Article

The Portuguese schools' evaluation programme: A sociological approach to the participation of social actors

Luísa Veloso
Centre for Research and Studies in Sociology, University Institute of Lisbon, Portugal

Pedro Abrantes
Centre for Research and Studies in Sociology, University Institute of Lisbon, Portugal

Daniela Craveiro
Research Centre for the Social Sciences, Minho University, Portugal

Abstract

This article analyses the current Portuguese Schools' Evaluation Programme, implemented since 2006 in all state schools, as a social construction. The article focuses on a particular topic of the external evaluation the participation of social actors in school life, as well as on school principals' perceptions of the process. Our research is based on a content analysis of schools' evaluation reports conducted in three different regions (Lisbon and Tagus Valley, Alentejo and Algarve) and a series of semi-directive interviews with the principals and chairpersons of the General Councils of 20 schools. While it is important to consider the evaluation programme in the light of international political tendencies (e.g. New Public Management), it is also relevant to understand the impact of such policy on schools. We highlight the contributions of this approach to a wider reflection on evaluation processes.

Keywords

external evaluation, participation, schools, social actors

Introduction

The Schools' Evaluation Programme launched by the Ministry of Education in 2006, and conducted by the General-Inspectorate for Education (GIE), was a major innovation in Portugal. It was the first of such programme to cover all primary and secondary state schools in the country, on a regular

Corresponding author:
Luísa Veloso, Centre for Research and Studies in Sociology, University Institute of Lisbon, Av. das Forças Armadas, 1649-026 Lisbon, Portugal.
Email: luisa.veloso@iscte.pt

basis, producing a report on each school, available to everyone on the internet. Five aspects are described and classified under this programme − school results, educational service, organization, leadership and self-evaluation − by a team made up of two inspectors and one academic expert, who visited the schools over three days for interviews, focus groups and document analysis.

Our article discusses some important features of this programme and how it shapes (and is shaped by) the Portuguese educational field, as a system of interactions between a diversity of social actors with unequal resources both formal and informal such as the Ministry of Education, Regional Agencies, the GIE), principals, teachers, parents, pupils. Our conviction is that a political-administrative evaluation system is a socially constructed process from the outset, since it involves strategic choices, and is governed by ideological assumptions that bring about changes in practices and social relations. Moreover, it is the object of a (re)construction process, in particular through the complex forms of interaction established between the social actors who collect the data, those who analyse them and the people who are subject to the evaluation/classification process.

The Portuguese schools' evaluation programme is part of a broader set of policies, launched in 2005 to reinforce regulatory procedures (also including a new system for teacher assessment), as well as to promote better organization and autonomy for schools. Traditionally, Portuguese education was under the strict control of central government, but recently schools have taken on new responsibilities, so that organizational structure and evaluation have become crucial points on the educational agenda.

In 2005−06, the programme was designed by a group of experts at the invitation of the Ministry of Education and was then tested in 24 schools. It was particularly inspired by the model developed in Scotland (Croxford et al., 2009). Since 2007, it has been mandatory and implemented by the GIE. Every four years, all state schools are to be evaluated by a team of two inspectors and an external expert (usually from the higher education sphere). The guidelines favour a qualitative approach based on documental analysis (self-evaluation reports, school projects, activity plans, pupils' assessment results) and a three-day visit to schools. This includes a set of focus groups with local agents (the board and coordinators, as well as panels of teachers, pupils and parents nominated by the school board) in order to evaluate five dimensions: results, services, organization, leadership and self-regulation. Despite the importance of quantitative data (in the first dimension) and self-evaluation (in the last), this model focuses on the way in which a school – understood as an 'educational community' in which the board has the leading role – designs, develops and sustains its own strategies. This is achieved through documentation and the use of focus groups. The classifications awarded are: very good, good, satisfactory and unsatisfactory. All the schools' evaluation reports (around 10 pages each) are available on the internet, along with the school boards' replies. The evaluation is sequential (Kyriakides and Campbell, 2004: 29); the self-evaluation data and results are considered on the basis of external evaluation. In some cases, schools opt for self-evaluation because they know it is a prerequisite for the external evaluation.

In this article, after presenting the major references for our theoretical framework (section 1) and the methodological procedures (section 2), we present a quantitative analysis of the reports, focusing on pupils, family and community participation, as well as a qualitative analysis of the interviews of the formal leaders of 20 schools (section 3). The article concludes with some general remarks on the process.

Schools' evaluation as a social process: The theoretical framework

External evaluation is a multi-faceted social process, involving various social actors. The specialized literature on the subject, distinguishes three analytical fields.

First, the development of schools' evaluation programmes has been a worldwide political concern since the 1980s, as a part of a broader movement, known as the 'new public management model' (Balazs and Faguer, 1996) or 'the rise of the evaluative state' (Clarke and Dawson, 1999). Generally speaking, it concerns a tight permanent evaluation process that, at the same time, turns out to be a control strategy. The main goal is to improve the performance of services, one that also applies to education. Managerialism thus becomes a dominant trend and evaluation plays a central role in sustaining organizational effectiveness (Clarke and Ozga, 2011). Powerful supranational institutions have insisted on the need for such programmes (EURYDICE, 2004; OECD, 2009), while recognizing the diversity of national models. For instance, the emerging Portuguese system took as a major point of reference, and is very similar to, the British OFSTED inspections, implemented since 1993. It is an external process, based on national standards and criteria, but it is mainly qualitative and relies on self-evaluation by schools, in order to help them identify priorities and outline development strategies.

Influential authors like Ball (1997a, 1997b) have argued that such surveillance technologies intensify teachers' work and administrative control over them, classifying schools and supporting an educational market model involving public and private institutions. In doing so, they set the stage for a massive privatization process. If some populations are classified as 'de-schooled', others are classified as 'failing', often neglecting the structural causes of their results, reinforcing and legitimizing systems of dominance (Ayed and Poupeau, 2009; Meunier et al., 2004). A similar concern in Portugal was expressed by scholars such as Afonso (1998) and Barroso (2005).

Still, other authors have emphasized that education evaluators were among the first to challenge conventional paradigms and advocate the use of qualitative and collaborative methodologies (Clarke and Dawson, 1999). For instance, Stake (2004) has emphasized over the last 40 years the benefits of qualitative case-study evaluation as a way of improving the quality of schools and avoiding the risks of standardization. Particularly over the last decade, a number of studies have concluded that constructivist and participatory evaluation programmes may be more effective in generating development than normative and standardized ones (Rebolloso et al., 2005). As Munck (1997) has stated, a key issue for national systems is to find ways of bridging the macro and micro levels, where information technologies may be an important tool for developing innovative models. Such ideas are also an important influence on current schools' evaluation programmes.

Some recent analyses have stressed the importance of the contexts of evaluation, as a socio-historical construction, as well as of the evaluator's role and profile, in the way both processes and results are appropriated by local actors (Contandriopoulos and Brousselle, 2012; Jacob and Boisvert, 2010).

This perspective also offers a valid way of framing European evaluation policies. Grek et al. (2009) discuss the way in which quality assurance devices are introducing new ways of thinking about education. New actors, networks and elites gain an important role in the creation of new standards for the comparison of different public systems, 'constructing new categories of (educational) thought and action – the project of re-inventing a "new" European identity of competitive advantage and responsible individualism' (Grek et al., 2009: 129).

Studies on the implementation of an 'evaluation culture' in specific countries, contextualized by national ideologies and interest groups (Andersen et al., 2009; Croxford et al., 2009; Ozga, 2009; Segerholm, 2009), are also a great help in understanding our subject.

This approach implies not just looking at the schools' evaluation model itself, but at its educational and social context, leading to the second axis of our literature review. Historically based on the French model (Archer, 1979; Petitat, 1982), the Portuguese education system is mostly public, centralized, secular, academic and bureaucratic. Between 1926 and 1974, however, economic restrictions and dictatorship ideologies reinforced the traditional features of school culture (Nóvoa,

1994; Teodoro, 2001). After the 1974 revolution, a crucial change in Portugal marked by the transition from a dictatorship to a democracy, there was a huge expansion of the state secondary and higher education network. Although education administration remained centralized, national evaluations were mostly associated with repressive tools, generating firm resistance from a strong and well-organized teachers' union. While educational reforms were governed by national parties' conflicts and alliances, school boards and principals were elected by teachers and their power remained weak, many teachers were applying each year to a new school, especially in poor and segregated areas, and local communities were seldom involved in school development.

New programmes and legislation from the 1990s onwards sought to promote better organization and greater autonomy for schools, especially under the Socialist Party governments (1995−2001 and 2005−11). While diversification and adaptation to local contexts were the focus of such policies during the first period, since 2005 the accountability and responsibility of schools – and particularly of their principals – have been a major concern, frequently pointed out by the government. Meanwhile, the media also took a greater interest in school evaluation, using the scores in national tests to rank schools, neglecting the effects of inequality in both pupils' social backgrounds and organizational resources.

The schools' evaluation programme in Portugal thus developed mostly as a way of reinforcing state control over a process of decentralization and local autonomy. At the same time, other private and impressionistic schools' evaluation procedures were influencing public opinion and clamouring for privatization, based on the argument that average scores in national tests were higher in elite private schools (Barroso, 2005).

It is not only people or groups of people who are classified in the evaluation process. Organizations are too, and the external evaluation of schools plays a key role. While the furthering of schools' achievement is part of this improvement in quality, it is also important to understand how this is perceived by school actors. And because evaluation processes are classification processes, they may take on additional importance for the schools in that a school ranking could outweigh school results and define the schools as 'successful', 'unsuccessful', 'unstable', etc.

In its extreme forms, this systemic transformation may create an 'education market', partially regulated and funded by the State, in which both public and private organizations compete to be the choice of families, as happens in the USA (Popkewitz, 1991) and the UK (Gewirtz et al., 1995).

International comparisons of evaluation models have revealed considerable differences in the principles, methodologies, pace and objectives of these political processes, and it is difficult to identify which model produces the highest quality of pupils' learning and the defence of educational equity (OECD, 2009; Van Zanten, 2006). The traditionally public, centralized and hierarchical systems of Southern Europe have revealed structural problems in relation to disadvantaged communities, entailing a systemic inability to foster pupils', parents' or teachers' participation in school organizations (Archer, 1979; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1970; Petitat, 1982). Moreover, recent education policies have generated ongoing tensions with powerful trade union organizations − apologists for the professional rights of teachers − and the measures adopted result from complex negotiations and struggles (Enguita, 2007). Curiously, while these countries have always understood the evaluation of pupils to be a central mission of the school, including strong classifications and sanctions, there is little tradition of systematic external evaluation of professionals or organizations.

Closer analysis of the contemporary schools' evaluation process in Portugal identifies an array of projects and experiments from the last 20 years that resulted from the strategies of their promoters with the underlying notion of quality indicated by various international bodies, but whose duration and scope have not yet created a 'culture of organizational evaluation' in schools (Coelho et al., 2008).[1] The current system for the external evaluation of schools was set up on the basis of these experiments and some international models.

As noted by Torres and Palhares (2009), this process cannot be separated from the conception of school organization that has come to the fore in recent years. This has been embodied in new legislation on the status of the teaching career and the management of state educational establishments in which aspects such as professional hierarchy, discipline and leadership have been strengthened. This has sought to reshape the idea of democratic management of schools and of the collegial relation between teachers, a legacy of the 1974 revolution, when democratic values were central to the re-definition of all institutions, including the education system. Nevertheless, Sá (2009) has given us the valuable insight that the external evaluation of schools should be analysed as a political-administrative process based on a combination of distinct rationalities, some more prescriptive and others more emancipatory. Most of today's education policies are developed in a complex social context resulting from the interaction between government guidelines and the way in which the professionals interpret and apply them, both conditioned by a multiplicity of other interest and pressure groups (Alves and Canário, 2004; Archer, 1979; Bowe and Ball, 2002).

This article aims to contribute to drawing a sociological picture of the schools' evaluation programme, defined as an institutional system developed through the interaction of various social actors and professional groups with multiple cultures and strategies, namely the political class, education inspection services, regional directorates of education, academic experts, school principals, local authorities, school employees, pupils and their families. To see this process simply as a government imposition would represent a failure to understand the heuristic potential within the heritage of the social sciences. This would involve sticking to an elitist principle that the social actors at the top of the formal hierarchy determine the rationality of social phenomena.

Methodology

The discussion presented in this article is part of broader research project on the factors and conditions that contribute to fostering school achievement in basic and secondary schools, focusing in particular on external evaluation reports. The institutional contexts of primary and secondary education schools are the object of study, addressing the relations between educational policies, organizational models, leadership profiles and school achievement. The study centres on the analysis of information resulting from all the external schools' evaluation reports drawn up by the GIE (see IGE, 2009) in the academic years of 2006/07, 2007/08 and 2008/09 in the Lisbon and Tagus Valley, Alentejo and Algarve regions[3] (298 reports on schools and school groupings[2]).

The methodological strategy adopted in the research comprised a diverse set of analysis and information collection techniques. The analysis presented here was carried out using the following procedures: content analysis of external evaluation reports, focusing on the 'Results' domain and using the MaxQDA qualitative data handling software. The *corpus* analysed focused on the section of the reports covering 'Evaluation per factor'; semi-directive interviews with school principals in a set of 20 schools. In order to obtain a closer knowledge of the actual situation in schools, a set of schools was selected on the basis of type of school organization, school typologies, the regions in which they are situated and achievement/non-achievement rates. Schools were selected for their diversity and not on the basis of their statistical representativeness; the selection took into account a set of aspects in accordance with the objectives of the study, namely: type of school, type of territory and school results. The interview is structured around three analytical elements: school results, organization and school management. These 20 schools were selected in order to ensure the maximum heterogeneity in terms of geographical location, local context, size, levels of education and pupils' results.

The methodology adopted by the schools' evaluation programme is mainly qualitative. Hence, there is some variation in the content of the information in the reports of the different schools, as well as in the evaluators' judgement criteria. In addition to the idiosyncrasies of each evaluation team, this article examines the hypothesis that this variation is organized around two key axes of differentiation: (1) the diversity of the social and organizational contexts in which evaluation takes place; (2) the relationships between each school or school groupings, the GIE and the Ministry of Education.

For this article three procedures were adopted to analyse the reports: (1) identification of school types through a multivariate analysis based on the quantifiable information presented in the reports; (2) characterization of the presence or absence of information in reports related to evaluation indicators defined to assess school management participation practices; (3) characterization of the presence or absence of quantifiable information in reports related to school management participation practices as a function of pupils' average school performance (above/below average).

The different understandings of the school leaders (principals and chairpersons of general councils) in relation to the evaluation programme were identified and described using content analysis of interviews.

Empirical evidence

Due to the essential nature of these reports, their specificities must be taken into account. They were not written for research purposes. It is therefore understood that the available data encompasses the evaluators' criteria and representations on each of the aspects evaluated but, as long as they are sociologically deconstructed, they remain a vital source of information for broadening our knowledge of both school organizations and evaluation processes.

The research also involves analysis of a set of semi-directive interviews with school leaders, allowing us to explore the complex game of interaction between the evaluator and the evaluated, which is ultimately the sociological foundation for any evaluation process. To facilitate presentation of the analysis, the most significant figures in each table are highlighted in bold.

The external evaluation reports: The emphasis on participation practices

The analysis of the reports is based on the hypothesis that the interpretative modes of the external evaluation model are not entirely prescriptive and allow for variations; however, these are not solely dependent on the subjective appreciation of the evaluators of each school but are conditioned by diverse factors such as the type of school organization, school results and social and regional context.

Two specific aspects should be mentioned when giving an overall interpretation of the reports. First, the reports became increasingly concise between 2006 and 2009, and there was a progressive convergence of categories, which could be due to the fine-tuning of either the evaluation instruments and/or the socially constructed understandings of the process by the main actors involved. Second, a considerable portion of the information tends to be repeated in most of the reports (without any variation over time), which may be a result of a defensive strategy to diminish the ability to differentiate between schools.

A key element in this study was the multivariate analysis, because it produced a definition of three types of school organizations.

The multivariate analysis was based on a survey of the school characterization variables contained in the evaluation reports. Some of the selected variables were removed from the analysis due to the high incidence of missing values. Other information sources, which were distinct from the

external assessment reports, were selected to compensate in part for the lack of data, while the territorial dimension was added. A typology of urban areas (urban, semi-urban, and rural parish) was used to decide where each school unit is located, in accordance with the population density criteria used by the Portuguese National Statistics Institute (1997). Based on this survey, the quantitative analysis began with a set of 27 active variables, taking into account four different analytical aspects of school organizations: (1) alternative curricula offered by schools; (2) involvement of pupils, parents or guardians, and local community representatives in school management; (3) division and coordination of work (the collaboration of teaching staff on a curricular and inter-cycle level and the existence of self-evaluation processes); (4) the quality of the facilities and infrastructure and human conditions (stability of the teaching staff, acknowledgement of pupils' academic and civic merit, development of projects) that provide support for school activities. These variables were subjected to a Multiple Correspondence Analysis (Greenacre and Blasius, 2006), and another set of variables was taken as supplementary or non-active variables.[4] This set of supplementary variables is related to typology (school or grouping of schools), size and age of the schools, their territorial setting, the level of schooling, and the diversity of the school population (percentage of pupils receiving social assistance, foreign pupils, and number of pupils with special educational needs), and thus characterizes both the context and the population. The analysis differentiated between school organizations largely on the basis of the extent of the participation of various social actors in the schools. This procedure resulted in the identification of three types of school organization: (1) the *innovative school organization*, characterized by the broad range of education on offer and greater linkage between teaching staff, in which recognition of pupils' academic performance and civic merit, planning of activities by pupils, pupils' and their parents' involvement in the planning and preparation documents and the intervention of the General Council in school life are all well-established practices; (2) the *traditional school organization*, in which there seems to be no (or only sporadic) curricular coordination and no visible organizational strategies for recognizing pupils' academic and civic merit, involving pupils in the planning of activities, and encouraging the participation of pupils and their parents in school management (the General Council is not working or its actions are inconsequential); and (3) the *diffuse school organization*, in which there is greater staff turnover and pupils have greater needs, with a narrower range of education on offer (perhaps also due to the fact that most of them are dedicated to primary education), in which there are practices for integrating pupils and their parents in school management similar to those in the innovative school organization. It is interesting to note that although the differences are not very significant, pupils from the first type of school organization tend to achieve better results in national exams.

This analysis suggests that the schools' relations with the community and notably the ways in which pupils, parents and other social actors participate in its management are the aspect in which the reports' descriptions of the schools diverge most. This is reflected in the typology. Reflection on this topic will therefore focus on the seven indicators that assess community (including teachers, pupils, parents and other local agents) participation and integration practices in the school units, in particular, as Table 1 illustrates.

This approach looks at the percentage of reports in which the indicators are mentioned. The least-significant indicators in the evaluation reports are related to pupils' participation in drawing up the school's planning documents and the participation of families and the community in management bodies. This suggests that, although there is a consensus among evaluators and evaluated on peripheral and informal participation, they diverge when it comes to the importance of the effective representation of parents and pupils in decision-making. In order to address the differences between school evaluation reports, these seven indicators were analysed according to the following variables: region, school organization typology and results in national exams.

Table 1. Actors' participation indicators.

Indicators
(1) To what extent are pupils involved, in accordance with age, in the development and discussion of the School's/Grouping's Educational and Curricular Projects?
(2) How are pupils consulted, and as far as possible made jointly accountable for the decisions which concern them?
(3) Do pupils participate in the programming of the school's activities?
(4) What are the interventions and contributions of the internal structures and external entities in the definition and revision of the school plans?
(5) Is there an on-going concern to encourage parents to come to school and to inform them about the Internal Regulations, educational strategies and school initiatives?
(6) How is participation in the administrative bodies, the management on which it is based and in the school's activities encouraged among the families of the pupils' educational guardians and other members of the educational community?
(7) To what extent are the parents and other actors of the community a fundamental resource in the search for solutions to the pupils' and school's problems?

Source: IGE (2009).

Table 2. Actors' participation processes, per region.

Indicators	Algarve		Alentejo		Lisbon		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Pupils: consultation and joint accountability	39	95.12	51	89.47	168	86.15	258	88.05
Pupils: structuring documents	17	41.46	29	50.88	121	62.05	167	57.00
Pupils: activities proposed	36	87.80	42	73.68	156	80.00	234	79.86
Community: structuring documents	30	73.17	39	68.42	129	66.15	198	67.58
Pupils' educational guardians: attracting and informing	**40**	**97.56**	**55**	**96.49**	**187**	**95.90**	**282**	**96.25**
Community and pupils' educational guardians: school management bodies	19	46.34	42	73.68	132	67.69	193	65.87
Community and pupils' educational guardians: Mobilization	**41**	**100.00**	**56**	**98.25**	**194**	**99.49**	**291**	**99.32**
Total	41	100.00	57	100.00	195	100.00	293	100.00

A comparison of the three regions, as shown in Table 2, allows us to highlight some interesting differences: in the Algarve, the evaluations focus on more informal consultation processes and those making pupils jointly accountable; in the Alentejo, the key perspective was the participation of parents and other members of the educational community in school management; and in Lisbon and Tagus Valley, particular emphasis was given to whether those responsible for defining the curriculum, internal regulations and activities to be undertaken in the school listened to the pupils or not. These variations cannot be dissociated from socio-cultural specificities. For instance, civic participation is a well-established value in the Alentejo, alongside a more traditional view of the role of children and adolescents, with the additional fact that this is a poor and rural region politically dominated by traditional left-wing parties. The emphasis on informal relations observed in the Algarve could also be tied to the regional context, made up of villages and small towns, while

Table 3. Actors' participation processes, per schools' typology.

Indicators	School groupings		Schools		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Pupils: consultation and joint accountability	150	82.87	**108**	**96.43**	258	88.05
Pupils: structuring documents	103	56.91	64	57.14	167	57.00
Pupils: activities proposed	**145**	**80.11**	89	79.46	234	79.86
Community: structuring documents	120	66.30	**78**	**69.64**	198	67.58
Pupils' educational guardians: attracting and informing	174	96.13	**108**	**96.43**	282	96.25
Community and pupils' educational guardians: school management bodies	**126**	**69.61**	67	59.82	193	65.87
Community and pupils' educational guardians: Mobilization	**181**	**100.00**	110	98.21	291	99.32
Total	**181**	**100.00**	**112**	**100.00**	293	100.00

pupils' participation emerges more strongly in urban settings like Lisbon. Bearing in mind that the GIE is divided into regional delegations, it is possible to examine whether each of these delegations has developed its own interpretation of the evaluation standards. Moreover, the differences observed result from interaction with the schools; that is to say, with the way schools represent themselves in the documents and in evaluation panels.

The typology of schools (presented in Table 3) also has a bearing on how those involved categorize the perceived benefits of school evaluations. It is therefore not surprising that pupils' participation is emphasized in evaluations of secondary schools, while in primary schools evaluators' focus is on parents' presence in school life. Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that this segmentation by age results from a socially constructed representation and varies between local contexts, so that in some innovative school organizations, pupils are involved in the organizational processes of management, planning and regulation from early childhood (see, in Portugal, the *Escola da Ponte*, www.escoladaponte.com).

Lastly, an analysis was made of the non-response rates for the 13 variables constructed on the basis of the quantifiable information presented in the reports on actors' practices in connection with participation in school management (as used in the multivariate analysis). As Table 4 illustrates, the evaluation reports of schools with results below the national average had the largest number of missing indicators on the involvement of pupils, their parents and the local community. This analysis allows us to set aside some conservative preconceptions in the public debate on the risks of sharing school authority, since local participation in schools appears to be consistent with patterns of greater academic achievement.

The analysis of how this aspect of school life is assessed in the external school evaluation process reveals that evaluators and evaluated have different conceptions of pupils', parents' and general community participation in school, and of the importance of such participation.[5] This heterogeneity may also be due to some ambiguity in education policies in this field: although participation appears in discourses and legislation, it is often in vague terms, so that different local interpretations emerge. However, the analysis allows us to deduce that this variation is not merely the result of the subjectivity of the evaluators and the evaluated; it is a social construction that 'adjusts' the external evaluation model to the type of school organization, academic results and region.

Table 4. Non-response rate of the variables related to actors' participation practices in school management, in accordance with the results in the national exams in mathematics in the 4th, 6th, 9th and 12th grades (%).

	4th grade		6th grade		9th grade		12th grade	
	Below average	Equal to or above average	Below average	Equal to or above average	Below average	Equal to or above average	Below average	Equal to or above average
Pupils								
Planning of activities	**46.00**	55.90	54.00	**50.00**	**50.40**	53.30	**38.80**	59.30
Joining proposed activities	4.80	**0.00**	6.00	**1.60**	4.70	**4.10**	**7.50**	10.20
Promotion of activities	**52.40**	67.80	**58.00**	65.60	52.80	**51.60**	**31.30**	37.30
Structuring documents	33.30	**18.60**	30.00	**25.00**	31.50	**23.00**	**20.90**	28.80
Pupils' education guardians								
Structuring documents	57.10	**40.70**	60.00	**43.80**	56.70	**45.90**	**53.70**	55.90
Association of pupils' parents	**14.30**	16.90	**16.00**	18.80	**18.90**	19.70	**20.90**	22.00
Intensity of participation	**11.10**	13.60	**12.00**	12.50	**9.40**	18.90	**17.90**	18.60
Community								
Role of the General Council	76.20	**71.20**	**64.00**	79.70	**63.80**	71.30	**65.70**	72.90
Public partnerships	1.60	**0.00**	2.00	**0.00**	1.60	**0.00**	**0.00**	1.70
Private partnerships	1.60	**0.00**	2.00	**0.00**	3.10	**2.50**	**0.00**	6.80
Joining local projects	**22.20**	27.10	28.00	**21.90**	26.00	**23.80**	22.40	**16.90**
Joining national projects	3.20	**1.70**	4.00	**3.10**	6.30	**2.50**	**4.50**	6.80
Joining international projects	25.40	**20.30**	28.00	**23.40**	26.00	**25.40**	22.40	27.10

External evaluation viewed by the schools' formal leaders

The semi-directive interviews with the principals and chairpersons of the general councils of 20 schools has helped us towards a broader analysis of how external evaluation was conducted in the field, and how school agents experienced it in local contexts.

Principals are key actors who are constantly moving between the different sections of the education system: while they are elected by the school community and are deeply involved in contexts of local interaction, they are at the same time the main mediators with the government. They play a pivotal role in the school evaluation process, managing contacts with the GIE, mobilizing information and taking part in the panels, they are the first to be informed about the evaluation, and they receive the report in first hand.

Analysis of the interviews shows that most principals recognize that an external school evaluation is necessary for the school's development and for their accountability. Since evaluation only takes place when the schools apply for it voluntarily, in the first two years (2006−07 and 2007−08) some principals admitted they went ahead with it in order to maintain a distinctive *ethos* of their schools − which also suggests the existence of a privileged relationship with central and regional government − or to legitimate and strengthen their personal efforts to bring about organizational change. Hence, the schools' voluntary application emerges as a strategy for standing out and achieving legitimacy, since the perception that external evaluation can enhance both the position of

the school in the local community and of the leaders within the teaching body is one of the main motivations for action.

Even among the principals who did not volunteer to undergo external evaluation but were included in a more recent stage, the predominant discourse was that this was a necessary and enriching process, as it detected weaknesses and provided an overall picture of the organization. The principals who represented the process merely as a mechanism of State control were clearly a minority. Nevertheless, some principals felt that their schools were 'not ready' for the interventions and that the process was so short that many of the local actors were not involved and did not even understand its objectives.

There is also a marked heterogeneity in the responses on evaluation methodology. Some made positive references to the extremely formative and qualitative nature of the intervention, while others criticized the fact that it was a summative evaluation giving descriptions and classifications rather than giving schools the necessary support for their development. Many of those interviewed recognized the value of the model, based on the triangulation of document analysis and dialogue in focus groups; on the other hand, criticisms were also made of the fact that evaluators' visits were too short, which produces a more formal and bureaucratic picture of the organization dependent on the subjectivity of the actors (of both evaluators and participants in focus groups) and that, as a principal stated, 'they did not even go into the classroom'. The principals suggest several different ways of dealing with these shortcomings. Whereas some believed that the evaluation should be based on more objective and quantitative criteria, indicators and methods, to reduce both subjectivity and potential 'staging strategies', the majority said that the model could only be improved by a longer presence in schools and a more in-depth look at the organization.

> I agree, I think this model is suitable; I would not change the model, but the way data are collected – I am referring to time issues: in fact, if you are going to evaluate a school, it is necessary to get a feeling of what the school is like, and this model does not allow this to happen, and the results of the observations are drawn from randomly selected specific situations. This does not give a full picture of the school, because a picture of the school is something I can get from being there for a reasonable length of time; the people who come here do not get the atmosphere of the place, they talk with people but there is a natural tendency for people who are interviewed to (over)value the school, or not, depending on their position. (Chairperson of the General Council of an 'innovative school organization' in Lisbon and Tagus Valley)

One aspect mentioned by most of those interviewed is that the evaluation does not give due consideration to the local context, which influences the schools' processes and results. Schools located in disadvantaged socio-economic environments felt it was unfair to compare their results – even in qualitative terms – with those of establishments that serve more advantaged segments of the population, as no recognition was given to their attempts to include and support more needy pupils. Some principals even mentioned factors that were out of their control, such as the high turnover of teaching staff or the rundown facilities. These indicators are included only in the characterization of the school; their impact on organizational and pedagogical processes and on pupils' results has not been taken into account.

> It is obvious that a school here in this region, which has lower social development indicators, cannot get the same results as a school located in a county where the social development indicators are higher. Obviously we don't get the same results, and this factor was not taken into account, so everything was the same . . . (Chairperson of the General Council of a 'diffuse school organization' in the Alentejo)

Nevertheless, there was a predominant perception among the principals that the evaluation programmes had a positive impact on their organization. In most cases, they mentioned that this

process had triggered the setting up of internal evaluation systems in the school, not only because this was an initial requirement but also because it was noted as a weakness of many schools: the presence of evaluators in the school had a formative role in this respect. Many organizations set up self-evaluation teams or quality observatories using the external evaluation model as a reference, and these helped schools to improve their indicators. This interaction between external and internal evaluation is in fact praised by a number of principals. In some cases, this strategy actually led to the hiring of private companies specialized in organizational evaluation; while this boosts the self-regulation mechanisms, it may pervert the self-evaluation principles understood to be the production of the organization's knowledge (and thought) about itself.

> Also in social terms, when our partners come to our evaluation, some of them probably also see us in a better light, I think. It also had a social impact . . . And so I think that these things are also good for us to get the place shipshape. So, internally we examine all the points that they are coming to evaluate. I think we also try to improve more and from then on we make an effort to always keep things in shape. (Principal of a 'diffuse school organization' in Lisbon and Tagus Valley)

Apart from the actual visits from evaluators triggering some more or less long-lasting organizational dynamics per se, a number of those interviewed underlined the benefit of an overall picture of the organization and its effects on self-esteem. Above all, while the good results obtained are referred to with pride and as a motivation to continue, the less favourable classifications in some schools are also referred to as a 'turning point' and served as a 'wake-up call' for the organizations to start working 'together more' (expressions used by various principals). Organizational aspects noted as 'weaknesses' in the reports, such as linkages between educational stages or high failure rates, are stated as being a motivation for the schools to take greater action in these areas. Even though a 'sequential evaluation' prevails (Kyriakides and Campbell, 2004: 29), i.e. external evaluation followed by self-evaluation or vice-versa, in some schools this may evolve into a 'cooperative model' (Kyriakides and Campbell, 2004: 29), due to the learning effects of external evaluation. The main aim of external evaluation is, in fact, to give schools autonomy, but a paradox prevails concerning its leading role, which is reflected in the definition of the criteria of school effectiveness and the particularities of each school.

A small group of principals referred to the evaluation as an administrative process that, for various reasons, had no impact on the improvement of the organization. In a few cases, they mentioned that it simply increased teachers' bureaucratic workload or the tension between management bodies and teachers. But it is curious that there is no correlation between views of the model and its effects. In other words, there are a number of principals who criticize the methodology adopted but who recognize the very positive effects on their organizations, while some who are more supportive of the evaluation system lament the fact that it did not have the expected results on their organizations. This also leads to a reflection on the diverging positions of the school principals on the politico-administrative framework that governs the education system, on the network that forms the school organizations and, above all, the mediation role they play between the two spheres.

Even though the great majority of those interviewed believed that external evaluation led to more formalized procedures and results, in some cases this statement was the basis for a criticism of the 'excessive paperwork' that teachers have to produce, while for others it produces greater institutionalization and systematization of processes, with gains in the schools' reflexivity and action.

Although they are in a minority in the current school network, it should not be forgotten that there are management bodies and general councils that recognize their inability to take action on the weaknesses of their organizations and who hope that the evaluation programme will lead the government to provide more effective, informed and individually tailored monitoring and support.

It is always important to get a picture from outside; the problem is that there is no monitoring. Look, the inspectors are the same, we are the same and the school is the same, they come here and we already know what the results are! They present their diagnosis of the school, fine, but then they go away and leave the schools to work alone! Sure they may have an idea of the problems, but so have we! . . . If the inspectorate has already detected the problems, every time they have been here, they should indicate and monitor those problems. They should identify the problematic cases, and do an in-depth study. They come here as inspectors and not with the aim of correcting problems. They should have specific teams to monitor the schools, to supervise teachers, to create new dynamics in schools. (Principal of a 'diffuse school organization' in the Algarve)

To conclude, school evaluation is taken by some school principals as a means of communication (and legitimacy) notably in interactions with the government, but in many cases also with teachers and in general with the local community. Although representations of the model adopted and its impact on the organization are extremely diverse, there is a very common belief that evaluation should consider the context variables and develop into a deeper and more extended monitoring of the organization.

Final remarks

This analytical essay provides a foundation for some reflections on external evaluation common to many countries as a social process and a mechanism of social classification, not just of pupils and teachers but also of schools and territories in which they are located; one of its important contributions is the extended focus on the organizations themselves, which enables schools to reflect on their practices from a broader perspective. Some of the school leaders' reflections are along these lines, with emphasis on the contribution of self-evaluation to promoting the schools' autonomy.

The apparent homogenization of schools, visible in the external evaluation reports, is indicative of the social construction of an image of schools heavily dependent on policy measures and on administrative choices. Evaluation may be contributing to the construction of a specific school model which, while conducive to greater effectiveness and parity of schools in terms of evaluation parameters, could also have a segregating effect following from the results of the evaluation (Ayed and Poupeau, 2009). Or it could be a key contribution to improving school efforts to develop learning practices. This appears to be the case especially when the principals interviewed recognize the need of the external evaluation. However, besides its classification effects, the fact that the process began with the schools being evaluated 'voluntarily' and only later on a 'compulsory' basis, could have drawn the volunteering schools closer to the central authorities, working as a mechanism of social distinction. Whether it had any concrete effects on the school remains to be seen. Accordingly, it is underlined from the outset that the social classification processes are applied not only to individuals ('non-achievers' and 'dropouts') but also to school organizations. The appreciation of the heterogeneity of learning contexts and the different ways in which evaluation influences schools' practices should imply a permanent upgrade of external evaluation models, leading to work on the construction of sociological analysis grids. Evaluation methodology is one of the points on which school principals expressed their displeasure, due to either its shortcomings or its excessive formality.

The invisibility in the media and civil society of evaluation processes and their outcomes is in contrast with the visibility of school rankings based on the pupils' average test scores. This shows the major challenge which a qualitative and technical approach faces in trying to raise public awareness, against the pressure of cheap, privately funded and quantitative, but often impressionistic approaches. Moreover, the impact of the evaluation programme on both national and local policy-makers remains uncertain, since government seldom uses such systems as a basis for making decisions.

The exercise of defining a set of variables to create a typology of school organizations revealed one of the basic principles of education: the democratic participation of the various actors in the education community in the organization of the school, one of the key factors differentiating organizations and the (implicit) criteria that govern the evaluation process. It is interesting that whether standing out for their absence or presence, this is the aspect that enabled the distinction between to be made between 'innovative', 'traditional' and 'diffuse' school organizations and some regional, contextual and institutional variations.

As the basic standards of the external (and self) evaluation processes are in themselves an instrument that classifies, they should be permanently under review and with the active participation of experts in social sciences, school actors and public sector professionals. The improvements that could be made to this process include the objectification of specific indicators (which in this research was done on the basis of what was considered qualitative information so as to obtain a typology of school organizations), linkage with a more intensive evaluation in the field (though this should be done over a longer period of time), and the involvement of school actors in the evaluation processes. Critical reflection on socially and formally constructed categories is a heuristic review of the benchmarking and methodology applied that inverts the logic of institutional 'routinization' and 'policing' (Ball, 1997a). Participation is one of the particularly interesting aspects because it is directly associated with some of the main ideological principles of the democratic state. As a diversity of interpretations and the risk of bias are found not only in government, but also among school actors directly involved in the learning processes, it is essential to strengthen the links between the various contexts of action within the educational system.

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Notes

1. See, for example, the School Quality Observatory project (developed by the Ministry of Education between the years 1992 and 1999) referred by Coelho et al. (2008).
2. The school grouping is an organizational unit that is made up of pre-school educational establishments and of one or more education levels and cycles that share common pedagogical aims. They were created in 1998.
3. The selection of the three regions is based on the aim of including regions with distinct characteristics; all three comprise, mainly, urban, rural and semi-urban areas respectively Lisbon and Tagus Valley, Alentejo and Algarve (Urban/Rural Typology for statistical purposes of the National Statistics Institute (1997), available at www.ine.pt).
4. Multiple correspondence analysis is most appropriate for the goals of this analysis in that it allows a multidimensional analysis. This is of fundamental importance when we are dealing with a large set of variables that are difficult to relate on the basis of univariate and bivariate analyses, it provides a structural analysis that is suitable for achieving relational configurations of the object of study, and it is appropriate for the work on variables that are reflected in categories (Greenacre and Blasius, 2009).
5. It is noted that there are many indicators and that visits are short; as a result, the omission of some categories may also result in a modest position on the scale of priority categories for evaluators and evaluated.

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Luísa Veloso has a PhD in Sociology. She is currently a Researcher at the Centre for Research and Studies in Sociology, University Institute of Lisbon and Professor at the Sociology Department of the University Institute of Lisbon.

Pedro Abrantes has a PhD in Sociology. He is a member of the Centre for Research and Studies in Sociology, University Institute of Lisbon, and is Professor at the Universidad Iberoamericana, Mexico City.

Daniela Craveiro is a PhD student in Sociology at University of Minho and a research assistant in the Research Centre for the Social Sciences (CICS-UM) of the same university.