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Educational policies and international perspectives: Brief evaluation of lifelong learning to optimize learner training

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Abstract

In this article, we will discuss the notion of educational policies. We will be able to question the purposes of these approaches in the concept of lifelong Learning and its assets for the training of learners in a formal learning framework. To arrive at this analysis, we will question research issues around educational policies and the need to seize this field of research for education actors. Secondly, we will consider an international perspective by questioning the evaluation of these educational policies on the international scene by comparing the use and application of these educational policies according to the challenges and purposes of the decision-making countries.

Keywords: Educational policies, lifelong learning, formal learning, continuing education, sociology of education

Introduction

Education policies are now part of a global at the heart of public debate, both in Europe and abroad. The processes by which education policy choices are made are changing. For a long time the preserve of a specialized elite, working with professional unions within the framework of a neo-corporatist model, reforms to school structures, the development of curricula and the status and missions of personnel were conceived, discussed and decided in a vacuum. The advent of a "democracy of the public" (Manin, 1996) ^[9], where the definition of the common good is no longer the sole monopoly of legitimate leaders, is changing this. The political offer is increasingly "linked to the demands of the public, which are all the more important given the freedom of public opinion, which is becoming increasingly autonomous in relation to traditional partisan cleavages" (Lascoumes and Le Galès, 2004, p. 24) ^[8].

Education finds itself propelled into this second age of democracy. Political choices in the educational sphere are invading electoral platforms, becoming one of the key issues in the most important elections, and parents and learners are being taken to task by political actors to legitimize their positions, as part of this process of "noisy agenda-setting" that is increasingly taking place in the media. Long side lined from decision-making processes, they are becoming central to a theory of social change that draws some of its characteristics from the New Public Management movement: end-users must be held accountable for the public service they receive, and thus also become the arbiter of future political decisions. The possible effectiveness of reforms, the inequalities they may potentially generate and, more broadly, their social desirability are thus hotly debated in the public arena, in exchanges that mix scientific and "lay" arguments, facts and standards and, ultimately, "common sense". Paradoxically, while educational policies - and school policies in particular - are now a major topic of public debate, they are still of limited interest to French-speaking researchers, whose field of investigation could include them. In their current form, they are still only marginally relevant to the disciplinary fields that could take them on: political science, sociology and education sciences.

Educational Policies as a basis for Research

Thus, while political science is multiplying sectoral case studies to support its theoretical and empirical developments, education remains largely outside its scope of investigation

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(Van Haeck, 1998; Buisson-Fenet, 2007) ^[19, 1]. Yet the social sector is at the heart of her analyses (Muller, 2000 ^[13]; Boussaguet, Jacquot and Ravinet, 2004), with extensive research into the health and housing sectors and, more broadly, social assistance schemes (RMI). This situation raises questions for Buisson-Fenet (2007) ^[11]: "One might have thought that the 'design' of the European educational landscape would make it an exemplary institutional figure for public policy analysis. Between 1945 and the beginning of the 1990s, the major fact that emerged was that of the unification of school structures and their systemization in the name of the necessary democratization of the institution. The massive intervention of the State, on an ideological level (the "major reforms" of the Ministers of Education), on a financial level (national education became the largest public expenditure item), on an organizational level (the establishment and development of central services) and on an expert level (the dual mandate of the General and Administrative Inspectorates of National Education), in a context where the planning and rationalization of budgetary choices consolidated the idea that the future was predictable and even controllable through technocratic management tools, and where professional negotiations were monopolized by corporatist union representation, justified the postulate of an "instrumental, teleological and state-centric rationality in the design and implementation of public policies" (Massardier, 2003) ^[10].

For Dutercq (2007), the reason why political scientists have not penetrated the world of education "is that in Europe, education has always been constructed as a world apart, outside the common rules and laws, as evidenced by, among many other examples, the invention of a specific status for the administrative qualification of educational establishments, that of EPLE, when it was first the common status of establishment for learning that should have been required. As a result, public policy specialists have never ventured into a closed, closed universe, the analysis of which required intimate knowledge". For Agnès van Zanten (2004) ^[20], the rarity of research by political scientists in the field of education is due to the fact that, contrary to the pluralist conception of public action developed by the currents of Public Policy Analysis, a "Hegelian vision of the State [...] still predominates in this sector, conceiving its action as transcendent of the State.] Conceiving its action as transcending the multiple particular interests of civil society [...]" and which "endows the latter with an almost magical capacity to construct the universal and affirm the general interest" (p. 29).

The times, however, seem to be changing. The multiplication of decision-making players in the now largely a-centric educational sphere - as a result of political decentralization, the growing autonomy of schools, the increased presence of the private sector and the pivotal role of the user - and the development of a new form of regulation based on results-based assessment could change the deal. These "new education policies", whose development in OECD countries has been demonstrated by Mons (2007) ^[7], are part of the global trend in public policy and can now be analyzed using the same tools (van Haecht, 1998; van Zanten, 2004; Buisson-Fenet, 2007; Mons, 2007) ^[19, 20, 1, 7]. The de-sectorization of public action should, moreover, mean that it is no longer possible to isolate education, which is linked to other public policy sectors and therefore necessarily the subject of global analyses in

research. For the time being, however, despite these developments, political scientists' forays into this field remain rare.

Nor has sociology fully embraced the analysis of educational policies. While there have been significant advances in this area, the field remains embryonic, due to a historical development focused on the role of schools in the reality of social mobility.

In the United States, the *Coleman* report (1966) led to a heart-rending review of the *common school*. It revealed that students' performance depended more on their social and ethnic origins than on their school's resources, whereas the initial aim of the study was to assess the variability of schools' resources with a view to introducing compensatory measures.

Over several decades, these national sociologies have produced an object with two main characteristics. Firstly, with the exception of the *Coleman* report, which broke new ground by imposing the concept of equality of outcomes, they focus mainly on the analysis of school careers (and particularly elite training) and are concerned with inter-group differences (social, ethnic...). This means that, for the most part, they are not interested in students' achievements, nor in intra-group differences. Here, education has only instrumental value in sociologies marked by an overriding interest in social mobility.

In addition to a clearly delimited object, these local sociologies have also adopted a focus that reduces their field of investigation in terms of explanatory factors for social inequalities in educational success. Educational policy choices and the resulting structures of school systems have been little questioned.

This current of quantitative analysis was based on the development of multiple national movements of "critical sociology" (the Reproduction movement in France, the English New Sociology, Correspondence Theory in the United States, etc.). Although they represent a heterogeneous theoretical corpus, these movements share a common denominator: the denunciation of schools as active sites for the reproduction of social inequalities. Whereas the *Héritiers* school was still open to reform the Reproduction school was pilloried. Not only would it fail to reduce the "disastrous disparities" it inherited, but it would in fact play a very active part in the creation of these inequalities, which it would have the task of legitimizing. From the status of powerless observer, the school is elevated to collaborator in an unequal social order, working against the façade of a meritocratic project.

In both empirical and theoretical terms, these national sociologies have enabled us to make definite progress, highlighting the need to redouble our attention to the reality of the meritocratic project. But while denunciation is necessary, it has led to a feeling of powerlessness and defeatism on the part of politicians and, above all, teams of educators, torn between belief in a certain individual action - the real learning of the children in their care - and the equally real, but macroscopic, vision of the perpetuation of inequalities at school.

In the field of educational science, from the late 1970s onwards, the *school effectiveness* movement attempted to meet the challenge of this impotent school with the slogan "*School matters*". The fundamental role of school in children's success was once again asserted, going beyond social determinism. The Anglo-Saxon research movement,

supported by a number of research centers in Europe, including IREDU, focused on student learning outcomes, with an increasing number of quantitative studies and monographs on "effective schools". By highlighting the fact that school contexts (financial and human resources, nature of the school population, etc.) have a greater influence on disadvantaged groups, these studies have shown that school organization is not only associated with average student performance, but also has an influence on social inequalities in schooling (Duru-Bellat, 2002) [4].

The need to analyze the political dimension of education

Faced with the limits of the agendas of political science, critical sociologies and the school effectiveness movement, the analysis of a political dimension conducted at a macro level now appears necessary to provide a more complete vision of the broader contexts in which learning develops. Alongside individual learning strategies and the close-knit environments of the classroom and school, we also need to investigate the effects of educational policies.

While these public policy decisions may seem far removed from the learner-teacher pairing at the heart of the learning relationship, it can be hypothesized that institutional frameworks have an impact on student performance, as they constrain the organization of the teaching act. Teaching in a school setting is not a totally free act; it is regulated by the organizational framework in which it takes place. For example, the teaching profession varies greatly depending on whether it is practiced in a centralized education system with national curricula, or in a framework that favors school autonomy and the construction of teaching content by the pedagogical teams of each school. In the same way, learning and peer-to-peer interaction differ between a single school and a system with different streams.

Recent research already shows that educational policies are linked to student performance (Walberg, Paik, Komukai and Freeman, 2000; Gorard and Smith, 2004; Mons, 2005, 2007; Dupriez and Dumay, 2005) [2], [6], [7], [3]. More generally, international surveys of student achievement, such as those conducted by the IEA and OECD, show that a significant proportion of educational disparities are due to differences between countries. This inter-country variance can be explained both by societal factors, whose impact appears to be limited (Duru-Bellat, Mons, Suchaut, 2004) [7], and by the education policies pursued.

While research into the consequences of political choices in education is now considered necessary, it is difficult to fit in with traditional national analyses. In order to better describe and evaluate public decisions, most of which are taken at a national level - even if decentralization reforms are on the increase - international comparisons are essential, because among other things, they introduce variety into the analysis. Alongside experimentation, whose biases and implementation difficulties are well known, comparative education enables us to make the necessary change of focus. By going beyond the school and national levels, it embraces multiple school configurations and enables us to compare educational policy choices and assess their consequences. Situated at a supra-national level, comparative education recognizes the existence of political autonomy. International surveys of student achievement, which give rise to secondary analyses relating student performance to educational structures, provide the empirical means to question political choices.

International comparisons: A tool for investigating educational policies

International comparisons renew the analysis of educational policies, enabling a better descriptive understanding and assessment of their effects on student learning.

First and foremost, international comparisons enable us to better analyze and describe public policies in the field of education. The aim here is not to import institutional schemes that have been elevated to the status of "best practice", but rather to decentralize, to look at things from a foreign perspective, and to highlight the specific features of national policies, which are all too often considered by practitioners from a solely local point of view.

When research is qualitative (e.g. Osborn, Broadfoot, McNess, Planel, Ravn, Triggs, 2003), it allows in-depth descriptions of both classroom practices and the political and social contexts in which they develop. Most often based on a restricted sample of countries, they allow for often instructive head-on contrasts between teaching systems, but tend to construct a particularistic view. Each country tends to be confined to its own specificities, which seem irreducibly opposed to other national schemes.

Quantitative international comparisons and, more specifically, the major surveys launched by the IEA and the OECD, enable us to revive the Universalist current of comparative education. PISA studies provide a better understanding of school organizations, thanks to contextual questionnaires administered to students, teachers and school heads. These databases, which are often overlooked in the polemical debate on international rankings, are one of the riches of these surveys, enabling us to draw not just oppositions between countries, but rich typologies of educational systems (Mons, 2007) [12].

International quantitative studies can also prove to be an effective tool for researchers when it comes to evaluating educational policies. Based on large samples that enable statistical analysis, they allow econometric comparisons to be made between, on the one hand, performance indicators for education systems and, on the other, institutional patterns resulting from political choices.

The first international studies focused on the analysis of indicators linked to efficiency, in a quest for school performance. Marked by the launch of Sputnik, the Cold War and US-Soviet competition, the first international pilot study of student achievement designed by the IEA in 1959 was financed almost entirely by the United States, which was anxious to measure the extent to which its students were falling behind in science subjects. The IEA's studies were then carried forward by the wave of human capital theory, which set a simple educational objective for each country: to educate its young people to the best of their ability, in order to build up a reservoir of quality human resources, so as to win the global economic competition. This international vision of economic competition boosted by human capital explains the interest in education as a good that can be valued in its own right, and the corollary desire to identify school organizations promoted as "efficient".

The educational experiences of countries that topped the charts in the first PISA studies, such as Finland, Korea and Japan, have also gradually lent credence to the idea that educational efficiency and equality are not mutually exclusive. The quest for greater equality at school would now seem to be a factor in explaining a high general level,

or even a numerically significant school elite (Mons, 2005). Behind these empirical findings and new political leitmotifs lies the Brussels rhetoric of adherence to a balanced European social model based on economic growth boosted by social cohesion.

In so doing, these international surveys provide a valuable new empirical tool, making it possible to reinterrogate the issue of justice at school beyond the strict framework of meritocracy. It is no longer a question of checking whether the legal principle underlying the meritocratic system - "equal ability, equal opportunity" - is being verified. This international approach, which focuses on achievements, allows us to question, from a Rawlsian perspective, the necessity and reality of mastering the basic skills needed to integrate into our society with full dignity. It's no longer just a question of checking whether the school competition has been fair, but also of ensuring that the school enables the acquisition of the minimum common base that makes it one of the institutions contributing to a fairer society (Meuret, 1999; Duru-Bellat, 2002)^[11, 4].

While international surveys of pupil achievement provide us with new tools for assessing the efficiency and equality of education systems, they also enable us, by widening the focus of analysis, to apprehend new explanatory dimensions of these phenomena, and in particular the political dimension.

It wasn't until the 2000s and the wave of surveys conducted by the OECD - the PISA cycles - that the desire to arm ourselves with an international tool designed to answer questions about educational policies was loudly and clearly affirmed. The inter-governmental nature of the OECD is obviously no stranger to this concern. Politicians commission studies on policy to guide their decisions. However, even if this focus on politics is still very rhetorical - the explanatory power of PISA studies remains limited - the desire to examine education policies and to question the relevance of choices made in this area and their consequences is real.

While the potential of these surveys of pupil achievement for educational policy reflection must be taken into account today, they are nonetheless the subject of much questioning (for a summary, see Moons, 2004; Normand, 2005)^[16].

The political and pedagogical uses of these surveys are also criticized: the harmfulness of international educational benchmarking reduced to one-dimensional national scorecards published in the media; potential perverse effects on national teaching practices (risks of teaching-to-the-test linked, even indirectly, to these surveys); failure to take account of historical and socio-economic contexts in the analysis of results; use of hasty conclusions to support educational policy injunctions in the countries participating in the surveys (extreme evidence-based policy research logic, "good practice" ideology).

While these international surveys and the secondary research they enable do indeed offer new potential for analyzing educational policies, it would now seem necessary to renew their design and use (Mons, 2007)^[12].

A pluralist conclusion in two stages

Against this background, the article presented here aims to offer both a positive and critical view of the use of international comparisons and educational policies, and more specifically of quantitative investigations, in the evaluation of public school policies. The first section aims

to show how international surveys of pupil achievement can contribute to this evaluation work, which is currently underdeveloped. In addition to the classic studies on the effectiveness of certain features of education systems, most often conducted within the framework of international organizations such as the World Bank or the OECD, with which readers are already familiar, our aim is to present original research that breaks with this main stream.

First and foremost, this research takes a step away from traditional quantitative studies, as it evaluates public education policies by combining the findings of quantitative and qualitative analyses. This is the case of articles by the English socio-historian Green on the evaluation of the single school, and by Dutch education specialists Scheerens and Maslowski on the "effects" of school autonomy. They are also ground breaking in that, beyond the traditional auscultation of pupils' achievements, they focus on "school productions" that are rarely explored - see the paper by sociologists Duru-Bellat, Mons and Bydanova on the relationships between pupils' attitudes, school cohesion and educational policies.

Finally, they stand out from the mainstream because they focus on system characteristics linked to strong sociological issues, as in the paper by Crahay and Monseur from the Universities of Geneva and Liège on the effects of academic and social segregation on student performance. All this research shows that the use of international quantitative evaluations, often denounced as the armed wing of a positivist neo-liberal evidence-based policy research movement, can also be part of a different vein of public action research, different because it knows how to cross research methods, take an interest in schools as places of socialization and production of social equality, and enliven public debate through popularized empirical lessons rather than normative policy recommendations.

The second part of our article, which we have called "Regards croisés critiques", aims to provide, through a series of shorter papers, a distanced vision of the tools used in this research trend. The article by English statistician and psychometrics specialist Goldstein presents the limits and recommendations for the use of international surveys. French education researcher Jean-Yves Rochex examines the complex relationships forged around PISA between political issues and approaches, and scientific issues and approaches. Belgian sociologists Maroy and Mangez, and Portugal's Barroso, look at how rankings derived from major international surveys are used in political discourse. Finally, Czech educational socio-economist David Greger, from a localized point of view, questions the reality of evidence-based policy processes based on PISA.

It is therefore on these two approaches that we wanted to focus our knowledge and highlight the convincing elements of education policies on the international scene. The mesh between formal and informal learning through the application and recognition of educational policies and an extremely important post-COVID 19 issue. It will therefore be necessary for our decision-makers and trainers to integrate these concepts into their school and academic management.

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