Research project: Conceptualising kindergarten curriculum in the Portuguese external evaluation of schools context[1]

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Objectives and Research Questions

Research question:
Is the Portuguese external evaluation of schools contributing significantly to the kindergarten curriculum?
Objectives:
- To study the perspectives of directors, kindergarten teachers, kindergarten department coordinators and parents about the effects of the external evaluation of schools in the Portuguese kindergarten curriculum;
- To highlight the significance of the external evaluation of schools as contributing to the kindergarten curriculum in Portugal;
- To characterize the curricular changes in the Portuguese kindergartens' related to the effects of the external evaluation of schools.

Conceptual Framework

In the research literature 'external evaluation of schools' is "used to describe external monitoring of schools" (Penninckx, 2017, p.2) and occurs with evaluators that do not belong to the school (Scheerens, 2002). External evaluation of schools is perceived as the same as 'inspection', 'supervision' or 'appraisel' (Macnab, 2004), or even as "external inspections of schools' (MacBeath, 2002) and 'school evaluation' (Nevo, 2002). Defining 'inspection' as "an evaluation of the quality of schools including minimally a site visit leading to a judgement on whether the quality of schools is meeting the expected standards" (Penninckx, Vanhoof, De Maeyer, & Van Petegem, 2015, p. 333), is affirming that it is a mechanism to ensure the school accountability (Taubman, 2009, Van Bruggen, 2010, O´Neill, 2013). Despite the interrelation, there are shreds of evidence that it has a transformative and formative approach (Belloni & Belloni, 2003) by direct and indirect effects on schools (Penninckx, 2017).
As curriculum theorist, William Pinar defines curriculum as a "complicated conversation" in which is urgent to "understand the curriculum as a multifaceted process, involving not only official policy, prescribed textbooks, standardized examinations, but as well the "complicated conversation" of the participants (2004, p. 19). According to Pinar,

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Reynolds, Slattery, and Taubman (1995, p. 847), the concept is no limited: “Curriculum is a highly symbolic concept”. The abstract peculiarity of the curriculum does not restrain us to argue, “school curriculum is what older generations choose to tell younger generations . . . the curriculum is historical, political, racial, gendered, phenomenological, autobiographical, aesthetic, theological, and international.” (Pinar, 2004, pp. 185-186).

Intended Methodology, Methods, Instruments

It was designed a qualitative-quantitative methodology based on data collected through interviews, document analysis and, questionnaire.
Data from three national and three international reports about the external evaluation of schools were analysed by content analysis. Four semi-structured interviews were applied to directors (n=5), kindergarten teachers (n=5), kindergarten department coordinators (n=5) and parents (n=5). Content analysis was used to analyse the interviews data. The questionnaire will characterize the perception of kindergarten teachers (n=100) about the curricular changes in the Portuguese kindergartens’ in the external evaluation of schools context, by statistical analysis.

Conclusions, Expected Outcomes or Findings

There are studies that demonstrates “how school inspection with its basis in specifications and fixed measures conflicts with the formative agenda of the incoming curriculum, causing a barrier to its creative realisation in schools” (MacKinnon, 2011, p. 89), also referring to the Portuguese reality (Barreira, Bidarra & Vaz-Rebelo, 2016). We can conclude that there is a tendency for the external evaluation of schools to be reflected in the kindergarten curriculum, by effects and side effects (De Wolf & Janssens, 2007; Penninckx, 2017), that similarity with formal education, it has provoked changes in the kindergarten curriculum by the knowledge fragmentation.

Keywords

Kindergarten curriculum; External evaluation of schools; Effects of the school’s inspections

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