

Hélène Buisson-Fenet & Xavier Pons

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# School Evaluation Policies and Educating States

Trends in Four European Countries



## Introduction

For several decades the educational systems of developed countries have been through deep structural transformations (decentralization / centralization, merchandising, privatization, opening to contracts, development of evaluation strategies and of quality assurance methods, etc.). These are said to be linked to the influence exercised by organizations like the OECD<sup>1</sup>, the UNESCO<sup>2</sup> or the World Bank (Henry *et al.*, 2000; Jakobi, 2009), which at an international level promote “new educational policies” such as decentralization, free choice, or differentiation of the compulsory school (Mons, 2007b). They are also said to be the result of the local and intermediary regulations being better taken into account (Maroy, 2006). Some see this process (that is found in areas other than education) as being the death of traditional State schools which can be described as “compulsory school[s] [which are] founded on a procedural logic and respect for equality, [which are] state-provided, culturally unique, territorially homogeneous and, over the last few years, pedagogically undifferentiated thanks to the progressive disappearance of the alternative routes.” (Mons, 2007b: 8) The State would be losing its educating mission to other actors (local authorities, families, autonomous schools, private funding, etc.), moved by the quest for manifold interests. In England, for example, several research works mention how private interests are increasingly taken into account in the working out of educational policies (Ball, 2007), leading some inspectors to talk about the privatization of schooling (Green, 2005).

Should this then be seen as the decline of the educating states, which can be defined as modes of regulation in which state organizations (departments and ministries, administrations and bodies of State, government agencies, commissioned organizations etc.) wish to control as much as possible the organization, the content and purposes of education, this being done through different ways (production of norms, curricula, providing of managing tools and of policy instruments etc.)? The thesis we wish to put to trial throughout this work and that we voluntarily state synthetically at this stage is that we are not witnessing the decline of these educating states, but their recomposition. The problem is that this recomposition is often contingent, unstable and multidirectional and that

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<sup>1</sup> Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development.

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization.

it depends on policy configurations in which these States are led to act or react.

That is why, in order to account for it, this work compares the policy configurations that become knotted when external evaluations of schools are conducted, in England, in Scotland, in France and in Switzerland; it is based on a two-year qualitative and exploratory survey composed of interviews (n = 101), of reviews of scientific, institutional and professional literature, and of some observations. Here the “schools” designate general state establishments, or private ones with state contract, mainly in primary education and lower secondary education (UNESCO’s ISCED 2011, levels 1 and 2)<sup>3</sup>. School evaluation is broadly defined as a reflexive and collective process of the production of feedback on the functioning of schools which allows policy actors to appreciate, in reference to various political values (efficiency, equity, quality, relevance etc.), both their organization, their results and the effects of the various measures implemented to reform and regulate them or the education they provide to their pupils. External evaluation can be understood as an evaluation conducted by people coming from outside or as an evaluation not commissioned by the school itself<sup>4</sup>.

Studying the school external evaluation process seems particularly relevant when questioning the current evolutions of these educating States. Globally, political scientists who deeply analysed the forms and evolution of New Public Management clearly stressed that evaluation was a key principle of this doctrine since, by quantifying performance and measuring the outcomes of public organizations, it is supposed to invite the latter to increase accountability and to shift to an obligation towards results (Hood, 1991, 1996; Christensen & Lægheid, 2001). In the educational sector in particular, the external evaluation of schools was described as one of the six new education policies implemented in European countries that had contributed to progressively define new models of post-bureaucratic regulation of educational systems (Maroy, 2006) and as one of the major devices at the origin of new accountability policies (Harris & Herrington, 2006; Dupriez & Mons, 2011; Meuret & Lambert, 2011). Evaluation as a business was also described as a professional space contributing to the diffusion of a new soft governance of education at the European level (Lawn, 2006; Normand, 2010). Closer to our reflections on educating States, another conception of evaluation

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<sup>3</sup> However, the possibilities offered by the field research mentioned in Chapter 2 have sometimes led us to incorporate in our field of analysis establishments that do not strictly belong to compulsory education, mainly *lycées* in France and Sixth form colleges in England.

<sup>4</sup> For a better writing, we shall sometimes refer to this external evaluation of schools as defined here as “evaluation” in the course of this work.

sees it as a contemporary and renewed form taken on by the control of teaching in this context of transformation of the modes of regulating and governing (*Revue internationale d'éducation*, 2008). Complementarily, this research on the external evaluation of schools is also a way of questioning the empiric relevance of an “evaluative State” studied particularly by education researchers (Neave, 1988; Broadfoot, 2000; Maroy, 2006; Van Haecht, 2007; Dumay, 2009; Pons, 2011).

This book is thus composed of three parts. The first one aims at presenting our research work. In chapter 1, we will explain our theoretical approach. It is a manifold approach which stands at the crossroad of policy and State analysis in political science, of a sociology concerned with public action and its professionals, and of educational sciences. In order to try and answer the different scientific questions raised by a comparative sociology of the recompositions of State in the education field, we shall propose a comparative analysis of the different *figures* taken on by the contemporary educating States in several European education systems, these figures designating the particular forms of State and its action in policy *configurations* which shall themselves be studied through three of their dimensions (institutional, professional and cognitive). In chapter 2 we shall present the methodology of our research, meaning our comparison procedure (case oriented), the reasons for selecting the studied countries, education systems and territories, and the means of selection, the means of access to field study, the research methods at work, and the way we processed them.

In a second part, we shall describe, analyse and compare the policy configurations themselves, relying on three analytical transversal approaches. Chapter 3 deals with the historic and political contexts in which school external evaluations have been implemented in each country. Our purpose here is not merely to recall the weight of past upon present, but to show the different forms of the historicity of public action at work in every system, and their influence on the definition of interdependencies between the actors. Chapter 4 introduces the institutional designs at the origin of the evaluation processes in the countries. The purpose is not merely to describe the formal organizations in presence – even though the sharing of this type of knowledge often is a necessary prerequisite to comparison – but to show, on the basis of planned evaluation processes (their degree of codification, their varying frequency, the extent of the consequences they are associated to), to what extent they can frame the relations between the actors. Chapter 5 will finally question the actual foundations of interdependencies between these actors in each educational system. It stresses contrasting situations between England, where these interdependencies strongly depend on a specific inspection process, France, where the weight of the professional identities of the

actors remains deciding, and Switzerland, where interdependencies mainly happen when specific policy instruments are implemented, Scotland being an example of hybrid interdependence.

In the third part, we shall start from the configurations thus brought to light, in order to question more deeply one of their dimensions, and in so doing wonder about the evolution of an aspect of State action, with a comparative purpose. Chapter 6 deals with the cognitive dimension and raises the question of the actual Europeanization by numbers and measurement instruments of European education systems as far as school external evaluation is concerned. Although not denying the supranational normalization that comes with the creation of a European space for educational policies, we stress that this normalization is of unequal importance from one educational system to the other, and that it is still difficult to conclude that the educating States are withdrawing. Chapter 7 develops the professional dimension, and questions the relations between State and professional groups in every country. Contrary to the idea that the transformations of public action would harm the closing bureaucratic strategies of professional groups, and that the new public management would further condemn the central part of these groups in the policy process, we shall show that within each configuration, specific models of professionalization can develop, being coherent with different roles for the State. Finally, chapter 8 focuses on the institutional dimension. Disagreeing with the idea of the convergence, as partial or unequal as it may be, of the European educational systems toward modes of post-bureaucratic institutional regulation similar to the evaluating State's mode, we shall conclude that there exist various forms for the educating State (the evaluating State being only one of its manifestations), between the educational systems as well as within each of them.