self-evaluation:

'There isn't a document of self-evaluation, there are a number of documents about various things that are done and, in a way, evaluated, there is some documentation about projects, the marks that students obtain in the exams as well as at the end of the year. But that information is not assembled.' (Director – School H)

In a formal or/and systematic or a non-formal or/and non systematic way, the area most mentioned as being subject to measurement practices, as expected, is the teaching and the student results.

'In the self-evaluation, the students' results are extremely important, namely, to observe the school success, the school failure, the dropout rates, and then try to understand why things happen and what we can do to stop school failure.' (General Council President – School G)

'Our concern now is the school failure and the dropout rates.' (General Council President – School I)

'We are evaluating the students' results. We are working with the results of the first term, which will be presented in the pedagogic council so they can reflect over those results.' (Director – School L)

Therefore, we see the absence of formal measurement processes (as the literature understands them), but the existence of some measurement practices (although not integrated in a formal and systematic process). Even the existence of formal models, as the EFQM Excellence Model and the CAF, or the reference framework of IGE (mentioned by two, three, and four interviewees, respectively) in some schools does not reflect the existence of a formal and systematic internal self-evaluation process.

Although there is, in some schools, the clear conscience of what self-evaluation is and the need to implement it, we also noticed a lack of knowledge about the objectives and the results that self-evaluation may bring:

'There is a lack of information about what self-evaluation is. We never had any special instruction about self-evaluation so people could understand what it is, what it is for and how it is done.' (General Council President – School L)

'*The community in general is not aware of the importance and the need of self-evaluation.*' (Director – School B)

'*People ask themselves what is school self-evaluation for and the people who make part of the self-evaluation team are seen as outsiders in the school, who are always asking everyone for data.*' (Responsible for the self-evaluation – School A)

With respect to the stakeholders' involvement in the measurement stage (and also in the next one: incorporation), teachers and directors are the main agents in the process:

'*Those who are more involved in the self-evaluation are teachers and, amongst them, those who have more responsibilities: director, head of departments, teacher responsible for the class, i.e., those who live closer to the school problems and want to solve them.*' (Director – School E)

We also observe that there is a lack of interest and involvement from the people outside, but also from inside of some of the appointed self-evaluation teams:

'*What was worst in the last self-evaluation was the weak involvement of the team. It could be a lot better!*' (Responsible for the Self-Evaluation –School J)

'*It is very complicated to build up a self-evaluation team. People don't find it attractive because that means work.*' (General Council President and Responsible for the Self-Evaluation – School H)

'*It is important to have more participation from all the members of the school community, i.e., to have a more extended team with teachers, students, non-teaching staff, external members. Then it will be possible to have all school community aware of what is done in the school every day.*' (Director – School D)

Bouckaert and Halligan (2008: 26) use the word 'systematically' to qualify the process of measuring performance. It seems that this is precisely what is mostly missing from the Portuguese schools studied. As expected, by years of rankings by the media, and an increased focus by the educational authorities on school achievement, the evidence points to mainly registering exam results along with progression and completion rates, with little measuring of factors that might determine those results, the general cornerstone of the formal models mentioned by some interviewees. Schools seem to understand the importance and the need for self-evaluation but acknowledge difficulties in moving forward to the actual implementation of formal and systematic processes. Moreover, the motivation for doing so does not seem to result from an intrinsic need of data for improvement, but more as an extrinsic motivation relating to fulfilling the requisites of the external evaluation imposed on them.

Incorporation

In the incorporation dimension it is difficult to establish a clear distinction between a limited and a comprehensive dissemination. What happens, in most schools, is the dissemination of the results of the self-evaluation in the Pedagogical Council, which is composed by the Director and representatives of the teaching staff, non-teaching staff, parents and students. In practical terms, however, most of the time this council ends up being

composed exclusively by representatives of the teaching staff (due to the general absence of the other members in the scheduled meetings) and for this reason what could work as a dissemination channel for the various members of the educational community ends up being restricted to the teachers.

The Pedagogic Council is then a vehicle for the dissemination and discussion of self-evaluation results but mostly among teachers:

'There is space to debate in more depth the results in the pedagogic council and it is normally there that some strategies are defined. (...) And when the pedagogic council has some issue to solve, the delegates take it to the subject groups and things are discussed in the group and come back so that we understand where we stand.' (Self-evaluation responsible - school F)

'Therefore, the ones with a more active role are teachers and within teachers the ones with more responsibilities: director, heads of department, teachers responsible for classes; and that experience more directly the problems and want to find solutions.' (Director – School E)

In fact, it may be concluded from the interviews that parents, students and the school community in general do not have a strong participation in the incorporation stage of the performance management cycle, even when they are called to participate, in the pedagogic council, in the general council, or in other contexts:

'Parents rarely participate in the school's life and there is no parents association. To choose the representatives of the general council we have called all the parents and just three showed up.' (Director – School F)

'One of the weakest points is the lack of participation of the local community in the school's life, because we have to take into account that the school is not only what is inside its doors.' (General Council President – School M)

'One weak point in the self-evaluation process is related to the lack of participation of some members of the school community, which even when they are called to participate, do not, and especially the students don't show an effort and interest in taking part in the school life.' (General Council President – School E)

The writing up of reports, namely those resulting from the discussion of the self-evaluation results in the pedagogic council, also seems to be a systematic practice in schools, that, however, in most cases, does not reach outside the pedagogic council and the teaching staff (as stated by the heads of the administrative services, the only representatives of the non-teaching staff included in our interviews).

'These results go to the pedagogic council, and after that the heads of department also elaborate reports focused on the problems found.' (Director – School D)

As with what was stated in the 'Measuring' dimension above, a limitation found also here is the centralization of the dissemination process on the students' results, without consideration for the determinants of those results, which is a common feature of formal models of self-evaluation. Student results are easily disseminated to the whole community, through the school's webpage or even at the school itself.

'*The results are public. If you visit the school's webpage you will find reports that analyse in simple terms, directed at various publics, the results of national exams and in recent years, of internal evaluations.*' (President of the General Council – School J)

As final remarks, we can say that the dissemination of the self-evaluation results seems to constitute a common practice, although not under a formal self-evaluation approach, done in a systematic way. Consequently, it is more correct to speak about systematic attempts of dissemination that, although initially seem to involve the educational community as a whole, end up being in fact limited to certain actors of that community, mainly, the teachers and the members of the school general council.

Furthermore, and taking into account the theoretical model used for our empirical work, this second stage of performance management, designated incorporation, goes beyond the discussion and dissemination of the performance results (in this case, self-evaluation) between the different elements of the educational community. It is also about 'incorporation', meaning importing the performance data (self-evaluation) into documents and proceedings with the objective of being used in the schools. The objective is, therefore, to create the possibility of including the information about performance (self-evaluation) in the discourse and ultimately, in the school culture.

According to these objectives, we can conclude that they are not being achieved in the schools studied; more steps need to be taken to move from the dissemination (still with limitations) into the real incorporation of the evaluation results.

Use

The dimension 'use' is considered as the self-evaluation stage that is harder to implement in schools, not only in theoretical terms (based on the literature review conducted in the topic), but also when the interviewees are questioned about the biggest difficulties of the self-evaluation process:

'*Yes, that is the problem, to move from the diagnosis to action* (…).' (Responsible for self-evaluation – School G)

Despite that, the number of interviewees stating that there are actions resulting from the evaluation process and that the use of the results of the evaluation is weak is the same (nine each) and only four of the interviewees said that there is 'no use' at all of self-evaluation results. Therefore, the information collected through the empirical study should be carefully read.

First of all, it is common for the interviewees to state that they use the results of self-evaluation in a rather vague manner, failing to give concrete examples, when asked about them:

'*We analyse the weak points of the evaluation results and try to act on them.*' (Responsible for the self-evaluation – School J)

'*The action has been done according to what we think is better. Now we have to start acting based on more concrete data.*' (Responsible for self-evaluation – School F)

Additionally, one must distinguish between two aspects that are often blurred, when schools present examples of improvement actions. In some cases, these are the end product of a measurement and dissemination process (a), but in others they are only occasional improvements to the school problems, mostly in ancillary services (b):

(a)

'*These results go to the pedagogic council, and then the heads of department also elaborate reports directed at the problems found. As an example, if someone tells me that we need to support history or geography better because it is identified as having an unusual student failure, we send a proposal to the pedagogic council president stating that we need an additional 45 minutes a week and supported study.*' (Director – School D)

'*And from that originated a completely computerised administrative services, that significantly improved its proceedings as a result of that evaluation; the performance of managing bodies improved, since the communication became easier, being done almost entirely in an electronic way (…).*'(General Council President – School L)'

(b)

'*In terms of structural conditions, we've tried to fix the toilets of teachers, students and non-teaching staff. We've also tried to provide heating for every classroom. We've always tried to make some improvements according to the suggestions we've been receiving.*' (Director – School G)

'*We observed that the eating habits of the students were not the healthiest. So we made the 'milk campaign', through which the students who had drunk more than a glass of milk per day won a prize.*' (General Council President – School M)

'*One of the weaknesses pointed out in the school was related to the school web page which was always out of date. Now we have a team who updates the webpage daily.*' (Director – School F)

Another important category related to the improvement actions is their evaluation. It is essential to evaluate the improvement actions undertaken after the self-evaluation process to see its effects. However, in our sample of schools, improvement actions are rarely evaluated. Only three interviewees, from three different schools, referred that there is some kind of evaluation. This means that schools can make some improvements but these are not generally evaluated to see if they are working or not.

One of the statements is related to a positive evaluation (a) and the other to the negative effects that resulted from the improvement actions undertaken (b).

(a) '*We started a new pedagogic project called students' educational occupation, through which students can have 'spaces' where they can be. In the mean time, we made some questionnaires, namely to the students, to see if the time they were spending in those spaces and the activities they had, were being useful or not. And we had very positive feedback!*' (General Council President – School M)

(b) '*I decided to give more time to English classes because the school was having a lot of students with negative classifications. But this measure is not working because the success in*

the English classes is far below what is expected. And this makes me conclude that something is wrong!' (Director – School A)

Nevertheless, these afore mentioned examples are exceptions to the rule where we can say that the evaluation of actions resulting from the self-evaluation process is not part of the schools' daily reality and culture.

'*We started a very important project to improve the success of teaching in the classroom, but we should have measured the results of the project after its implementation, and we didn't. Did the teaching improve? Did the classes improve? How did they improve? And how did that reflect in the results? Did the students' results improve? We don't have a structured evaluation model.*' (General Council President and Responsible for the Self-Evaluation – School H)

In fact, these and other questions still do not have an answer in the large majority of the schools involved in our study.

The idea of 'using incorporated performance information' is that of making decisions for improving performance (Bouckaert and Halligan, 2008: 28). However, most of the schools studied do not seem to be able to give evidence of improvement actions resulting from their self-evaluation. Moreover, in the few that do give examples of improvement initiatives, there seems to be a disconnection between their measuring and incorporating – mostly of students' results, and their using. Often the examples given of improvement actions refer to ancillary services rather than the core teaching processes affecting students' results. Additionally, the evaluation loop does not seem to be systematically closed, as the effectiveness of the initiatives for improving results is seldom evaluated.

Different types of school different performance management?

After analyzing the self-evaluation process according to its three stages – measurement, incorporation and use – it is important to investigate the perceptions of the different school actors and of the different types of schools included in our sample towards this process. Given that we have interviewed different kinds of people in different types of schools, we may now try to understand if different performance management practices are associated with different types of actors and schools.

From the analysis of the case studies' results there are some differences, which however can hardly be designated as trends, mainly because our sample is small and it is difficult to find big differences between schools or actors. Even so we can see that the heads of schools are those who mostly refer to the existence of performance measurement and somewhat systematic practices, as well as improvement actions based on the self-evaluation process. In this sense, generally speaking, the heads are the people who try to emphasize the best practices of their school. In fact, we can say that this might be an expected result, since they are the people ultimately responsible for school performance.

As mentioned before, we would expect better developed performance management arrangements in 'against-all-odds' and 'elite' schools than in 'fatalistic' and 'coasting' schools. However, our evidence is inconclusive for the relationship between performance management practices and the type of schools. There could be some explanations for this. Our sample

selection was based on performance indicators from 2007, whereas we have interviewed the people in 2009/10. There is the possibility that schools have changed their practices and even their results as a consequence of having been externally evaluated by IGE in 2007. Thus our labelling of them according to our typology may have been superseded in the meantime.

From the public discussion of the results of the study with several of the representatives of the school system in Portugal, it was clear that 'cultural' factors played an important role in the results obtained. The results of the study were not a surprise for the people present; as they seem to be in line with their perceptions. Namely, there seems to be a recurrent discussion on both the lack of real autonomy of the schools to make decisions, in relation to the Ministry and regional education authorities, and/or a difficulty of the schools to exert the recently extended autonomy. As mentioned before, Portuguese public administration, of which the state school system is a part, does not have a 'culture' of autonomy of its services in relation to the 'Centre', and no matter how many legislative initiatives on the matter, it will take time to 'modernise', and make the transition from the rhetoric of autonomy to the reality of self-determined schools who have the capacity to self-regulate and improve their performance of their own accord and as a result of intrinsic motivation to do so.

Concluding remarks

What the results of our study seem to indicate is the application in the analysed schools of some practices that are associated with different stages of the performance management process, but not framed in a formal, structured and systematic process. In fact, and as stated by Bouckaert & Halligan (2008: 39), what differentiates more developed systems of performance are the level of incorporation and specially the use of results. These are the dimensions for which evidence is lacking in our study, but paradoxically, commonly heard in the interviewees' speech, denoting some rhetoric involved in this theme.

We find that the self-evaluation process has been initiated in most schools although it is still not a rooted and internalised process. Nevertheless, there are positive signs in what concerns the development of self-evaluation, either due to internal motivation, such as the teachers and school heads wanting their pupils to have better results, or more often external pressure, such as that exerted by external evaluation of schools by the General Inspectorate for Education or school rankings published by the media.

We conclude from this study that performance management practices are still poorly developed in Portuguese secondary schools. Academic results seem to be the area where most measurement occurs, with some dissemination happening mostly among the teaching staff. Little seems to be done in relation to the determinants of those results, although some schools also measure satisfaction of students, parents and staff. However, when it comes to using the results for action, few can give examples of this happening. When they do, they often mention improvements in ancillary services, rather than in the core teaching and learning processes. Performance management, 'self-evaluation' in the schools jargon, has still to be internalised as a crucial practice for school improvement. This is in accord with the findings of IGE, which shows that in all the domains evaluated by the external evaluation of schools, 'self-regulation and school improvement capacity' is the least well developed (IGE, 2010).

In terms of practice, our study results show that there is a lot to do in terms of performance management practices in Portuguese secondary schools. The research clearly illustrates that there is a need to develop the knowledge on school performance management, which will be able to point to critical performance management practices, identify best practices and use the collected evidence for policy setting. This increased knowledge will promote learning, may foster practice benchmarking exercises between schools and may ultimately inform policy developments.

In this sense, one of the main conclusions of our case studies, which is also emphasized in the literature, is that in most of the Portuguese schools there is no self-evaluation 'culture', which leads to a complex implementation of internal and even external evaluation models. We have observed that, generally speaking, performance management practices or, simply, 'self-evaluation', is something we can say is yet in an embryonic stage, which urgently needs, by its importance, to be matured by all the school's community actors, both internal and external.

In theoretical terms, we conclude for the usefulness of the Bouckaert and Halligan (2008) framework to understand progress in performance management, but more needs to be understood in terms of whether progress in performance management will actually lead to progress in performance itself. The 'culture' issue mentioned above, especially, needs to be further investigated. The positioning of Portugal in the 'Public Administration' archetype, namely its Weberian public administration culture and a very much centralised political system may help explain why after decades of school evaluation (Coelho et al. 2007) and legislative initiatives granting increased autonomy to schools and consequently demanding more accountability, has led to little in terms of schools' capacity for self-regulation and improvement, with school results having stagnated despite increased levels of resourcing.

For a meso-level study, the use of a twelve-case study seems to be insufficient. However, given the level of understanding gathered by this study, we propose a survey-based follow-up study, which would allow for a bigger sample, and hopefully a more conclusive understanding of the relationship between performance management practices and school achievement. Also, since all schools have now been evaluated, the confounding factor of having been evaluated on the practices of the school can be eliminated, and updated data on school performance can be used in the study for all schools in Portugal.

Appendix 1 – Sample of schools

'Type' of school	School	Interviewees	Region	Nº
'Elite'	School A	1. Director	Centre	1
		2. General Council President		2
		3. Responsible for the Self-Evaluation		3
		4. Administrative Services Director		4
	School B	5. Director	North	5
		6. General Council President		6
		7. Administrative Services Director		7
	School C	8. Director	Centre	8
'Against-all-odds'	School D	9. Director	North	9
		10. General Council President		10
		11. Old and New Person Responsible for the Self-Evaluation (group interview)		11, 12
		12. Administrative Services Director		13
	School E	13. Director	Centre	14
		14. General Council President		15
		15. Responsible for the Self-Evaluation		16
		16. Administrative Services Director		17
	School F	17. Director	Lisbon	18
		18. General Council President		19
		19. Responsible for the Self-Evaluation		20
		20. Administrative Services Director		21
'Fatalistic'	School G	21. Director	Lisbon	22
		22. General Council President		23
		23. Responsible for the Self-Evaluation		24
		24. Administrative Services Director		25
	School H	25. Director and General Council President (also Responsible for the Self-Evaluation) (group interview)	North	26, 27
		26. Director and Administrative Services Director (group interview)		26, 28
	School I	27. Director	Lisbon	29
		28. General Council President (also Responsible for the Self-Evaluation)		30
		29. Member of the Self-Evaluation Team		31
'Coasting'	School J	30. Director	Lisbon	32
		31. General Council President		33
		32. Responsible for the Self-Evaluation		34
		33. Administrative Services Director		35
	School L	34. Director	North	36
		35. General Council President		37

	36. Administrative Services Director		38
School M	37. Director	North	39
	38. General Council President		40
	39. Responsible for the Self-Evaluation		41
	40. Administrative Services Director		42

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