Uncertainties and Risks in Education Politics
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New Approaches in Educational Research (NAER) dedicates this issue to research and reflections on Education Politics (EP). Obviously, this publication does not contain all topics susceptible to be problematic; however, by reading it one can identify questions which show how unsure this area of knowledge is. Indeed, that uncertainty can be both an incentive for improvement and the root cause of future problems with irreversible consequences. Readers will have to judge whether the nine articles which complete this new issue of NAER throw light or cast shadows upon current educational policies.

We talk about ‘educational policies’ not only because there is no single educational policy –actually it is rarely a matter of a single State and increasingly a matter of international institutions. Also because EP has two facets: apart from being a government action, it is an object of research and teaching. Thus, both aspects appear in the articles compiled in this volume. Some of them substantially tackle the problems that affect EP as a discipline which is integrated in the curriculum of higher education studies. For instance, Manuel de Puelles’s article focuses on the uncertainties which affect its conceptual vagueness, the nature of its knowledge or the lack of delimitation of its fields, as well as on its epistemological shortcomings. In that sense, Fernández-Soria’s contribution echoes the relation some researchers see between the lack of epistemological studies, the weakness of research designs and ethical insufficiencies. These articles demand a higher epistemological commitment in research; Jiménez, Palmero and Rico conclude by saying “we need to increase the minimum epistemological reflection levels required to scientifically study Education Politics”.

This study tries to identify and analyse the different ways of understanding, teaching and practicing EP as a postgraduate training discipline. It points out its dispersion of concepts —also tackled by Puelles— and methodologies, which “show the lack of a hermeneutic circle and an interpretative community”. In the first part of his article, Fernández-Soria identifies similar problems. He presents the concerns of the scientific community regarding EP teaching and research and advises more agreement on the meaning of some concepts and applying an active teaching methodology which involves students and improves their attitude and motivation towards Politics. As Jiménez, Palmero and Rico state, conceptual disparity is detrimental to the teaching of EP and is an obstacle to getting to know and explain the problems which affect it. To that, Puelles adds an age-old conflict which blocks teaching and research on politics: its axiological and regulatory or empirical and positive character.

The fields of knowledge of EP is another key topic present in Manuel de Puelles’s contribution. He focuses on the values, the agents—especially collectives—, the curriculum and the assessment of EPs. Some of those may be influenced by a specific type of agents which are currently defining EPs: international agents, some nominated agents –international institutions among others— and other more ambiguous agents such as an economy with a neoclassic approach. All of them are decisively influencing EP as a government action.

The colonisation to which the economy, in a neoclassic way, is subjugating EPs is a recurrent topic in most of the contributions to this volume. The consequences of the omnipresence of this type of economy in the decisions taken about EP are causing the greatest uncertainties and risks for one of its inalienable objectives: the achievement of a more democratic, fair, cohesive society.

The progressive substitution of welfare policies with management policies is, perhaps, the most visible effect of the neoliberal nature of educational decisions. This management approach has severe effects on social policies, especially on educational policies. In his article, Javier Bascuñán warns us about some of those effects, such as the loss of quality in public services and social protection services and reduced access to social rights. He argues that this deterioration is due to ideological reasons, since it is not caused by the economic situation, as citizens are expected to believe. On the contrary, the solution is precisely in the economy. The gravity of that reduction in social services increases with the failure of social education policies which provide a civic training which favours understanding, maintaining the social structure and providing skills for social inclusion and social transformation. The idea of doing “more with less” is a perverse mechanism which provokes inequalities and exclusions based on the pretext of achieving competitiveness, efficiency and budget control. Those inequalities and exclusions demonstrate the failure of some major objectives, which are not only related to the citizens of the traditional nation-State, but also to the idea of European citizenship, in a way which causes distrust of national and European institutions and disaffection with democracy and politics.

That management approach is composed of different aspects of EP quoted by Fernández-Soria, such as accountability, school governing, funding and schooling, as well as the evaluation of learning to which other articles in this publication have referred to when explaining the connection between globalisation and educational policies.

Justino Magalhães explores the building of a concept of globalisation through the world’s fairs and the spreading of ideas like freedom, justice and equality contained in the Declaration of Human and Civil Rights, from the Charter of the United Nations
and the Declaration of the Rights of the Child. Based on that, he recounts the historical process of globalisation in the school sphere, from the statalisation of the Absolutist State to the universalisation of the school system of the mid-20th century, which brought its extension and wider access. Later on a paradoxical situation would occur, that of forcing international convergence and school uniformisation while demanding the adaptation of the school model (contents and methodological strategies) for different populations and places. In the 90s, that paradox was even exacerbated by the popularisation of new means of access to information. The subsequent globalisation provides the school system with information about diversity, multiculturality, pluralism and greater variety of pedagogical ideas, etc. The striking thing about that process — something which is commented by Magalhães — is the fact that globalisation forces curriculums to embrace new topics and ethnocultures, but, at the same time, to implement evaluation systems — mainly numerical ones like PISA — which aim to achieve generalisation by establishing basic, essential elements all educational systems should have. Globalisation rules over a global perspective. Pedagogical convergence and standardisation smooth other diversity.

Following the same idea, Magalhães reminds us that measuring, arranging in series, comparing and achieving agreements have distinguished precedents in the educational sphere. That was the aim of Marc-Antoine Jullien de Paris in 1817, and the Progressive School movement, which stated the famous 30 principles of Ferrière, and even Ferdinand Buisson's *Dictionary of Pedagogy*, which revealed the state of education in each country. All of that work was done in order to evaluate and specify models of pedagogy which could also be used as paradigms to be reproduced.

But are these objectives the ones which guide current evaluation agencies? Some of the contributions to this publication point out that current EPs are subject to evaluation processes which cause, at the very least, uncertainty. By accepting the fact that evaluating education is indispensable, what creates uncertainties is the role international institutions play. As Leóncio Vega states in his article, those international institutions have become "the main educational actors" and they not only set the conceptual, methodological and teaching agenda of EP, but also provide the measuring standards used. Vega Gil concludes that those institutions “acquire a governance category (social and mercantile use) since they transcend schools to become a tool for legitimate social aspects, school choice, quality, segregation, management and excellence”, that is, a tool to promote “competitiveness, the privatisation of Politics and some internal practices within public educational services (and even more in those which are private)”. Certainly, in our times — as Fernández-Soria points out — the numerical evaluation of education, as in the ‘Programme for International Student Assessment’ (PISA), "is becoming a tool for governance, a new means of power which is designing EPs based on the ‘evidence’ of numbers". In his contribution, Vega Gil states that OECD — responsible for PISA — "is a political actor dominated by neoliberalism with regards to the international lines of education". Taking that into account, it would be legitimate to question if the PISA evaluation is not being used to legitimate educational actions and decisions — supposedly based on ‘reality’ — without considering politics and ideology.

The presence — and leadership — of international institutions in EPs questions the role of nation-States. That is another recurrent topic in this new issue of *NAER*. The question is whether that presence — which is the result of globalisation and the new economic paradigm — implies a shift of power in favour of supranational institutions and against the traditional role of States in education. Although some writers in this publication recognise the new role international institutions play in EPs, they trust in the decisive regulatory role of States (Magalhães) and doubt that educational systems break away from States (Vega Gil). However, it is acknowledged that “part of the crisis in Education Politics has to do with globalisation, educational transference and a defensive reaction from State-nations” (Vega Gil). Other authors, although sharing that trust and acknowledgment, foresee a changing tendency in the prominence of actors and think Nation-states will become less important while international institutions will gain importance (Fernández-Soria). Others claim that prominence should be shared between States and private institutions (Francisco Muscarà), which shows the terms of a very current debate about EPs. For Latin America — which is fighting to achieve the 2030 goals — he presents some challenges also shared by other regions: autonomy in institutional management as a tool to tackle cultural identity, social plurality, national integration and social equity; revaluation of the culture of effort and the involvement of companies in educational matters.

But this change in prominence may need to be justified through an unconditional application of the ‘social needs’ discourse. This discourse, based on a ‘logic’ which is not easily sustainable from a social cohesion point of view, argues that traditional nation-States have demonstrated their inability to manage economic shortfalls and to provide society with what it needs for its own progress and welfare. Thus, educational prominence should be moved to other agents which are capable of managing resources more efficiently and better understanding social needs. Civil societies — as opposed to States — demand their own prominence; families ask for ‘freedom’ to educate their children, schools ask for ‘autonomy’ to be managed, individuals ask for ‘emancipation’ to achieve their interests and explore their abilities, markets ask for greater ‘deregulation’ to show what they are able to do. That way, accountability policies are applied in Education. For some, these are the solution to efficiently distributing the scarce resources available, for others they are an ideological discourse which spreads neoliberalism. And therefore, free education policies — with the standard of free choice of school — are applied, defending the parents' right to choose but not considering a possible consequence of school segregation. As a result, a model of school governing emerges championing a supposed management efficiency and to the detriment of the traditional, democratic models of governing. An evaluation paradigm is established as a pretext to achieve an exact diagnosis which enables action where necessary, as explained above. However, that evaluation is being used as a new way of governing EPs. All this seems to result in the privatisation of education, a threat to the creation of a cohesive, democratic society, something which has been noted by some of the articles in this volume.

Of course, EPs are meant to consolidate the national union in the case of Latin America, like Muscarà states, or the European union — though in this case they seem to have the opposite effect (Bascuñán)—, but they are also meant to build and consolidate democratic societies. In this sense, at the beginning of this presentation, we referred to the concerns of EP teachers and researchers about the disaffection of people and especially students towards politics. In their article, Carpenter and Clouse...
present a revealing experience which may be contrary to this idea of disaffection and may potentially favour involvement and democratic competence: direct participation in educational policy issues through electoral polls, a possibility which exists in 24 states in the USA and allows formulating EPs through mechanisms of direct democracy. They study 206 referendums carried out between 1906 and 2009 about issues related to curriculum and teaching, equality, economic issues and facilities, moral issues and political reforms in force. Among other conclusions, their study points out the fact that, although 66% of referendums failed, they were an attractive tool to carry out political changes, even playing an important role in the process of creation of EPs in the USA.

All the different topics treated until this point—though limited as we mentioned at the beginning—are a good collection of risks and uncertainties related to EPs. To conclude this presentation, we would like to point out what may be one of the principal problems in achieving successful EPs: the lack of a holistic design of EPs. That design should consider the possible underlying effects and dynamics of reforms and should also be able to anticipate possible unwanted effects and, conversely, implement possibilities of success of EPs. In his article, Groff proposes applying an analysis tool to EP which has already shown its efficiency in other spheres: system dynamics. That methodology, especially useful in complex systems like the educational one, allows an understanding of why systems behave in a certain way, it allows the testing and planning of policies before they are applied, predicting their dynamics and offering better chances of success. Many educational reforms have failed, for example, because they were aiming for partial changes and ignoring their effects on the whole system, or because they did not take into account the negative reactions or resistance of the agents involved, especially teachers. Understanding the structure, the interconnections and the behaviours that converge in an educational reform; observing it as whole, its interdisciplinary nature or its genealogy, are only some of the requirements needed to achieve the stated objective. System dynamics “offers specific tools to people responsible for formulating policies which enable them to identify detrimental dynamics and to promote the best policies and system designs”. It can also “help us create an educational system which is efficient and fair for our students”.

This is an inalienable objective of any EP: achieving efficiency but fairly. An EP which was not efficient would end up being discredited; an EP which was carried out unfairly would only serve a society doomed to be unequal and incohesive.

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