

Accountability policy forms in European educational systems: An outro

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Abstract

This article presents the discussion and the conclusion of an EERJ Special Issue on accountability policy forms in four European educational systems aimed at identifying how global schemes and instruments of accountability are integrated into national governance patterns. The comparative discussion indicates that accountability instruments and schemes take the form of singular trajectories that are neither a continuation of the national histories nor an indexation on global governance models. It also emphasises the need to better conceptualise how power relations in the interface between the global and national scenes, as well as within national contexts, shape the accountability forms.

Keywords

Accountability, New Public Management, testing, governance, policies

Do the national case studies presented in this special issue reveal converging trends, or rather unique trajectories tied to the specificity of their historical national contexts? The main goal of this special issue was to analyse in four European contexts historically characterised by no or soft accountability regimes the shape that accountability instruments have taken, by looking at both the policy trajectory and the implementation of accountability instruments.

New institutionalism as framework

From a theoretical standpoint, we suggested considering accountability as an institution, based on the classic definition within sociological new institutionalism (Berger and Luckman, 1966: 55),

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insofar as it diffuses worldviews affecting actors' cognitions (representations of what counts in the school world) and behaviours (measuring, evaluating and possibly sanctioning). In the introduction, we argued that two classic hypotheses rooted in the sociological new institutionalism permit to think about the diffusion and the institutionalisation of accountability schemes in educational systems where accountability was not historically the centrepiece of the regulation: path dependence on the one hand, and isomorphism pressures from the global education policy field on the other.

According to the first, nation states remain key players to take into account for understanding the policies and frameworks structuring them (see Pierson, 2004). According to the second, there now exists a global policy field exerting isomorphism pressures on countries and education systems, at least symbolically. In fact, institutional isomorphism most often amounts to only a formal and 'symbolic' adoption of the institutions, which permits a decoupling between the policy demand and the real practices (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Superficial similarities in the adoption of a policy can therefore obscure very contrasting realities from one country to another, both in the meaning of what is being promoted and in the adoption of new instruments by the actors concerned. The four national cases presented below permit to discuss the balance, in such contexts, between the path dependence hypothesis and that of a mimetic process within a global education policy field.

Four contrasting cases

Xavier Pons describes the French situation through a study of the French testing policy in education since the mid-1970s. His approach takes into account various sources of interdependencies between policy actors (including global players) and shows a succession of five different policy configurations, all indicating, in different ways, a 'statisation process' during which civil servants and political leaders increased their influence and imposed their views and wishes on actors. This has meant that national governance patterns have scarcely been affected by the demands emanating from the globalised institutional environment in France and that large-scale assessments have, in some ways, helped to strengthen the national normative frameworks.

In French-speaking Belgium, low-stakes accountability (LSA) and test-based accountability (TBA) have emerged since the 1990s, while the educational system was characterised by the quasi-absence of both LSA and even more of TBA instruments. Their spread is arguably explained by the agenda of the centre-left political coalition that legitimised them: establishing common standards within a quasi-market context, including subsidised private schools that have significant curriculum autonomy. However, the analyses also indicate their low institutionalisation in the daily practices of schools and teachers, which the authors explain through a foundational tension between inherited institutions highly embedded in local contexts and the political signal associated with the new accountability instruments aiming to institutionalise common norms at the system level.

The contribution of Antoni Verger, Miriam Prieto, Marcel Pagès and Patricia Villamor provides a comparative analysis of two Spanish regions, Catalonia and Madrid. The authors argue that, in a context of financial austerity, each region has witnessed the emergence of instruments typical of high-stakes accountability framing, and more broadly, the New Public Management (NPM) framework as a whole. However, they observe differences in the kind of instruments and regulation, with the school autonomy being clearly more associated with market mechanisms and pressures in the Madrid region than in Catalonia. Those differences seem to be related both to coalition in power as well as to the history of the education system regulations in the two regions.

For Portugal, Carvalho, Costa and Sant'Ovaia show that high-stakes accountability has also emerged over the past 15 years: first since 2001, through the annual publication by the media of school rankings, and secondly between 2011 and 2015 under the Financial Assistance Programme agreed between Portugal, the European Union and the International Monetary Fund. It proceeded

through the expansion of national testing, its rhetorical presentation as central instrument for governing, and the use of test outcomes for the allocation of supplementary hours funded to schools. As in Spain, the acceleration in the adoption of high-stakes accountability instruments was triggered by global pressures as well as by the nature of policy coalitions.

The integration of accountability schemes in the nation scenes: Tentative explanations

What do the four study cases reveal about the pattern of intersections between the global education policy field and the national decline of accountability schemes? Supporting the idea of an isomorphic pressure from the global education policy field, we may first of all observe that accountability is everywhere. In each case, accountability instruments, and related mechanisms of regulation, have flourished, while they were in most cases quite exogenous to the national patterns of regulation. Meanwhile, according the path dependence hypothesis and the idea of vernacular globalisation (Maroy et al., 2017), they have been translated and configured by the structural and normative frameworks inherited from the national past (Schriewer, 2012). Sharp national differences are indeed observed.

The analysis of the French testing policy over the past 40 years indicates clearly that these instruments have been the privileged tools used by administrative and political constituencies to maintain their historic capacity to impose their cognitive and normative frameworks on school-level actors. In French-speaking Belgium, as well, 'history matters'. The analysis presented in this special issue emphasises that the accountability scheme had to contend with the weight of the past in the Belgian context that has long been characterised by a quasi-market logic. In such a context, the authors show that the quasi-market logic and the willingness of each school to distinguish itself in a competitive environment affects far more the actors' cognitions and behaviours than the recently promoted instruments of accountability.

More generally, we would single out two trends emerging from the four cases about national differences. One concerns the situation of Spain and Portugal and the other, that of France and Belgium. In the first case, which is characterised by the particular financial circumstances that some authors describe as the 'Troika' years, we observe a stronger adoption of the cognitive, normative and instrumental frameworks of NPM, whatever the slightly different policy rhetoric underlying them. In the second case, while there were also isomorphic pressures stemming from the global education policy field, they have been forcefully tempered by a national path dependence. The adoption and formal dissemination of accountability instruments is combined and, to some extent, 'absorbed' by traditional modes of governance.

This leads us to advance the hypothesis that the integration of accountability into national governance patterns might be conditioned by the power relationships between the global actors and the national stakeholders. The financial crisis resounding in Spain and Portugal probably made the educational systems more vulnerable to the international pressures of adopting accountability policies and NPM instruments in different sectors. The case of French-speaking Belgium illustrates the importance of taking into account power relations on another scale. Here, the centre-left political actors (who have governed the educational system continuously for nearly 30 years since its split from the Flemish community) have used the rhetoric of accountability and NPM for their own political agenda, namely the regulation of the market in favour of greater intervention by public authorities.

If we take this reasoning one step further, we might argue that accountability forms cannot be explained only through path dependence or through isomorphic pressures. Or to put it differently, the result of the interplay between global and national forces is producing unexpected trajectories,

in that they are neither a simple reproduction of the past nor a simple indexation on exogenous governance models. In theoretical terms, it also means that over and above the emphasis on path dependence (historical institutionalism) and the spread of accountability as institution (sociological new institutionalism), such analysis should look into the respective positions, interests and relationships of the actors involved. We suggest that actors' institutional agency (Lawrence, 2008) might reveal a fruitful concept to understand how institutional change is also influenced by local and global stakeholders. The empirical findings of this special issue highlight the importance of the actors and power relations concerned in order to grasp the local processes at work in the implementation of accountability policies and the diversity of meanings attributed to seemingly identical instruments.

Finally, the bottom-up approach adopted throughout the special issue indicates that low-stakes accountability framing, sometimes also termed reflexive accountability, only partially permits to characterise the governance patterns of the continental European countries under consideration here. For one thing, the developments analysed in the case of Spain and Portugal seem to obey a different logic from those of the other countries considered in this special issue. For another – and above all – the discussion demonstrates the fact that beyond a somewhat superficial distinction between high-stakes and low-stakes accountability, there are a multitude of schemes and policies that can only be understood through a fine-grained analysis of the policies and instruments in action.

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