

EXPLORING THE POTENTIALITIES OF COMPLEXITY THEORY FOR THE STUDY OF PUBLIC POLICIES IN EDUCATION: THE EXAMPLE OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

EXPLORANDO AS POTENCIALIDADES DA COMPLEXIDADE PARA O ESTUDO DAS POLÍTICAS PÚBLICAS EM EDUCAÇÃO: O EXEMPLO DA UNIÃO EUROPEIA

EXPLORANDO LAS POTENCIALIDADES DE LA TEORÍA DE LA COMPLEJIDAD PARA EL ESTUDIO DE LAS POLÍTICAS PÚBLICAS EN EDUCACIÓN: EL EJEMPLO DE LA UNIÓN EUROPEA

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ABSTRACT: In this article we assume that educational reforms, particularly in the European Union, since the 1990s have been guided by the recommendations of international organizations that emphasize the centrality of education and its ability to guarantee employability, to avoid social exclusion, to promote citizenship and personal development. In the search for new ways to explore the realities linked to public education policies, this article aims to contribute to a better understanding of the concept of complexity and to deepen an approach that allows a new intelligibility of complex systems, such as public policies in educational sphere.

KEYWORDS: Complexity. Systemic approach. Educational policies. European union.

RESUMO: Neste artigo partimos do pressuposto que as reformas educativas, em particular na União Europeia, desde os anos 1990 têm sido pautadas pelas recomendações de organismos internacionais que acentuam a centralidade da educação e a sua capacidade de garantir a empregabilidade, de evitar a exclusão social, de promover a cidadania e o desenvolvimento pessoal. Na procura de novas formas de explorar as realidades ligadas às políticas públicas de Educação, este artigo tem por objetivo, contribuir para uma melhor compreensão do conceito de complexidade e também, aprofundar uma abordagem que permita uma nova inteligibilidade dos sistemas complexos, como são as políticas públicas na esfera educativa.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Complexidade. Abordagem sistémica. Políticas educativas. União europeia.

RESUMEN: En este artículo asumimos que las reformas educativas, particularmente en la Unión Europea, desde la década de 1990 se han guiado por las recomendaciones de organizaciones internacionales que enfatizan la centralidad de la educación y su capacidad para garantizar la empleabilidad, para evitar la exclusión social. , para promover la

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ciudadanía y el desarrollo personal. En la búsqueda de nuevas formas de explorar las realidades vinculadas a las políticas de educación pública, este artículo tiene como objetivo contribuir a una mejor comprensión del concepto de complejidad y también profundizar un enfoque que permita una nueva inteligibilidad de los sistemas complejos, como las políticas públicas en la esfera educativa.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Complejidad. Enfoque sistémico. Políticas educativas. Unión europea.*

Introduction

In this article, we assume that educational reforms, particularly in the European Union, since the 1990s, have been guided by the recommendations of international organizations that, through an abundant production of documents and the development of statistical projects, emphasize the centrality of education and its ability to guarantee employability, to avoid social exclusion, to promote citizenship and personal development. As a prescriptive "recipe", these agencies show an education perspective for the 21st century, based on lifelong education.

Although there is strong pressure for European Union governments to shape their education and formation policies in line with supranational recommendations and guidelines, the truth is that national education and formation systems continue to be influenced by a wider social, economic, political and cultural context, and as a consequence, there is no single model of education and formation policies that prevails. In this sense, the trends that emerge are naturally and inevitably complex.

However, the centrality that is attributed to education in the development processes of countries, specifically in countries belonging to the European Union, poses complex problems for the study of educational policies.

As we defend (NEVES, 2005; 2008) for this problem centered on the dynamics inherent to social phenomena, we think a multi and transdisciplinary approach is adequate, which supports a complex view of reality.

This argument is based on the belief that nowadays it is undeniable that human systems have complexified their ways of life and connection to the world. This complexification is not a unique characteristic of our times, but today it takes on shapes never seen before, which require new readings of reality so that we can intervene and improve living conditions in contemporary societies.

These questions become very pertinent for an investigator of social and human reality. This is because a researcher whose object of study is the human being and his experience in

society, today, cannot be oblivious to characteristics inherent to social and human societies, characterized by unpredictable, uncertain, and possibly chaotic phenomena. The methods inherited from classical science, coming from Descartes and Positivism, do not serve a researcher who seeks to analyze and try to understand a large number of elements of a different nature, but that as a group are part of the same whole. That is, interacting parts that characterize the globality of a whole.

In the search for new ways to explore the realities linked to public education policies, this article aimed to contribute to a better understanding of the concept of complexity and also to deepen an approach that allows a new intelligibility of complex systems, such as policies in the educational sphere. In this sense, we tried to gather the contribution of some authors who could support us in defining a new research paradigm that contributes to an intelligibility of the complex reality, which today challenges us, of educational policies.

From paradigm crisis to complex thinking

Classical science was based on the idea that the scientist's job consisted of discovering laws that govern a given process, so that an adequate mathematical model could be built and from there on to be able to determine the evolution of the system, through universal laws.

This positivist and deterministic paradigm is suitable for explaining static systems, systems in balance, but when it comes to explaining unpredictable and uncertain systems, as living systems are, it reveals an almost total inability to explain and understand them. This is because for living systems it is difficult to define a general equation that defines their evolution and that explains their behavior. Living systems are systems that develop at times through states of balance, at times through states of disorder and chaos, giving rise to uncertain and unpredictable behaviors, and it is this complexity that defines them as complex systems.

As stated by Boavida and Amado (2006, p. 132, our translation):

complexity is revealed when empirical and logical difficulties arise, both in the Physical Sciences and in the Human and Social Sciences. These difficulties arise, above all, from failed attempts to impose the simplification paradigm, a paradigm that imposes order on the universe and expels disorder from it.

In the perspective of these authors there is a complexity that has directly to do with chaotic phenomena, characterized by a disorder, and also has to do with logical contradictions in the field of conceptions and modeling of the real.

But let us try to define the concept of complexity a little better. According to Donnadiu and Karsky (2002, p. 18, our translation) the concept of complexity is as follows:

[...] they are phenomena where multiple factors interact, where principles of regulation and imbalance are combined, where contingency and determinism, creation and destruction, order and disorder are mixed, where systems with an increasingly elaborate architecture proliferate.

From this notion, we infer that the complexity of a living system tends to increase, through a complex organization. This is characteristic of living systems and, consequently, of social and human systems.

The attempt to understand the complexity of the systems started in physics, nowadays, two types of systems are defined: linear systems and non-linear systems. Linear systems are represented by equations through physical and mathematical formulas that try to represent a certain reality. Non-linear systems are not represented by mathematical formulas, because the variables of influence are immense, and the systems do not respond in an organized way to their variations. Most natural systems are non-linear systems.

In living systems, more precisely in human and social systems, this complexity can take the form of complex objects or situations that, according to Donnadiu and Karsky (2002, p. 27), can be identified by some particular characteristics, namely: vapority and printing (we are unable to determine exactly and precisely which dimensions and boundaries make up the system and each of its parts); risk and instability (time has the particularity of disorganizing the structures and organization of complex systems, but it also allows the emergence of periods of order and stability); ambiguity (another characteristic that identifies complex phenomena and that concerns the relationships that unfold within a complex phenomenon, and also the relations that it establishes with the environment in which it is inserted); uncertainty and unpredictability (complex systems develop autonomous behaviors, that is, free from external determinisms. As they are systems subject to influences both from the external environment and from the relationships that develop within them, they can assume unprecedented and unpredictable configurations that cause changes system status).

In a general perspective, what the complexity paradigm proposes is a view of the world as an inseparable whole, where knowledge of reality will necessarily have to start from a multidisciplinary perspective.

It is also in this line of a reorganization of knowledge, that Morin (2001; 2002) proposes a paradigm shift that sees the complex object as a place of intersection of different problems, whose approach must be based on a transdisciplinary and systemic perspective.

The systemic approach and complex thinking

Systemic thinking was an important milestone in the epistemological break with classical science thinking.

The object of study of the Systemic Approach is the systems. A system is made up of independent parts, but which interact with each other, mutually transforming each other. Therefore, the system is not defined by nature or by the sum of its parts, but by the properties that the interaction between them originates. Therefore, the isolated study of each part of the system does not allow us to get to know the system, which contrasts with the logic of Cartesian thought that argued just the opposite.

Hence the maxim: *the whole is more than the sum of the parts*. This is because from the very organization of the system, emergent properties emerge that can retroact on the parts themselves, transforming them.

Living systems have predominantly nonlinear temporal dynamics, which means that these systems can be sensitive to external disturbances. Thus, predicting their future behaviors becomes extremely difficult. However, living systems, although unpredictable in the long run, have a certain determinism that allows their organization in view of a purpose.

That is, living systems, and particularly social and human systems, are systems composed of many different elements and/or subsystems that interact with each other spatially and temporally, in a non-linear manner, generating emerging patterns that are observable only on larger scales, making them complex systems.

But this type of system is not only structurally complex, it is also functionally complex. This is because they evolve over time and their states in all stages of organization undergo changes which continually change their functioning.

In this sense, the term complexity refers to the description of states in a complex system. The degree of complexity can be related to the number of elements that make up the system, disregarding the interactions that exist between them. We can also measure the degree of complexity based on the number and intensity of the relationships that exist between the elements of the system. Or we can verify the level of complexity of a system, based on the relationship between the number of relations and the number of elements in the system and the number of functions performed by the system.

According to Morin (2001, p. 17-19, our translation),

at first glance, complexity is a fabric (*complexus*: what is woven together) of heterogeneous constituents inseparably associated. (...) Complexity is

effectively the fabric of events, actions, interactions, feedback, determinations, chance, which make up our phenomenal world.

Morin (2001) presents us with seven principles that can help to understand complex thinking:

1. *The dialogical principle* – which can be defined as the union of two antagonistic principles or notions that should be repelled, but that are inseparable for the understanding of reality;
2. *The principle of recursivity* – it is a process in which the effects are both causative and producers, the final states being necessary for the initial states;
3. *The holographic principle* – demonstrates that the whole is in the parts and that the parts may be more or less able to regenerate the whole;
4. *The systemic or organizational principle* – according to which the organization of the whole produces new qualities or properties in relation to the parts considered in isolation, called emergencies;
5. *The principle of the retroactive circle* – that allows the knowledge of self-regulatory processes, better known as feedback;
6. *The principle of self-eco-organization* – principle according to which our autonomy is inseparable from the environment, which reveals a relative autonomy;
7. *The principle of reintroducing knowledge into all knowledge* – all knowledge is a reconstruction carried out at a given time, by a given culture.

We understand, then, that there are some principles that govern complex thinking. In general, we can summarize them as follows: everything is connected to everything; the living world is composed of antagonistic and complementary opposites; every action implies retroaction and retroaction gives rise to new actions; we live in dynamic feedback systems and not in static and linear circles of causes and effects; hence the structure of the system is constantly changing, causing unexpected properties to emerge; a system is more than the sum of its parts, the properties of a system are not explained by the isolated analysis of its parts; it is impossible to try to understand a system without relating it to its context.

In other words, the proposal of complexity is a multi and transdisciplinary approach to phenomena, through a paradigm shift that opposes the reductionism and determinism characteristic of the positivist paradigm, which characterized classical science.

The advantage of complex thinking is that it allows us to understand the small actions that can have a great influence on great results, which indicates that there are no single-cause phenomena, since all actions cause unexpected effects.

However, for the complex objects and phenomena to which the definition of system can be applied, some characteristics can be attributed that distinguish them from simple systems, to be considered complex systems.

Generically, complex systems are those composed of many elements and/or subsystems of different nature, which interact spatially and temporally with each other, in a non-linear way, generating emergent patterns that are observable only on larger scales.

There is also another specificity within complex systems, which are Complex Adaptive Systems - CAS. This is because there are systems whose organization is based on complex patterns that have the ability to modify and adapt according to interactions with the environment, thus responding in an organized manner to external stimuli.

In general, all CAS have in common the fact that they are systems made up of a large number of elements interacting with each other according to certain rules and forming a web of simultaneous interactions, but without any central control unit. Which means that each element is unique and free to react to the environment that surrounds it, according to its rules that we may or may not know. Each of these agents can influence the overall result of the system or the rules contained in the other elements.

In other words, the characteristics that CAS have in common are: being adaptable and evolutionary, producing emerging behaviors and having some power of anticipation. Through the evolution of the rules of interaction between agents, they are able to adapt and learn; complex systems also exhibit emergent behaviors that cannot be deduced from the individual action of each agent; and in their effort to adapt to a constantly changing environment, the elements that constitute CAS develop rules capable of anticipating the consequent responses, thus acquiring the power of anticipation.

Since each agent is continually reviewing its rules of interaction, it is involved in a constantly changing environment. Thus, CAS continue to evolve and exhibit new emerging behaviors in which history and context play a central role, further complicating the task of building a general theory.

A complex approach to education regulation methods and instruments

From the second half of the twentieth century, international institutions emphasized a transnational convergence of educational policies, despite structural and organizational differences controlled by national states. From “loans”, “copies” and “transfers”, the models and good practices that changed the role of the State as the sole regulator of the educational field spread. This leads us to another discussion, the fact that today we are witnessing the construction of new ways of regulating educational policies. The dominant form nowadays is built from the great statistical projects and education indicators that, comparatively, serve to evaluate and monitor the progress of the world education and formation systems.

These seem to be the most influential and important current forms of regulation due to their economic connotation, because the indicators are important instruments for States, as they attract foreign investment, out of this need comes the desire for countries to be well qualified in these world rankings.

However, there are also other agents that influence educational policy not only at the transnational level but also at the national, regional and local level. Here, we return to the discussion about the new role of the State in education and, more specifically, about the regulation of education and about the different actors involved in this regulation.

What is happening is that, to a greater or lesser extent, all countries on a global scale are confronting supranational organizations and agencies that lead the State to assume a mediating role, ceasing to be the sole promoter of goods and services of society, to become a state regulating the global market process.

Then we look at the new forms of regulation of education (in the sense of political power in action). We realize from the literature related to this theme, that there are numerous meanings for the term regulation, according to the theoretical and disciplinary positioning.

Antunes (2006) considers the regulation of education in two dimensions: on the one hand, as a set of mechanisms put in place to produce the emergence of individual and collective behaviors and mediate social conflicts, as well as guaranteeing social cohesion; on the other hand, he sees the regulation of education as the definition of standards and rules that establish the framework for the functioning of institutions.

Barroso (2006) states that the term regulation is applied in the context of education to describe two types of differentiated, but interdependent phenomena. On the one hand, it describes the ways in which the rules that guide the action of the actors are produced and

applied, on the other hand, it is used to describe the ways in which these authors appropriate the rules and transform them.

In the first case, Barroso (2006, p. 13, our translation) distinguishes a type of institutional, normative and control regulation defined as: “the set of actions decided and executed by a body to guide the actions and interactions of the agents over which it has a certain authority”.

In this sense, the dimensions of coordination, control and influence exercised by the holders of a legitimate authority are emphasized.

In the second case, we have what Barroso (2006) calls active, autonomous and *situational regulation*. This perspective, it is a process that includes the definition of rules that guide the functioning of the system, but also its readjustment according to the various strategies and actions of the various actors, in their relationship with those same rules.

Also in this line, Doray and Maroy (2003) identify three meanings according to which the term regulation is used. In a first sense, we have a regulation close to the systemic approach, considered as a set of feedback mechanisms through which the system regains its balance, guided by a reference standard.

In a second sense, Doray and Maroy (2003) refer to *institutional regulation* with reference to the control of actions by a recognized authority, that is, regulation is exercised by an agency with legitimate authority, whose mission is to guide actions and interactions between the various actors.

In a third nuance of the term regulation, Doray and Maroy (2003) define a type of regulation that is used more as the result of an articulation between “horizontal” regulation processes to produce standards within the organization. In this sense, regulation is understood as a social process of producing “rules of the game” that allow solving problems of interdependence and coordination.

Antunes (2006) refers to the contribution of Roger Dale who defines the term regulation as the set of control activities that the State assumes through policies and legal sanctions, thus considering the State as the regulator of last resources, as it maintains the authority and responsibility for the governance of education, but it does not control how activities are coordinated. This author, however, refers to a new level of regulation that has been emerging. In addition to regulation as a form of governance, determined by rules, which operates downstream to functioning (*inputs*) and regulation as a form determined by objectives (*outputs*), Dale warns that we are moving towards regulation based on results control mechanisms (*outcomes*).

In addition to these new forms of regulation, we have some authors who question the role of the various actors involved in the regulation of education, and the various levels at which this regulation occurs. This process of regulating educational policies has, at its core, the discussion about the new role of the State in the governance of education.

Barroso (2006) analyzes the movement of recomposing state power and redefining the different roles of social agents in the educational field. In this context, he takes as reference the existence of three different, but complementary levels of regulation: transnational regulation, national regulation and micro-regulation.

Regarding transnational regulation, this author states that it is about:

a set of norms, speeches and instruments (procedures, techniques, diverse materials, etc.) that are produced and circulate in international decision and consultation forums, in the field of education, and that are taken by national politicians, officials or specialists, as obligation or legitimacy to adopt or propose decisions regarding the functioning of the educational system (BARROSO, 2006, p. 44-45, our translation).

Regarding national regulation, this term relates more to the concept of institutional regulation, as it concerns the way in which public authorities exercise coordination, control and influence over educational systems through norms and rules.

In this line, Antunes (2006) introduces another term, meta-regulation, also developed at a more institutional level, where the State has the main role of defining the conditions and parameters for negotiating and confronting the interests at stake.

As for micro-regulation, this refers to a:

complex game of strategies, negotiations and actions, of various actors, whereby the norms, injunctions and constraints of national regulation are (re)adjusted locally, often in an unintentional way (BARROSO, 2006, p. 57, our translation).

Thus, this micro-regulation is a process of coordinating the action of the actors based on the confrontation, interaction, negotiation and consensus of various interests, of different logics and strategies of "administrators" and "administrated" belonging to interdependent intra and interorganizational territories.

Referring to some comparative studies in the area of education on the modes of state regulation, Barroso (2003) highlights some common elements regarding the modes of political regulation in the field of education. In this sense, this author distinguishes three types of effects: the "contamination effect" - which exists in terms of the transfer of concepts, practices and measures put in place in the countries; the "hybridity effect" - which results in

the overlapping or miscegenation of different logics, discourses and practices in the definition and political action and; finally, the “mosaic effect” that results in the process of building these same policies that rarely affect the whole of education systems and that normally result in a series of general measures for specific situations and audiences.

These effects on the modes of political regulation in the field of education highlights, in the author's opinion, an “institutional regulation”, that is, a set of actions carried out by an instance to guide the actions and interactions of the actors over which they hold a legitimately recognized authority.

According to this analysis, we realize that there is a complex system of regulations at different levels and carried out by different actors, who confront each other, different logics and interests.

But in addition to the fact that there are several levels of regulation that result in different effects on the modes of political regulation, there are actors that lead these various levels and modes, which vary according to their level of involvement in the formulation of educational policy and their ability of regulation in relation to its members. Ioannidou (2007) focuses on the analysis of actors at the transnational level and presents us with three groups of agents:

- a) International agents - such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization - UNESCO or the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development - OECD, which are intergovernmental organizations without the capacity to regulate and control their members, having only the power to define an agenda for the education they propose, eventually assuming a role of great influence in the definition of educational policies;
- b) Supranational organizations - such as the European Union - EU, which have regulatory powers over their members and also have some legal power to shape policies in some areas. The EU has no explicit power over the education of its Member States, but it has an enormous influence on the definition of its educational policies;
- c) Non-governmental organizations - such as the European Educational Research Association, which operate as self-organized networks of professionals, without interference in government policies.

The European Union as an example of a complex system of education regulations

Bearing in mind the objectives of this article, we will now analyze the complexity of the situation of the European Union, as a supranational organization, and the forms and instruments of regulation that it exercises in the educational policies of its Member States.

In the official documents of the European Union, the objective of complementing the action of the Member States in the field of education is visible, serving only as a space for coordination and evaluation of progress in the implementation of policies.

In this perspective, the European Union does not intend to impose greater homogenization or unification of national education systems. The argument of Nóvoa and Lawn (2005) is that the European discourse tends to impose itself as a regulatory ideal that defines the possibilities and impossibilities in the field of education.

In the opinion of Ioannidou (2007), what is happening today is that in European cooperation in the field of education, the aim is not only to build a European area of education, but rather that the Member States define common objectives that logically lead to an European model of education.

This strategy, according to Nóvoa (1998), presupposes a method and structure well illustrated by the verbs: identify, disseminate, measure and compare. Identify common objectives, disseminate good practices, measure the results obtained and compare the progress achieved.

Therefore, the European Union uses instruments, mechanisms and tools to achieve certain political objectives through which it exercises its regulation of education.

From the activities of monitoring, measuring and comparing educational results and evaluating the results and performances of education systems, a tendency towards political regulation of education also appears in the context of the European Union through comparable empirical data.

Ioannidou (2007), however, draws attention to the fact that, in the case of the European Union, “classic” regulatory instruments still exist, which coexist with these emerging trends.

In order to distinguish between “classic” regulatory instruments and the new instruments mentioned above, we will refer to the contribution of Ioannidou (2007), which is based on Wikkle's definition, distinguishes three regulatory instruments: power (as a form of legal and normative regulation which links states to certain actions); money (as a form of

capital financing) and knowledge (as a way of generating and disseminating knowledge derived from evaluation, quality management and project implementation processes).

Based on this distinction, Ioannidou (2007) analyzes the regulatory instruments used by the OECD and the European Union in relation to their Member States, as organizations with a strong influence in the transnational area of education.

The author concludes that, in the case of the European Union, the instruments linked to power and money still have considerable weight (considered the classic instruments of regulation). From the point of view of power, we find expression either through the definition of political competences for the European Union, through articles 149 and 150 of the Treaty of Amsterdam, or through the definition of the principle of subsidiarity, as a way of supporting the action of States Member States in certain areas of national policy. From the point of view of money, we still find a strong weight and influence in the financing of certain actions defined by the European Union as priorities. Since the Lisbon Summit in 2000, and with the introduction of the Open Method of Coordination (OMC), we have seen the emergence of new forms of regulation based on evaluation and mutual knowledge between Member States.

This latest trend seems to have been increasing. This is because the OMC is based on an approach based on monitoring and benchmarking that assesses the progress of Member States in relation to common objectives, the so-called “soft law” (IOANNIDOU, 2007). On the other hand, this method is also based on the sharing of good practices, which demonstrates a clear need for peer evaluation, in order to support mutual learning by identifying good practices. We also have the emergence of a series of large-scale comparative and evaluation studies, such as the studies developed by Eurostat.

These examples, in the opinion of Ioannidou (2007), are the proof that there is a certain convergence in the use and rationalization of these instruments, justified by the need for information and transparency on educational systems for possible comparisons and identification of successful cases, to favor the correction of policies oriented towards common objectives, based on knowledge, as a means of regulation.

However, the author warns that this knowledge generates, through these instruments, valid and accurate information about a reality that is difficult to observe in quantitative data.

That is why authors, such as Afonso (1998), draw attention to the fact that evaluation was a way of introducing market logic in the sphere of the State and Public Administration. The adoption of this type of policy led to a positivist type of evaluation theory, and an

evaluation based on measurable indicators, which reflects this greater concern with the product than with the process.

The European Union applies a series of instruments to regulate educational policies which, although based on consensus and shared values, develop a series of tools that collect and transform information into knowledge, which makes the European Union an institution with great influence in mediation of community education policy.

In addition to the instruments that we have seen associated with knowledge, the European Union also exerts enormous influence through money and power.

In terms of power, although it is not explicit, it is difficult to conceive of the idea that a Member State is on the sidelines of this political strategy, which even camouflaged in a discourse around common defined objectives (NÓVOA, 1998) constitutes an European “*gouvernance*” strategy that defines how to pose problems and build policies.

Therefore, in the European Union we can still find the three types of instruments for regulating education still very present, although there is a significant trend towards instruments associated with knowledge. Once again, we warn that the impact of these types of regulatory instruments can have a perverse effect.

Education is a process where a set of dimensions are interconnected that make it a complex phenomenon. A statistical evaluation will hardly be able to make a diagnosis of this complex process where various dimensions interact, such as the cognitive dimension, the affective dimension, the cultural dimension, active citizenship, empowerment, the dimension of social relationship, responsibility, professional formation, etc. That is, the indicators are too restrictive and simplifying of the reality that we are trying to assess (NEVES, 2005, p. 159, our translation).

According to Neves (2005), in education emerges the need to build other types of modeling, so that the change in the logic of analysis of the evolution of educational policies changes from technological thinking to complex thinking, capable of embracing the emergencies of unpredictable and interdependent phenomena.

The European Union has a strong influence on the definition of an educational agenda for its Member States, also defining the issues that must be evaluated and monitored, in addition to defining what is desirable and how it can be achieved and feasible.

This objectivity, almost imposed as an explicit mandate, makes it practically impossible for the Member State to function outside this “magistracy of influence”. A magistracy that Ioannidou (2007) claims to be constituted by an elite policy, composed of

networks of experts and specialists who are responsible for creating and disseminating a language about educational phenomena and how they should be interpreted and resolved.

In this investigation, we recognize that this “magistracy of influence” frames and produces, to a large extent, the problems of contemporary education.

But like Ball (2007), we believe it is important to draw attention to the fact that there is a tendency to identify a set of generic solutions to these problems and to recognize their effects on the reform and restructuring of education. In this sense, these “magical solutions” have become dominant in political discourse and take the form of response possibilities, which are borrowed and adopted by several countries with different political, social and cultural contexts. However, the author alerts us to the fact that there are local political actions that involve processes of struggle and negotiation and that translate these magical solutions into divergent practices.

Concluding notes

In the current context, political decisions are a complex arena where there is a need to address local particularities and, at the same time, be aware of general standards and the convergence of global models of education.

Therefore, an analysis of educational policies should consider the general and common elements of international education policy, but also the process of translating and recontextualizing the implementation of policies at national and local levels.

In this article, we seek to deepen some theoretical contributions on the analysis of educational policies and policies in particular and, we conclude that, in the global context, the analysis of educational policies must start from the assumption of a political cycle in motion that includes the context of influence, the context of production and the context of practice.

In this perspective, currently analyzing the context of influence requires us to consider not only the global context, but also the process of producing political texts and the speeches that frame them and also consider the immediate and hidden effects that these policies have in practice.

Although we recognize that globalization is the scenario that frames and contextualizes many of the contemporary problems of education, the speeches and texts and political speeches seem to point out a set of solutions to these problems, with very clear effects on the reforms and restructuring of education. However, most authors emphasize the

importance of local politics, where these general solutions are translated and interpreted in localized practices.

In this article, we intend to highlight that supranational influences are not the only source of influence in the formulation of educational policies and that it is important to relate these influences to the place and the contexts in which the policy is applied.

Based on the analysis of the European Union's political context in the area of education, we assume that contexts are important for understanding the specific conditions and circumstances in which these global trends are transformed into possibilities of response with some creativity, generating complexity.

We conclude that it is essential, in addition to considering the influence of a global process with a tendency towards homogenization, also to emphasize the importance of context and its complexity as an element of reformulation of policies and politics.

In this context, we do not intend to develop a linear approach to educational policies, as we believe that policy is a process subject to constant reinterpretations, being made and redone while it is being implemented. Given this constant recontextualization, we defend a broader conception of politics, as a process, as a political cycle, understood as several arenas of action (context of influence, context of text production of politics, context of practice), which today encompasses processes and diverse agents (ANTUNES, 2006).

In our view, it is necessary to deepen the analysis of the regulation processes of educational policies that seek to identify and understand not only the production of rules, norms and constraints, but also the readjustment of the actions of the various agents in relation to these same rules. In this perspective, it seems to us to make more sense to speak of a multi-regulation process (BARROSO, 2003), since the processes of regulation in education do not result exclusively from the imposition of norms defined *a priori*, but from different logics and interpretations that result in processes of struggle, confrontation and negotiation exercised by institutional, individual agents and formal and informal structures that recombine the various existing regulations, in a perspective of social regulation.

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