

Accountability policy forms in European education systems: An introduction

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Abstract

This article is an introduction to a European Educational Research Journal special issue on accountability policies and instruments in Europe. Two hypotheses grounded in the new institutionalist theory are presented to conceptualise and analyse the variety of national trajectories and forms of accountability in four European education systems (French-speaking Belgium, France, Spain and Portugal). The first hypothesis is that of path dependence, which privileges the prevalence of national histories despite the diffusion of global instruments. Strong resemblances between the countries, meanwhile, would favour the second hypothesis of a globalised field in which education systems are exposed to similar policy schemes.

Keywords

Accountability, policies, testing, governance, New Public Management

This special issue deals with accountability policies in education within the European context. It presents four national case studies carried out with the aim of understanding how institutional dynamics have led to a diversity of accountability forms in Europe. By looking at multiple European cases, it raises the issue of the singularity of national governance spaces within the context of an increasingly globalised field of education policies. Such an approach constitutes, we argue, an original contribution to current debates, which largely focus on an institutionalised governance

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arena (Lingard et al., 2013) characterised by shared policy narratives that are translated and spread, with variations, in each of the different but interconnected national areas (Holloway et al., 2017). At the same time, however, the approach aims to avoid methodological nationalism. Rather, it points to the specific nature of the national level within the set of interrelationships connecting the local situation with international contexts.

This introduction begins with a general presentation of the accountability concept, its development within the education field and its proximity to New Public Management (NPM). After clarifying the objectives of this issue, we outline the new institutionalist theory that serves as the framework for the contributions and suggest two hypotheses aimed at understanding the interplay between global and national frameworks. In the outro, we discuss the comparison between the four case studies in the light of the two hypotheses.

Accountability

Accountability was not initially a policy but rather a social institution rooted in the English-speaking cultural world and its particular democratic logics (Bovens, 2005). The term itself has no direct translation in a large number of languages (Holloway et al., 2017). This institution can be defined as a ‘dynamic social relationship through which civil society seeks to control and challenge the state’ (Smyth, 2007: 28). It presumes a relationship between citizens and public agents characterised by a form of a priori mistrust of the quality of the public agents’ work, which civil society should, therefore, be able to monitor (Ranson, 2003).

In concrete terms, this monitoring is most often carried out by means of accountability instruments that permit taxpayers to assess the work of state organisations funded by their money (Bovens, 2005). Accountability instruments make the work of public agents visible to civil society for purposes of verification: ranking hospitals according to their effectiveness, publishing the number of persons returning to work each month through the efforts of a government agency responsible for the economic integration of the unemployed, and so on (Zumofen, 2016). Before it can be made visible by these instruments, the effectiveness of the public agents’ work must first be measured with reference to a variety of prescribed standards (Natriello, 1996). Within the accountability logic, such instruments imply that the work of the public agents is defined rather by the objectives to be attained than by a mandate, a delegation of responsibility and/or a diploma (Boussard, 2009).

New public management

Many studies draw on NPM to explain the spread of instruments based on an institution (accountability) historically rooted in the English-speaking world across several national contexts (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2009). NPM originated either in new institutional economics or in scientific management (Hood, 1991), and has echoed differently depending on national contexts – the ‘managerial’ NPM in the USA, England or New Zealand, for example, and the ‘institutional economics’ NPM in Scandinavia (Hood, 1991). Whatever the differences, NPM is usually associated with four defining dimensions: standardisation, market, decentralisation and accountability (Zumofen, 2016).

NPM configurations and effects on public services have been studied in a large number of countries, notably in the case of the hospital (Dent, 2005), administrations (Dunleavy and Hood, 1994) and the prison (Jendly, 2012).

Instruments and forms of accountability

In education, accountability is mainly rooted in one instrument, large-scale assessment, which in some contexts has had a quite long history, independent from the accountability logic. Large-scale assessment was already present at least from the end of the 19th century in several national education systems (Carnoy and Loeb, 2002), with quite different objectives from that of measuring teacher quality:

Whereas in the past the standardised evaluation focusing on the measurement of learning was mainly interested in the student, its present field of intervention is much broader and interconnects the spheres of education – traditionally its privileged terrain – and policy where it has become a steering tool (Mons, 2009: 100)

In addition to the test, standards constitute another centrepiece of accountability policies in education (e.g. Harris and Herrington, 2006), in the form of learning targets students should attain. This amounts to a formulation of the competences expected at each key point in the student's course of study.

Other instruments may be present or absent depending on the forms of accountability and the national contexts (ranking for instance). Furthermore, the reporting of scores to teachers and schools may take various forms: scorecards, progress reviews or anonymised outcomes. In some cases, accountability policies include formal contracts with specific targets and benchmarks that can lead to sanctions if they are not attained. In others, these contracts remain more implicit and low scores obtained by a school or a teacher would have no formal consequences apart from an incentive to think about one's practices in the light of the negative feedback.

These divergences in the form of accountability policy are understandable in terms of two distinct global narratives: high- vs low-stakes accountability (Mons and Dupriez, 2010), the latter being most often associated with continental Europe. For the advocates of the high-stakes accountability (HSA) scheme, the instruments will have an impact on teachers if they affect teachers' interests and status directly, through the use of financial incentives for instance (Hanushek and Raymond, 2005; Wößmann, 2007). Such a model, therefore, conveys a representation of teachers as strategic actors concerned with preserving their advantages or looking for additional ones, which also means that the relationship between teachers, public administration and civil society is characterised by a lack of trust (Ranson, 2003). In the context of HSA framing, there can be heavy sanctions, such as wage adjustments or placing the school on probation. Finally, HSA can take state-based or market-driven forms (Wößmann, 2007).

The second narrative, low-stakes accountability (LSA), suggests that accountability instruments should, above all, foster reflexive thinking by teachers about how such instruments work (Dupriez, 2015). Advocates of LSA, therefore, reject the publication of outcomes, based on the argument that the results of testing should target the teachers. Large-scale assessment results are perceived as the main levers of change in case of inappropriate practices (Mons, 2009). In other words, the aim is to make the teachers more aware of the value of their teaching methods.

Mons and Dupriez (2010) suggested the term 'reflexive accountability' to describe such schemes that rely mainly on teachers' reflexive capacities. The policies implemented in France, Germany, Switzerland, Belgium and to a lesser extent in some Scandinavian countries, are often cited as examples of such a conception of accountability (Dupriez and Malet, 2013). In Europe, historically characterised by LSA policies, the number of countries where we now find rankings that are typical of HSA has risen over the past five years (in the Netherlands, Sweden, Poland, Iceland, Portugal, Spain and – in quite singular forms – in Italy).

The objective of the special issue

This special issue aims to pursue the study of accountability forms in the European context through finely grained empirical studies of accountability instruments and their implementation. It draws on national case studies to analyse the way accountability policies and instruments are deployed and interact with national patterns of education governance. In addition, accountability is analysed as an institution, presupposing that specific operations (assessment, measurement) and cognition ('the measure matters') organise the relationships between public agents and civil society (Bovens, 2005).

Within a new institutionalist approach, the notion of institution takes on a particular meaning it is necessary to explain. Institutions are the foundations of social life. They shape human conduct by setting up predefined patterns of conduct that channel it in one direction as against the many other directions that would have been theoretically possible (Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 55). Accountability is seen as a new institution framing singular views of education and its governance, as well as patterns of conduct corresponding to this frame. The degree of divergence that we will observe in the conditions of integration into national governance patterns might be associated with two hypotheses. The first is the one of path dependence (Campbell, 2004), which suggests that a singular historical path will dominate over global institutions. Patterns of convergence, on the contrary, would lead to the consideration of an alternative hypothesis pointing to the increased influence of the global education policy field. This is the institutional isomorphism hypothesis.

Path dependence is a central concept in the historical institutionalism theoretical apparatus (Greener, 2005) that emphasises the normative dimension of the institution (Draelaants, 2006). Although economists and historians diverge over its best definition (Simola et al., 2011), both insist that path dependence would have the capacity to orient future choices by indexing them in keeping with past institutional frameworks. According to Levi (1997: 28, quoted in Pierson, 2004: 20),

Path dependence has to mean . . . that once a country or region has started down a track, the costs of reversal are very high. There will be other choice points, but the entrenchments of certain institutional arrangements obstruct an easy reversal of the initial choice. Perhaps the better metaphor is a tree, rather than a path. From the same trunk, there are many different branches and smaller branches. Although it is possible to turn around or to clamber from one to the other – and essential if the chosen branch dies – the branch on which a climber begins is the one she tends to follow.

The alternative hypothesis, rooted in the sociological new institutionalism, suggests that global education policy exerts pressure on states and organisations to move towards institutional convergence. Scott defines the field resulting from the process of isomorphism as a 'community of organisations that partakes of a common meaning system and whose participants more frequently and fatefully interact with one another than with actors outside' (Scott, 2001: 56, quoted in Gammelsæter, 2011: 5). The concept of field has been expanded during the last few years to include field mechanisms at the global level (Komatsu, 2013; Rizvi and Lingard, 2010; Sellar and Lingard, 2013), focusing on the idea that the institutional environment itself tends to be globalised and contribute to the expansion of similar education reforms globally (Verger et al., 2018), among which both teacher-based accountability instruments and large-scale instruments occupy a central place.

The main goal of this special issue is to analyse the shape accountability instruments have taken globally by looking at four European contexts historically characterised by no or soft accountability regimes. Our two hypotheses, not mutually exclusive, will permit the capture of a balance between dependence on a local 'path' and the pressure for mimetic adoptions from the global education policy field.

Contributions

The special issue is organised according to four national/subnational case studies including two types of categorisations: policy trajectory on the one hand, and the forms taken by accountability instruments on the other.

The analysis of the French-speaking Belgium case by Samir Barbana, Xavier Dumay and Vincent Dupriez shows the very singular narrative attached to the new accountability instruments developed with the aim of ‘building’ an education system, although, historically, this was rooted in the double idea of free provision and free school choice, thereby creating tensions between the locally embedded institutions and the new institutions promoted by the accountability instruments. In the next article, Xavier Pons focuses on the French case and argues that the country’s institutional logics have led to an integration of the accountability policy narrative into education governance without any substantial and deep transformations of the governance pattern. The third case is Portugal, where Luís Miguel Carvalho, Estela Costa and Carlos Sant’Ovaia analyse the strengthening and the ‘hardening’ of accountability rhetoric between 2000 and 2015 as a testimony to the emergence of post-bureaucratic governance patterns. Finally, Antoni Verger, Miriam Prieto, Marcel Pagès and Patricia Villamor point to similar transformations in the case of Spain, these having a different nature and magnitude in two contrasting regions, Catalan and Madrid.

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