Teacher Evaluation Policies: Logics of Action and Complex Adaptation to School Contexts

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Abstract

Recent teaching evaluation policies originated a generalized conflict as teachers interpreted them in terms of a stronger control and school re-centralization. Open resistance and never seen teachers’ demonstrations rose all over the country. Based on conceptual tools - interdependency and adaptive complexity – from the complexity theory, this study focuses on the indeterminacy factors stemming from the evaluation implementation process and on schools adaptive strategies to facing the new situation. The interpretative analysis of a school case data identified logics of uncertainty and ambivalence as well as successful adaptive strategies to re-establish the school organizational equilibrium and pacification of the school climate. Yet, if professional autonomy was legitimated through school-based decisions, it also appeared to be contradicted by the way the school director’s leadership tended to reproduce hierarchical and official mandates at local level.

Keywords: Educational policies, teacher’ evaluation, logics of action, teacher’ professional cultures, school leadership.

1. Introduction

Recent European policies reflect educational challenges that confront school systems with crucial issues: social cohesion, competitive economic growth and environmental sustainability. Yet, critical perspectives on education policies underline the contemporary influence of new-liberal imperatives trough multiple factors. On the one hand, the rise of the school new public management paradigm associates to the dominance of the ‘Evaluator State’ and the re-emergence of a ‘remote’ control on schools. On the other hand, evaluation reforms aim at
providing public accountability on both teachers’ performance and schools quality. In addition, given the systemic complexity of the contemporary world of education, discourses on knowledge economy and lifelong learning give prominence to the understanding of teaching from a developmental career-long perspective. Accordingly, expanding the frontiers of teaching content knowledge and reflective practice became imperatives of excellence both for professionals and schools. Moreover, as recent OECD publications (Isoré, 2009; OECD, 2012; Scheerens, 2010; TALIS, 2009) let us know, teachers are called upon ensuring the quality of education and assuming a higher responsibility for educating the European citizens to deal with the complexity of the future at a global level. In this macro context, teachers’ performance evaluation appears to be a crucial factor to achieve such major goals.

The imperatives of merit and excellence influence the evaluation policies and exercise transformative influences on the cultures of teaching. In Maroy’s (2008) perspective, the reform agenda in several European countries represent indeed “variants of a post-bureaucratic regulation regime, which seek to go beyond the bureaucratic-professional model still dominant today” (p. 2). Other earlier criticisms fall on the negative impact of the ‘technologies of governance’ (Ball, 2003; Gewirtz, 1997), such as standardization and ‘performativity’. Standardized approaches to teacher evaluation may be more efficient and easier to enact. They might, however, neglect “creating systems and environments that foster excellence and recognize that teaching is work that is creative, continually changing, pluralistic, diverse, and complex” (Larsen, 2005, p. 302). Similarly, Weisberg et al. (2009) even question the possibility of capturing the teachers’ real effectiveness through the evaluation system: “Excellent teachers cannot be recognized or rewarded, chronically low-performing teachers languish, and the wide majority of teachers performing at moderate levels do not get the differentiated support and development they need to improve as professionals” (p. 6). From this point of view, evaluation practices not only might restrict professional growth, creativity, and innovation, as they increase teachers’ stress, anxiety, competition, and produce changes in teaching. Based on conceptual tools – interdependency and adaptive complexity – from the complexity theory, this study purports to understand the role of teachers’ evaluation policies and how official regulations are (re) construed in differential contexts of schools. While being part of a larger research project, the present paper focuses on the indeterminacy factors as well as on the adaptive strategies and the professional logics of evaluation action that are likely to emerge as the evaluation implementation process develops in local school settings.

2. The study context

From 2008 to 2011, the Portuguese socialist government put in practice a policy agenda that articulates discourses on accountability, school quality and teacher development. If framed by a systemic perspective, this teachers’ movement cannot be dissociated from the political opposition to the socialist government that had a more complex expression at the parliament. It was indeed a powerful movement, which would end with the substitution of the Minister of Education. In this period, the Ministry of Education issued a nation-wide system of teacher evaluation, which encompassed the following dimensions: scientific-pedagogical matters, participation in school activities, interaction with the community, and professional development. It is a school-based model emphasizing career progression by merit, connecting evaluation performance to the school educational projects, and requiring plural sources of evidence in the final decisions. Although teachers received some of these changes without major contestation, harsher criticisms focused on specific points: the parents’ contribution for teacher evaluation; relationship between teacher evaluation and students’ success; and also equity implications in terms of career progression. Moreover, the highest point of dissention fell on the dichotomization
between ‘titular’ versus ‘non titular’ teachers and the introducing of ‘quotas’ system per school. For the first time, such normative dispositions not only restricted access to higher levels of the career ladder, but also reduced wages to a significant numbers of teachers. Consequently, while making teaching a more precarious job, the imposition of these changes originated a political conflict generalized to the country schools. Despite some incremental simplifications in the initial evaluation model, a grass root movement of resistance and never seen collective teachers’ demonstrations continued all over the country. The teachers’ war also extended to the Internet under influent forms of communication that adjusted critical positions among teachers and schools. In the present policy context, it is suggested that control over the profession is now tighter and that changing the “rules of the game” is eroding teaching autonomy rather than enhancing teaching quality and professionalism. The more teachers’ autonomy appears to be a ‘leit motif’ in the political discourse, the more it remains a ‘promise land’, and more precarious becomes the actual situation of the teaching profession.

3. Research assumptions, purposes and methodological options

Policy research on these teachers’ uprisings and school evaluation practices is still scarce in Portugal. Yet a pioneer study (Garcia, 2011) underlines some critical effects on schools and the professional foundation of logics of resistance to these policies. To a certain extent, this phenomenon appears to be similar to what Stephen Ball (2003) designates as “the terrors of performativity”, when he alerts to the ongoing transformation of the “teachers’ soul”. In this complex context, some broad questions arise. In what ways (if at all) this conflicting context has contributed to strengthen both school capacity and professional development? To what extent the schools differential evaluation implementation processes prevail over the standardization requirements imposed by the Ministry of Education and the teacher profile as law defines it? Based on conceptual assumptions from the complexity theory (Morin, 1990; Marion, 1999), this study focuses on a systemic process of change and the extent to which the schools followed non-linear ways to face unexpected challenges required by the teachers’ evaluation implementation. First, it is assumed that, implementing a new model of performance evaluation enlarged the field of schoolwork complexity. Critical forces in confront and conformity versus resistance might have arisen while the schools put adaptive capacities in action and searched for new professional meanings. Second, as the official discourse from 2008 to 2011 introduced indeterminacy factors in schools life, it also brought about new configurations of interdependency among the existing teachers’ social networks. In differential school contexts, professional interactions might have indeed generated new connections and differential points of view concerning teaching effectiveness and evaluation. Although little is known yet about the impact of policy on teachers’ professional relations in schools, a number of studies indicate that professional trust (Coburn & Russell, 2008) is a crucial factor in sharing and discussing perspectives and knowledge as professional changes occur. Third, this complex process has implications on the professional ethics to the extent that fragmented evaluation solutions might vary across schools over the country. Fourth, as a result of emergent logics of action, the schools might have developed professional evaluation cultures, which appeared to be inexistent till recently.

3.1. Research questions

The research design followed a phenomenological and interpretative approach assuming that, beyond pressures from the official directives, the implementation of the systemic evaluation
model intertwines multiple spheres of regulatory action: schools specific characteristics, teaching faculty professional status, and leadership roles distribution. Moreover, the school actors’ subjective meanings and interpretations of evaluation policies might have contributed to differentiate practices of performance evaluation in local schools. Based on previous assumptions, the study purported to (a) characterize the schools’ search for equilibrium, through emergent forms of interdependency and adaptive strategies; (b) identify how the newly created school evaluation structures functioned; and (c) interpret changes in terms of professional logics of action. Accordingly, the analysis addressed the following questions: What kind of professional strategies emerged during the implementation process of evaluation? To what extent schools decision-making followed a ‘normative fidelity’ position versus a professional autonomous approach?

3.2. Methodological procedures

Data from multiple case studies of schools were collected for a year long as the implementation process of evaluation was occurring in schools. Schools selection and participation in this study regarded their own appropriation of the actual evaluation model and differential past histories, as being a Lyceum (former secondary school for elites) versus being a technical-professional school in the past. Yet, within the scope of the present paper, only data from one school case are used. Complementary data analysis included school documents produced by the Pedagogical Council (PC) and the CCAD coordination structure (CCAD), as well as interviews to school directors, teachers being evaluated at the time and teachers’ leaders. Data were transcribed verbatim, content analyzed, and devolved to the participants for initial validation. The interpretative analysis presented in this paper focuses on Spring School data, school leaders and CCAD’ s member’s interviews. The content analysis followed Glaser’s grounded theory (2001), in order to identify the participants’ professional meanings and subjective interpretations regarding the evaluation process. Units of meaning were identified and submitted to higher levels of analytic abstraction. A systematic process developed leading to create main themes and defining substantive categories (See Table1) that characterized the participants’ perspectives.

4. Results

The analysis of the CCAD members’ data identified organizational complex processes that characterized the micro-politics of teacher’s evaluation at Spring School as Table 1 illustrates.

4.1. Emergent evaluation structures and organizational changes

The Portuguese teacher evaluation policies are in correspondence with the national Integrated System for the Evaluation of Performance for the Public Administration issued in 2004. The 2008 law radically changed the previous qualitative and undifferentiated system to a school and peers based evaluation model. Accordingly, new organizational structures were designed to cope with the new evaluation policies both at ‘meso’ and ‘micro’ levels. The Scientific Council for Teacher Evaluation (CCAP), whose members were appointed by the Ministry of Education, was created to set national evaluation standards and specific guidelines to be followed by the schools. However, each school created its own Coordinating Commission of Evaluation (CCAD) composed by four members of the Pedagogical Council (PC), the school director, and the president of the school Pedagogical Council (PC). In Spring School, the school director also performed leadership functions as CCAD’s president. In terms of the evaluation model
implementation, it was important to institutionalize the school CCAD structure and define the criteria for selecting the CCAD members themselves as well. Given that schools had to respect the teachers’ evaluation implementation deadlines, it urged that the CCAD’s started working: defining criteria for selecting the evaluators; analyzing and interpreting the official normative evaluation orientations; searching for congruence among the teachers’ individual evaluation objectives and the school educational objectives; and, finally, organizing the calendar for each evaluation phases and giving pertinent information to the teachers. The CCAD’s members also had to make exceptional decisions when (a) problems of evaluation implementation emerged; (b) the school lacked enough evaluators from the same subject group; and (c) exceptional measures were necessary to reach consensus between evaluators and the teachers to be evaluated.

In subsequent years of the socialist governance (2009-2011), several amends reviewed the evaluation purposes, the performance dimensions, and criteria. Meanwhile, successful negotiations between the Teacher Unions and the Ministry of Education reduced most critical areas of dissention, as for example, those pertaining to parents evaluating teachers and the evaluators’ lack of professional qualifications, particularly when they did not belong to the same scientific area. In sum, specific changes regarded: (1) classroom observations undertaken by external evaluators to the school; (2) personal evaluation form developed by the school CCAD members; (3) the teacher’ personal project describing his/her contribution to the school educational project; and (4) the teacher’s annual self-appraisal report. Yet, although the CCAD’s members are responsible for the teacher’s qualitative classifications, the school ‘quotas’ system remained.

### Table 1. Themes and Categories Regarding the Teacher Evaluation Implementation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main themes</th>
<th>Descriptors</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Uncertainty</strong></td>
<td>- Lack of information from the ministerial instances.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Constant changes coming from the Ministry of Education (ME).</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Uncertainty on satisfying the deadlines imposed by the ME.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Lack of experience on developing evaluation instruments.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Lack of expert knowledge on professional evaluation.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- School conflicting climate.</td>
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<td><strong>Self-efficacy and Satisfaction</strong></td>
<td>- Feelings of professional worth.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Being recognized professionally.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Feelings of ‘pacification’.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Adaptive strategies</strong></td>
<td>- Decentralization of the evaluation tasks.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Open seminar on performance evaluation.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Teachers’ involvement.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Collective responsibility.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Positive collaboration climate.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Transparency of the implementation process.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- “Fighting against the time limits”.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Plenary meetings with the evaluators.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Sense of autonomy</strong></td>
<td>- Dominance of the school internal regulations.</td>
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</table>

The current model is clearly school and teacher-based allowing for a micro-local regulation context. It involves more teachers in the process (some from different schools), maintains the decisional power about teacher’s performance, and empowers CCAD structure in articulation with the Pedagogical Council (PC). Although the PC exercises the final saying on evaluation decisions, each school makes its own options and organizes their differential forms of working. The school director’s leadership, as CCAD’s president, has to guarantee that evaluation
decisions be congruent not only with the school specific characteristics but also with national policies.

4.2. Logics of action

As Table 1 illustrates, the content analysis of data found a plurality of themes concerning the implementation process of teachers’ evaluation in spring School: adaptive strategies, a sense of professional autonomy, and feelings of uncertainty stemming from unexpected events as that process occurred.

4.2.1. Uncertainty versus stability

Initially, the CCAD members in Spring School appeared to be sensitive to some sources of uncertainty while facing new and unexpected tasks for which they did not feel formally prepared. Some problems were internal to schools and regarded the a priori teachers’ negative pre-dispositions towards evaluation. Others were external pertaining to constant changes stemming from the Ministry of Education (ME). When the evaluation implementation was already in action, new coming official decisions created discontent, enhanced doubts, and a sense of a never ended evaluation process. As the Spring School’s director refers, “what is lacking is stability (…) some things happen which are not in ours hands, because the Minister of Education suddenly triggers some things in the middle” (p.15). Indeed such official interferences were interpreted as external control over schools and also originated a low sense of efficacy in fulfilling all the moving and unexpected requirements. In addition, the imposed tight deadlines help raising complexity to the new school task. Other higher levels of difficulty added to uncertainty and lowered organizational self efficacy, such as: (a) lack of uniformity in applying evaluation standards which might originate unjust consequences to some teachers; and (b) transforming evaluation judgments into quantifiable measures, particularly those concerning professional ethics and the social aims of teaching.

4.2.2. Adaptive strategies

Although the national Scientific Council for Teacher Evaluation (CCAP) was created for clarifying emergent issues on this process, the local evaluation coordination structures could act autonomously in order to adopt specific adaptive strategies for re-establishing organizational equilibrium and guaranteeing the school success in the evaluation planning. In the preparatory phase, although the main goal was abiding by the Ministry of Education’s normative impositions, the CCAD of Spring School worked democratically. The emphasis was on ‘distributed’ leadership and internal de-centralization. It matters to underline that such strategies contrasted with the ME centralization approach to schools and teachers. Indeed, at the time, it urged to pacify the school climate. As Table 1 synthesizes, the CCAD’ s president considered necessary to use a number of adaptive interactive strategies. On the one hand, favoring the evaluators’ collegial practices and leading them to assume a collective responsibility; on the other hand, reducing the teachers’ potential antagonism and making the evaluation process to appear a democratic one.

As the evaluation-planning phase progressed, the CCAD’ s president gave preference to the following strategies: teachers’ involvement, collective responsibility, and co-accountability. The school evaluation implementation process was assumed as a collegial endeavor. A sense of accomplishment resulted from this joint venture. In a participant’s saying, “I by myself could not do it…It had to be made in-group. The [evaluation] instruments we are using now on this process are ours” (Spring School, eval2, p. 20). Simultaneously, the accountability for this task was
assumed as collective practice. In the school director’s words, “(...) we all are accountable, we must contribute as a whole and the evaluation instrument it is from all of us” (SP, Dir, p.13). After all, these strategies conveyed the idea that the evaluators validated the construction of evaluation instruments as well as other decisions to be applied in the next evaluation phase. In consequence, the CCAD work gained legitimacy to the schools eyes.

4.2.3. Collegial leadership and interdependent interactions

This school’s CCAD revealed indeed a collegial leadership and democratic way of working. As a CCAD’ s member describes, “the director likes to make decisions in group, and working this way it is easier because he is listening and is able to find a central line of thought common to all of us; in this way, everybody with specialization or not in this area can see his\her own point of view and consider the issues in question as their own. Nothing was decided and approved without the vote of all CCAD members” (SP, eval3, p.2). As the CCAD’ s president underlined, “people was bond to the process, participated, contributed (...) Nevertheless, there were minor changes that gave stability to the process (...) despite everything, there was a full acceptance of the evaluation” (SP, Dir, p. 30).

4.2.4. Organizational equilibrium and internal normalization

Feelings of satisfaction and professional recognition related to the evaluation planning process that was considered to be successful and, most of all, because it gained legitimacy to the school eyes. Yet, the emergent micro-policy interactions did not always developed as a linear process. The CCAD president’ s pressures on teachers to follow the imperatives of the legislation turned out to be a polemic issue in subsequent phases. Problems between evaluators and teachers being evaluated emerged in some cases. Individual views had to be clarified and contrasting interests accommodated along the implementation process. At this stage, other non-collegial strategies were necessary, such as “quickly correcting” some “fragilities” interpreted as forms of de-regulation and deviance from the norms instituted by the CCAD for the school; re-defining the criteria, clarifying and explaining further the evaluation rules created by the school. The CCAD’ s president viewed these strategies as the best way to abide by the legal dispositions but also to minimize or hide subjectivity and prevent deviant singularities and “surprises”. In his words, “the norm makes things easy” and “de-regulations are quickly corrected at the hierarchical level”. But, in the end, this participant makes a positive valuation of the whole implementation process: “I think that people were very rigorous and tried to accomplish everything as it was told to them. (...) Some small mistakes were detected and immediately corrected. The people executed well… I think they showed good will and much care, they were very rigorous. Regarding the legislation, I think we were very rigorous …if everything is not very clear … since all of us have subjectivity (…), when a teacher asks for a review process, we have to say whether or not he\she is right” (SP. dir., p.40). The repetitive emphasis put on both ‘rigor’ and ‘deviances’ that must be corrected suggests that in Spring School the evaluators’ work should follow the official rules and oriented towards uniformity. The organizational equilibrium achieved in the implementation process resulted, after all, from internal policies directed to normalization of evaluation criteria and standardization of procedures.

4.2.5. Organizational Self-efficacy and Satisfaction

The analysis indicates that Spring School faced multiple non-linear processes of change from a positive perspective. A sense of organizational efficacy articulated with professional satisfaction. Indeed, the school’s director had previously organized a seminar on evaluation open to all teachers’ evaluators. Such preparation might have contributed to moderate the initial sense of complexity that appeared to be close to organizational chaos. The collaborative methods of work
might have increased their sense of efficacy while developing the evaluation instruments and making decisions pertaining to subsequent phases of the process. Moreover, professional logics of questioning and reflection dominated the participants’ discourse in the first implementation-planning phase. In a participant’s words, “all listened to each other, all read and raise questions (…) and this was most important, it was something common to all of us” (SP, aval1, p. 24). In this work context, teachers, either as CCAD members or evaluators could develop self-efficacy on professional evaluation matters which added to reinforce feelings of accomplishment, recognition and satisfaction.

5. Concluding remarks

Developed in the centralized political context of restructuring the teaching career by socialist governments, this study purported to characterize and interpret the complexity of the teaching evaluation implementation in schools, here understood as places for emergent logics of systemic influence and controversy. The systematic analysis of data identified logics of complex adaptive action that Spring School found to reduce unexpected uncertainty and deal with complexity. The Spring School climate remained peaceful in such context. If the CCAD president had sometimes to ask for advise at the representative instances of the Ministry of Education, the internal leadership strategies were successful in rebuilding the school organizational equilibrium and gaining legitimacy, both internally at school level and externally at the Ministry of Education regulatory instances. The teaching evaluation appears in this study as a school-based model. Yet, some crucial criticisms remain alive: (a) restricted access to the highest levels of the teaching career; (b) prevalence of an unjust evaluation system, since a good number of teachers who reached the level of excellence is left out; and (c) weakening the culture of professional collegiality in schools to the extent that it favors individualism and competition among teachers.

5.1. Non-linearity and logics of action

Implementing the teachers’ evaluation new model was clearly a non-linear process that congregated multiple micro-political interactions at Spring School. Non-linear situations were dealt with adaptive strategies that regarded formal decisions made at the CCAD level and reflected principles of internal co-accountability and collegial interdependency. Given the complexity of the evaluation policies and its conflicting antecedents, the CCAD members gave priority to processes that opened and enlarged participation to minimize the teachers’ potential criticisms. The CCAD appeared to work as a “link pin” between the school’s Pedagogical Council, the evaluators, and even the teachers themselves. Nevertheless, it matters to underline that these complex interactions, on one hand, referred to the newly created interdependencies among teachers’ groups; on the other hand, pertained to antagonistic perspectives regarding central issues in the evaluation enactment, such as: conceptions of evaluation (developmental versus summative), holistic and qualitative versus positivistic/quantitative evaluation, questioning the teacher profile of excellence defined by the ministerial norms and, not less important, evaluating the ethical and social transversal dimensions of teaching.

5.2. Professional sense of agency

Differential discourses emerged on meanings attributed to the evaluation work. Some teachers viewed evaluation as one more form of work intensification, a criticism that also addressed the hegemonic discourse of the ME on normalization and rationality. However, the analysis also revealed that a sense of professional agency among the participants was reinforced through such
an enriching experience. Yet, in this regard, a teachers’ multi-polar discourse was found, since the analysis identified some ambivalences and even contradictions. On the one hand, in Donald Schön’s approach, performing the evaluation tasks at the CCAD level facilitated two types of reflection. It was a reflection on policy requirements and ‘reflection in action’ through out the CCAD’s work. In this aspect, Spring School was successful in building consensus through open participation and the CCAD’s decentralization strategies. As a consequence, it seems that teachers, through their evaluator role, developed a greater awareness concerning the need for changing the teachers’ professional mentality. In contrast, a major conflicting goal consisted in congregating democratic and collegial strategies with the hierarchical leadership in the last phases of the implementation process. Indeed, if the internal evaluation policies construed by the CCAD members represented the ‘school will’ and obtained internal legitimacy, it was also necessary to accomplish constrains from law. In this sense, the Spring School succeeded in building new opportunities for exercising autonomy but “within the rules”.

5.3. School vision and organizational learning

It matters to highlight other positive effects derived from the school-based evaluation experience: developing a holistic integrated vision of the teaching work and learning that school represents a complex totality. Due to recent professional interactive interdependencies and activities diversification, Spring School gained a more intense dynamism. An image of interdependency gave rise to the conception of school as a learning organization, oriented to “help those who have a lower performance” and “learning to be more attentive and follow them” (Eval3, p.10). Although recognizing the initial fears and doubts concerning their efficacy, the participants valued their teaching evaluation involvement in terms of both the experiential evaluation learning and being able to use that new knowledge. In agreement with other studies (TALIS, 2009; Flores, 2010; Santiago et al., 2009), the analysis suggests that there was not yet a true culture of professional evaluation implanted in the Portuguese schools before 2008. Despite some emergent signs of competition among teachers, it appears that Spring School is approaching the idea of a professional learning community. On the whole, these results converge with international studies suggesting that school leadership might influence teaching evaluation practices positively if a context of collaborative structures and consistent feedback is in place. Indeed these are crucial requisites so that performance evaluation truly becomes a teachers’ developmental process with a positive contribution to school effectiveness. Further research could address these issues more deeply in other differential school contexts.

References


