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# The emergence of Accountability in the Portuguese education system

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**Abstract**

The issue of accountability has gained a renewed social, political and educational importance. This is one of the reasons why it should continue to be an object of theoretical and conceptual reflection, particularly in the social sciences. Regarding, more specifically, education, the contributions that have the issue of accountability at their core are still few, particularly in countries where democratic political regimes are relatively recent. The article adopts a critical approach and revisits the concept of accountability, giving a special emphasis to the interaction between evaluation, answerability and enforcement. This brief theoretical and conceptual framework is then applied to some aspects of the Portuguese educational reality and we conclude that the issue of accountability is still, in this specific context, relatively recent and uncertain

Keywords: accountability in education; partial forms of accountability; Portuguese education system.

## 1. Introduction

In this text, I intend, mainly, to discuss some concepts and stress the presence and importance of the issue of accountability in the field of Portuguese education. However, the discourses that call for the introduction of accountability mechanisms are not always motivated by explicitly democratic reasons. There are also demands which are influenced by more instrumental or control reasons, or which aim to cater to rationales that feed or exacerbate competitive inequalities even though, as often happens in education, they seek to justify themselves as an inevitable compensatory consequence of the loss of power, namely of the State, in the course of autonomy and/or decentralisation processes. These contradictory perspectives and rationales, with different emphases and consequences, also and increasingly affect public education policies.

Taking this into account, in this text I aim to stress aspects of the issue of accountability which I believe are necessary to maintaining the debate on some of its more pertinent dimensions for the field of education – and following from this, share some experiences and the content of some legal norms which are being implemented in Portugal.

## 2. Towards a definition of accountability

Although it is often translated into Portuguese as synonymous with *answerability*, the word accountability displays some semantic instability because in reality it corresponds to a concept with plural meanings and magnitudes. In order to avoid some of the pitfalls surrounding a concept which requires greater reflection and which could certainly be the object of an interesting theoretical-conceptual exercise, I will attempt to make the discussion of the meaning of accountability more accessible, opting, to this effect, to closely follow one of the most widely referenced works by Schedler (1999), though still including, where appropriate, my own reinterpretation.

For Schedler, accountability has three structural dimensions: an *information* dimension, a *justification* dimension and a dimension of *enforcement* or sanction. Accountability, as an obligation or duty to provide answers (*answerability*), is not simply a more or less benign discursive activity that is exhausted in information and justification; it also includes an authoritative, coercive or sanctionative dimension (*enforcement*). In light of the huge variety of existing situations, those three dimensions (information, justification and sanction) may not always be present but, "even if one or two of them are missing we may still legitimately speak of acts of accountability". However it seems to me that, even though these "acts of accountability" may exist in isolation, they can only gain density if they are integrated and combined in a broader model.

From my point of view, a model of accountability will still be incomplete if its heuristic capacity is not extended by including the pillar of evaluation. In this sense, I suggest that the pillars of evaluation, answerability and enforcement

should be combined, thus creating a more complex model of accountability that is consistent and has new interactions and interfaces. So, what I call the pillar of evaluation refers to the process of collecting, treating and analysing information, theoretically and methodologically oriented and grounded in order to produce value judgments on a given social reality. In this case, whenever it is justified or deemed necessary, evaluation may precede answerability, but it may also take place between the answerability stage and the enforcement stage.

I suggest an interpretive typology which distinguishes *partial forms of accountability, models of accountability* and *systems of accountability*. I can regard as *partial forms of accountability* those actions or procedures that only relate to some dimensions of *answerability* or *enforcement*, which therefore do not constitute an integrated model or structure. On the other hand, a *model of accountability* is a more complex structure, preferably adaptable, open and dynamic, in which different dimensions or partial forms of accountability display congruous relations and intersections, function and make sense as a whole. Lastly, a *system of accountability* is an articulated collection of models and partial forms of accountability which, having their own specificities and potentially different degrees of relative autonomy, however constitute a structure congruent with the action and orientation of the State, (or another agent or organization of mega, macro or meso-regulation, or within multilevel regulation), for example, in the context of public policies founded on certain values and principles.

## 3. Accountability: Evaluation, answerability and enforcement

Among many other objectives and roles, evaluation may be used as a condition for the development of processes of answerability and enforcement (*accountability*). That is, answerability, as an act of justifying and explaining what is done, how it is done and why it is done, implies the development of some form or process of evaluation or self-evaluation. In a democratic society, to be able to be held to account we must evaluate in a way that is well-founded and as objective as possible; and be held to account in order to guarantee transparency and the right to information in relation to the pursuit of policies, orientations, processes and practices. And if for whatever reason the voluntary assumption of possible personal, political or institutional responsibilities is not expected or appropriate, or if, in the course of answerability, there is room for prizes or sanctions or other forms of enforcement for institutions, organisations or people, that should still take into account, depending on the specificities of each case, a rigorous and prudent evaluation from a technical-methodological point of view (based not only on previously defined criteria, objectives and standards, but also widely participated and formative processes), while also bearing in mind the cultural, ethical and legal framework that envisages democratic procedures and safeguards fundamental rights.

Evaluation precedes (or should precede whenever possible) answerability and enforcement (Dimmock & Hattie: 1990), given that following answerability there should also be an evaluation that considers the information provided and the arguments produced regarding the policies, actions and performances at stake. Likewise, without the congruence of assumptions, values, procedures and methodologies of evaluation, answerability and enforcement it is harder to have a search for objectivity and transparency regarding political, social and educational decisions and practices, which may compromise the achievement of the democratic right to information and, consequently, raise the possibility of distancing and alienating citizens in relation to what happens in institutions and organisations that are public or of public interest. In relation to this last aspect, it is necessary to consider resistances and deal with real obstacles which may follow from the failure to understand or insufficient interiorisation of rights, or which may be induced by factors such as the poor functioning and bureaucratisation of the administration of justice, the levels of cultural, civic and moral development of individuals, the nature and purpose of the education and training systems, the frail presence of ethical issues in business, in the different types of organisations and in civil society in general - in sum, the low intensity of substantive democracy in a given historical context.

Also for these reasons a model of accountability may be felt as an "anathema" when its social representation coincides with a "potentially punitive image" (Ranson, 2003: 460). When this happens, the different dimensions of a model of accountability are forgotten and suspicion concerning the real meaning of the consequences inherent to the pillar of enforcement (which, as was noted above, do not necessarily have to be negative) takes hold. But since a model of accountability often implies a complex web of relations, interdependences and reciprocities, as well as differentiated possibilities of justification and explanation, the enforcement dimension is especially delicate, as can be easily seen when we think about the role and action of teachers and educators, for example.

Teachers and educators, perhaps today more than ever, develop their professional activity in the midst of highly contradictory pressures and demands, having to answer simultaneously to various hierarchical units (from the ministry to the school principals), to peers and supervisors, to students in many cases, as well as parents, the education community and society in general. Here lie, among other aspects, the roots of the decisive importance of a

reflexive practice of accountability. For example, if we expect teachers to answer to parents regarding the school progress of their children, these teachers will also have legitimate expectations that parents reinforce their care with learning processes. That is, expectations and responsibilities are reciprocal, although different (and possibly conflicting) perspectives regarding what counts as learning and what approaches are more effective for that learning to happen in a significant way may still be in conflict. In this sense, building consensus, communication and dialogue are fundamental dimensions in a "discursive practice of accountability". In fact, as Stewart Ranson observes, "The positive potential of this intelligible, reflexive accountability has been neglected in much contemporary theorizing of accountability" (Ranson, 2003: 460-461).

In fact, the systematic reference to accountability is in vogue and it is worth improving our understanding of the reasons (convergent and divergent) why some of its mechanisms and models have been referenced both by neoliberal and neoconservative orientations and by orientations from different ideological frameworks (from social democracy, the labour movement, the third way, among others). In relation to this, Biesta (2004: 234) states that "the idea of accountability may be relatively immune to political ideology", as in fact, in the case of England, both the New Labour governments and the Conservative party governments that gave such an emphasis to it show. As I myself have noted, this relative indifference to political-ideological differences has also been present in relation to evaluation policies in the last ten years (Afonso, 2001), although these policies had more specific connotations when the neoliberal and neoconservative coalitions emerged and made evaluation one of the leading instruments of the *new right* (Afonso, 1998, 2009).

## 4. Emergence of the issue of accountability in Portugal

Regarding the issue being analysed, and bearing the Portuguese educational reality in mind, the first observation we must consider is the existence of models which are still unfinished or are being built that seek to integrate and combine, in a more or less explicit manner and with varying degrees of consistency, the three dimensions of accountability: evaluation, answerability and enforcement. For this reason the presence of what I referred to above as *partial forms of accountability* is more evident, that is those actions or procedures that refer only to some dimensions of a model.

Considering only non-tertiary public education, it is mainly results from standardised tests, in the form of nationwide exams and other international evidence (including PISA), as well as the external school evaluation model, which have been used to share with the government, parents and society in general some of the specific dimensions of the operation of the education system (thus being part of the issue of accountability). On the other hand, since its relatively recent introduction, following from the review of the statute of the teaching career of Portuguese teachers in non-tertiary education, the process of implementing a model for evaluating teaching performance is also underway. In line with these fragmentary reforms, a new autonomy and management regime of state schools that introduces the figure of the principal as a unipersonal management body was also approved and is currently in force – a change that constitutes an important break with the tradition of collegiality that began in the stage following the democratic revolution, over three decades ago.

If we begin with this school management norm, we find that it includes several references to answerability and other congruous principles (Decree-Law no. 75/2008). It states that the autonomy and management regime of schools operates "on the principle of the responsibility and answerability of the State, as well as of all the other agents or intervening parties". It also emphasises that participation and intervention in the "strategic management" of school establishments or groups by families, teachers and other agents in the community "constitutes an initial, more direct and immediate level of the answerability of the school in relation to the people it serves". In fact the "strategic management" body, the "general council", is a particularly propitious arena for answerability, enabling the involvement of the education community in the information and justification processes (answerability). It reiterates that the exercise of autonomy "presupposes answerability, namely through self-evaluation and external evaluation procedures". Potential consequences of inspections and external evaluations are also highlighted, which may, for example, justify the dissolution of governing or managing bodies or interfere with the development of *autonomy contracts* between schools and the ministry of education. These principles and orientations allude to forms of evaluation, answerability and enforcement, clearly indicating that this autonomy and management regime of state schools includes dimensions that are very close to constituting a model of accountability.

Another political measure within the (relatively recent) emergence of accountability in education in Portugal regards the school external evaluation programme. The Inspectorate-General of Education is responsible for this programme, although it also involves invited external specialists who make up the evaluation teams. This external evaluation

programme encompasses an initial stage of collecting and systematising information, by the schools, from which a self-evaluation report is produced. This is followed by a second stage where the various documents and reports produced are provided to and analysed by the external evaluation team, in order to adequately prepare a visit to these schools. In a third stage, during the visit by the external evaluation team (which involves two members from the Inspectorate-General of Education and one evaluation expert), different panel interviews are held where members and representatives from all sectors of the education community are heard (members of the management body, teachers, support staff, students, parents, representatives from the municipality and other local institutions or associations...). The purpose of these interviews is to clarify and explore in greater depth aspects contained in documents and reports initially produced by the schools and/or following from statistical data provided by the Ministry of Education, and are thus opportunities for dialogue, justification and argumentation. At the same time, based on a previously defined script, other pertinent information is collected related to results, provision of education services, school organisation and management, leadership and capacity for self-regulation and improvement, as well as more specific data on academic performance, participation and civic development, behaviour and discipline, valorisation and impact of learning, articulation and sequentiality, monitoring of teaching practice in the classroom, differentiation of support, comprehensiveness of the curriculum and valuing of knowledge and learning, conception, planning and development of activity, human resource management, management of material and financial resources, participation of parents and other members of the education community, equity and justice, vision and strategy, motivation and dedication, openness to innovation, partnerships, protocols and projects, self-evaluation and sustainability of progress. In the following stage, the external evaluation team considers all the information and data collected, awards a classification to each area assessed, signals what it believes are the strong and weak points of the school visited and draws up a report that is sent, some time later, to the relevant school. Once this report has been received, the schools that deem it necessary will have an opportunity to contest it, that is, they will present reasons why they do not agree with the classification awarded and, as a result, the factual data may eventually be corrected. Both the report of the external evaluation team and the school's response are later published on the website of the Inspectorate-General of Education. More recently, in response to requests from school principals, an "appeals proceeding was established" to reanalyse the classifications awarded in the final external evaluation report.

In my view, these external evaluation procedures of Portuguese state schools reveal the presence of important dimensions of a model of accountability. The centrality of the pillar of answerability (where the production of information, arguments and justifications plays a structural role) is clear, and the pillar of evaluation is also present, in two different moments: during the self-evaluation process (or *ex-ante* evaluation) and during the external evaluation process (or *ex-post* evaluation). However the pillar of enforcement could be made clearer, even though it is known that there are other legal norms which involve consequences that depend on the results of this external evaluation. Therefore regarding this external school evaluation programme, we can provisionally conclude that it too is not a complete model of accountability, although in its specific configuration it includes several *partial forms of accountability* which may, eventually, be better combined and evolve into a *model* or more complex and consistent structure.

Regarding the evaluation of teaching performance, it is still not possible (or desirable) to draw conclusions about its configuration, particularly because there have been fluctuations and tensions surrounding its negotiation and legal regulation and the necessary conditions for its long-lasting stabilisation and implementation are not yet fully established, in spite of the existence of some experiences in schools that are based on the legislation produced and that allude, directly or indirectly, to the changes in the statute of the teaching career. In any case, the information currently available seems to indicate that the model for evaluating teachers will take shape not only as a professional development process, but it will also have connections, although indirect, with *partial forms of accountability*, which may eventually be integrated into a *model of accountability*. These connections are, in fact, to some extent envisaged by the actual statute of the teaching career where it is mentioned that evaluation will have "effective consequences" for career development, making it possible, for example, to "identify, promote and reward merit". The statute of the teaching career also emphasises that the evaluation of performance "is aimed at improving the school results of the students", showing that there is a relation between those two factors (performance of teachers and student results). This last issue, which is not new in other countries, was considered in the initial regulatory norms of the statute of the teaching career, although in a later stage it was (provisionally) set aside. However an evaluation of teaching performance that is connected, even if indirectly, to the results of external national exams is also to some extent implicit when, for example, in the current external evaluation of schools the comparison between the results of the internal evaluation of students and the external exam results is taken into account, as well as when the percentage of *excellent* and *very good* mentions is conditioned by the results of that same external school evaluation.

Lastly, standardised exams and tests (national or international), although they are often valued as being (or having the potential to be) at the basis of a model or system of accountability, have not actually been more than a dimension of answerability, that is, an act or a *partial form of accountability*. Likewise I can consider school rankings, which follow from the national exams, as also being a *partial form of accountability* (in this case driven by civil society and the market), propelled, in a decisive way in the Portuguese case, by some important (private) media bodies and politically conservative sectors (Afonso 2009).

## 5. Concluding remarks

Considering the examples above, we can emphasise that, in Portugal, there is enough evidence to suggest we are still in a initial stage of building models and systems of accountability in education, given that, in almost every case, the focus is on the discursive dimension and some practical experiences related to the pillar of answerability, that is, related to the dimensions of justification, argumentation and information.

There is therefore a wide open arena to exercise the sociological outlook and recover the more expressive and advanced meanings of an issue that, in many situations and contexts, runs the risk of being confined to narrow visions and impoverished versions of social, educational and political action. For this reason, which is as or more important than the methodological issues implicit here, it is necessary to assume, from the outset, that the construction of democratic and transparent models of evaluation, answerability and enforcement also implies the social, cultural and political valorisation of processes of participation, negotiation and justification, and the adoption of explicit models of justice and equity (social, educational and evaluative).

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