Original Article

The political decision on Portugal's entry into PISA: A research note

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Abstract

In this article we carry out a preliminary reconstitution of the genealogy of the political decision to integrate Portugal in PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment), promoted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, made in 1999 and implemented in 2000. For this we used a comprehensive analysis of newspaper articles, legal texts and documents on education policy as well as of interviews with relevant political actors. The first results of this analysis suggest that the decision, which was not unanimous among the government members with responsibilities in the education field, was taken by normative emulation, and aimed to consolidate a particular direction of the national education policy.

Keywords

PISA, political decision, Portugal, normative emulation

Introduction: contexts of the emergence and dissemination of international large-scale assessments

In this article we carry out a preliminary reconstitution of the genealogy of the political decision to integrate Portugal in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). This reconstitution is backed by the contributions of Verger (2016), in particular regarding the emergence, mobilization and dissemination of so-called International Large-

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Scale Assessments (ILSA), and by the heuristic framework of rationales for countries' participation in these assessments proposed by Addey and Sellar (2017, 2019).

Verger (2016) identified the normative emulation approach which theorizes the dissemination of global education policy as a process of state legitimation. Countries adopt global policies to stand before the international community as modern, responsible and credible states, who value public education, accountability and transparency as factors of progress and social development.

Addey and Sellar (2017, 2019), in turn, defined a heuristic typology in which they pointed out the main reasons or technical, economic, political and socio-cultural grounds that countries use in order to explain their participation in an ILSA: generate evidence for policy, build technical capacity, obtain financial aid, consolidate international relations, respond to or guide the agendas of their own national politics, guide economic growth, and inform curriculum and pedagogy. Regarding the nature of international large-scale surveys such as PISA as policy tools, Verger et al. (2018) pointed out that, among other aspects, they are politically rewarding, and malleable, stating:

> Enacting quality assurance … in education allows politicians to signal to their publics that they are working seriously towards education change and that they are concerned about education quality, learning outcomes and the future of children. (Verger et al., 2018: 20)

It should also be mentioned that our analysis is framed by a concept of education policy which, in its public dimension, refers to a process, to beliefs and patterns of interpretation as well as of choice of values that define the nature of political problems and calls for action, and which is constructed, beyond the actors implicated in the government's action, by other actors, both individual and collective, public and private (Antunes and Viseu, 2019; Lopo, 2016; Van Zanten, 2004; Verger et al., 2016). In this group we can also find the media, due to the role they play in the education policy arena (Blackmore and Thorpe, 2003; Grey and Morris, 2018; Kevin and Kuttner, 2018).

Moreover, as Strömbäck (2008: 242) remarked:

> Democracy requires some kind of system in which there is a flow of information from the governors to the governed and from the governed to the governors, for public discussions . . . . The media are supposed to provide such a system.

When conceptualizing the media, we thus acknowledge their rationale of involvement with the public in an interactive and iterative process of reality construction (Altheide, 2016; Altheide and Snow, 1979). We also acknowledge their influence in the public space as policy co-producers from a perspective 'that is sensitive to and recognizes the interactions and interdependencies of media systems institutions and actors, political systems, culture, and sense making' (Strömbäck, 2008: 232–233).

Materials and methods

This article is inscribed in a broader ongoing study within the scope of the research project entitled 'A success story? Portugal and the PISA (2000–2015)', funded by FCT – Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology – and focusing on the analysis of the political

assumptions – motivations, interests and rationales – that underlay Portugal's participation in PISA in 2000, and in subsequent cycles until 2015.

In this work, to which this research note is indebted, the emphasis was laid on a qualitative approach (Aspers and Corte, 2019; Schut, 2019), centred on the comprehensive analysis of the available documents on Portugal's participation in PISA. This included articles published in Portuguese newspapers,[1] legal texts collected from the Portuguese database Electronic Journal of the Republic; the government programme, its presentation in Parliament and the debates promoted around it collected from the databases of the Portuguese Parliament. Moreover, in-depth interviews with relevant actors in government positions and with leaders involved in the coordination of the first Portuguese participation in PISA were also used.

Results

The Portuguese daily newspaper *Público*, in an article entitled 'O folhetim da participação portuguesa' (The soap opera of Portuguese participation) reported that the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) had been informed that the Portuguese would not participate in PISA, quoting Ana Benavente, the secretary of state for education and innovation in office at the time, and her statement that Portugal would participate 'in everything, in all preparatory meetings'(Sanches, 2001: 35), only students would not take the tests. In other words, until 2003, Portugal would not compare with its OECD partners.

It was also pointed out that the Office for Education Assessment (GAVE, in the Portuguese acronym) should represent the country, but that this body was overburdened with the preparation of the 12th grade exams.[2] This justification, indeed, points to an important aspects of the Portuguese education context: the central place that assessing students' performance held in the public debate on education policies after the reintroduction of national exams in 1993. These had the twofold purpose of: (a) attesting the conclusion of the secondary school and allowing access to higher education, an evaluation which constituted an indicator of the quality of the education system already incorporated in the political agenda; and (b) the creation of the already mentioned central office of the Ministry of Education – GAVE, which was given executive functions to plan, coordinate, elaborate and validate the instruments of summative assessment of students and which, within the framework of its competences, would coordinate the first Portuguese participation in PISA.

In 1999, PISA again made the headlines, this time in the claim that Portugal would participate in the pilot tests and that, as the then director of GAVE, Glória Ramalho, explained, 'in 2000 the decision would be taken if the country was really going to participate in the mega-survey' (Sanches, 2001: 35).

Even though Portugal would indeed eventually participate in the first PISA cycle, which took place in 2000, this article illustrates the tensions which reverberated in the public space, and which involved the political decision with respect to Portugal's participation. Regarding this process, Ana Benavente can provide relevant first-hand information. She coordinated the study entitled *A Literacia em Portugal – Resultados de uma Pesquisa Extensiva e Monográfica* (Literacy in Portugal: results from extensive and monographic research), a pioneering work on the illiteracy of the Portuguese population, published in 1996.[3] Moreover, she participated in preparatory meetings with the OECD for the implementation of PISA, and in 1999 she held the position of secretary of state for education and

innovation. In an interview she granted us on 6 March 2019, Benavente explained the difficulties of this decision process:

> I came back (from the OECD) having voted against. PISA did not bring intelligence either to schools or to education. When I arrived in Portugal, a commotion had broken out in the Ministry of Education, with some saying . . . 'we cannot remain out of it' . . . And then, of course, the situation was intolerable, and I could not defend it, since I was the only one who had voted against it.

Along the same lines, in an interview conducted in May 2019, the director of GAVE, Glória Ramalho, stated that the decision to participate in PISA was a 'bid pushed by the OECD'.

The doubts regarding this participation are also mentioned in an interview with the minister of education of the government involved in the first PISA cycle, Eduardo Marçal Grilo, conducted by Carvalho et al. (2017: 156), when he stated that 'initially, there was (in the ministry) on the part of some sectors a, I would say, negative reaction regarding PISA'.

The Secretary of State for Education Ana Benavente, in the interview given on 6 March 2019, reasserted that the decision to have Portugal enter PISA was taken by the Minister of Education Eduardo Marçal Grilo, who, like the Secretary of State for Educational Administration Guilherme Oliveira Martins, was 'in favour of us joining the others. We could never be left out.'

On the other hand, analysing the government programme on education and the documents that report its presentation in the Portuguese Parliament and the discussions held on it with the political parties has enabled us to identify three key ideas that permeate these texts: assume the project of modernizing and developing Portuguese society; make education an actual priority; and raise equity, efficiency and quality in the education process.

Discussion

The various types of dissent regarding Portuguese participation in PISA, and the difficulties mentioned by political decision-makers in taking the stand of not participating align with the observations of other studies regarding the importance of the use by the OECD of an informal authority based on peer pressure as encouragement to the countries' participation in PISA (e.g. Liesner, 2012; Lingard and Rawollw, 2011; Woodward, 2009) and the 'sense of urgency' attributed to this decision (Meyer, 2014). Moreover:

> In some cases, non-participation may not be a real option, even when data is not relevant to a country's specific education challenges. For example, high-level policy actors in European countries have argued . . . that non-participation would send a signal that a country was not sufficiently committed to improving education. (Addey et al., 2017: 7)

It is also important to highlight that between 1995 and 2002, as mentioned by Teodoro and Aníbal (2008), the discourses of Portuguese political leaders have been of a hybrid nature. These associate constructivist-like discourses in a critical approach with discourses of social efficiency that links the utility of education to economic productivity in a homogenized and universal logic of modernization. It was during this same period that control over students' academic achievement was intensified with the introduction of national exams.

The early results we summarize here suggest that the decision to have Portugal participate in PISA was taken in a framework of normative emulation; in other words, a situation in which the government, through its spokesman, the minister of education, wanted to present itself before the international community as modern, committed to the country's development, and responsible, at the same time valuing the quality and the importance of externalizing, before its OECD peers, the priority given to education and, additionally, to the measurement of education quality, in which the external assessment of students' performance constituted an indicator already established in the national education policy agenda.

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Notes

1. Four Portuguese newspapers were selected (*Expresso*, *Diário de Notícias*, *Jornal de Notícias* and *Público*), adopting the following criteria: (a) fall in the category of reference newspapers, politically independent as regards their editorial statutes; (b) classified in the general information segment; (c) different publication frequencies (daily and weekly); (d) circulation numbers, positioned in the top three places of the ranking of the APCT – Portuguese Association for the Control of Print-runs and Circulation; (e) average reader profile by gender, age, occupation, social background and region of the country. The four newspapers are owned by Portuguese private corporations. Only articles of the information genre (news) were used. The research was done using the Boolean operator *and* combining the terms 'PISA' and 'OECD'.
2. Secondary education comprises three grades: 10th grade, 11th grade and 12th, terminal, grade. The syllabi of secondary education correspond to level 3 of the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED).
3. This work, however, asserted two fundamental differences regarding the foundations underpinning the analytical framework of PISA: the definition of the concept of literacy, understood as 'the skills to process written information in daily life' (Benavente et al., 1996: 13); and the reference population of the study, regarding which a representative sample was constructed, constituted by individuals 'from 15 to 64 years of age, residing in mainland Portugal' (Benavente et al., 1996: 23).

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