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The Evidence-based Education Policy Movement and Its Effects on the Curriculum Policy in Portugal (2011-2019)

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Proposal Information

This article aims to discuss the scope of the concept of evidence-based education policy in terms of curriculum policies in Portugal, focusing on the policies developed by constitutional governments in office between 2011 and 2019.

The research question is what are the effects of the movement of evidence-based educational policies on curriculum policies in Portugal between 2011 and 2019? The proposal aims at analyzing the political agendas built in the indicated period and identifying the curriculum policy measures that may reflect the effects of that movement.

Considering this evidence-based policy movement, and the relationship between knowledge and politics, Delvaux (2009, p.962) included in the designation of knowledge "everything that intends to say the real and is transmitted through oral, written language (texts , statistical tables...), or iconographic (graphics, photographs, drawings, films...)"; in this sense, scientific knowledge falls within the contours of this definition as a type of knowledge that cohabits and competes with a wide variety of other types (e.g., knowledge of professionals, government, the media).

Regardless of its type, knowledge is always produced by different actors operating in a specific social field, crossed by power relations, interests and ideology, and is influenced by the social and cultural context in which it develops (Barroso & Carvalho, 2008; Carvalho , 2012; Carvalho & Costa, 2015; Delvaux, 2009). And it is precisely because the production and use of evidence is also a social process that "there is no such thing as 'the' evidence" (Rycroft-Malone et al., 2004, p.84).

In fact, this movement acquires an almost planetary importance with the development and implementation of standardized tests, especially by the OECD, which has assumed itself as the most influential think tank in education, not only establishing an agenda, but also creating instruments for regulation and governance, which successive national governments resort to in the design of educational policies. The movement of evidence is based, above all, on the characterization of the reality of each country in the training of its young people in terms of three domains of literacy, also identifying the problems of each nation and demonstrating how others successfully fought these same problems. According to Bart and Daunay (2018), it is a discursive construction in the form of a pedagogical compendium that teaches all educational actors how to obtain good results, prescribing principles, actions, and contents for all dimensions of educational life that allow structuring effective, flexible, and adaptable workers.

This construction assumes the purpose of a "world class education" (Schleicher, 2018) or, in the name of Bart and Daunay (2018), of a "global cognitive subject" using an amalgamation between reality and fiction, within which they stage several real worlds, those of the students, ideologically composed and occupied by a global discourse.

This approach intends to shift knowledge from national curricula to situate it as an information and communication network, with a central role in the production process (Magalhães & Stoer, 2003) based on transferable and segmented knowledge known as competences. This objective can also be found in the PISA project which also intends to redefine school knowledge compatible with the construction of a knowledge society (Carvalho et al, 2017). As a result, the project of construction of the citizen has also changed from the concern to build nation-sates to competitive ones, able to organize an economy over its competitors.

Methodology or Methods/ Research Instruments or Sources Used

Assuming that educational policies, in general, and curriculum policies, in particular, are built in complex, multifaceted processes, in different stages and arenas constituted by different actors, it becomes relevant to analyze the relationship between the guidelines that curricular policies have been taking over in the last two decades and the evidence-based education policy movement. In this context, the concept of refraction(Goodson, 2010) will be used to understand the relationship between the supranational level and the national context, since, despite the OECD projects involving several countries, in each one there will be a path that can be different in the regarding educational policies considering their historical, social, and cultural context.

In this sense, educational change, and curriculum change, must be understood as taking on change patterns and forces, which provide different trajectories depending on the historical and cultural reality of each region, country and even profession.

When considering the Portuguese context, namely the period between 2011 and 2019, the two policy cycles (Bowe, Ball & Gold, 1992) will be analyzed to identify its agenda regarding the following premises:

i) the period 2011-2015 corresponds to the governance of an alliance between two political parties – Social Democratic Party (PSD) and Popular Party (CDS-PP) – whose mandate was marked by external intervention (European Commission, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund).

ii) the period 2015-2019 corresponds to the governance of the Portuguese Socialist Party (PS) with parliamentary support with the left-wing parties – Portuguese Communist Party (PCP), Ecologist Party Os Verdes (PEV) and Bloco de Esquerda (BE).

Through a comprehensive analysis of documents legislative and educational policy, we identified the agendas built from the evidence and how they conditioned and influenced national curriculum policies, understood as a puzzle process that reveals the dominant values, principles and interests at a given time.

Conclusions, Expected Outcomes or Findings

The evidence-based educational policy movement seems to be present in curriculum policies in Portugal during the period under study. Going back to the beginning of the PISA program in 2000, it is possible to see that its importance in terms of policy formulation was never questioned.

Results point to the conception of legitimization with relevance to the measurement cycle (2011-2015), while the conception of agenda setting serves the purposes of the citizenship cycle (2015-2019). However, is important to underline that PISA has as one of its objectives to provoke curriculum changes, which promotes, from the outset, political actions, and measures of the various national governments, being one of the governance instruments that has currently been affirmed within the educational policies.

These political approaches were based on greater or lesser curriculum coherence (Oates, 2011). The measurement policy cycle presents a greater alignment of the proposed measures, based on performativity, selection, and hierarchy. Considering that, in this cycle, the elements of curriculum content, assessment and accountability are aligned with the adverse socio-economic conditions in Portugal, this may constitute an explanatory hypothesis for the improvement of the performance of Portuguese students in PISA 2015. On the other hand, the citizenship policy cycle, with a rational based on innovation, inclusion, and flexibility, shows lack of alignment in terms of curriculum content, given the existence of several curriculum documents with different rationalities and conceptualization, namely curriculum goals and essential learning or student profile, and assessment. Therefore, despite the emphasis on formative assessment and elimination of the 4th and 6th year exams, the remaining end-of-cycle exams remain.

This alignment also must consider teachers' missions, what each one understands as a professional mission, so that a change in their practices is confirmed (Goodson, 2008) and bring better learning outcomes.

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