A good practice in School Leadership – Portuguese case study

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The use of self-evaluation in schools' improvement

Context of application

The schools' evaluation regime, comprising self and external evaluation procedures, was put in force in 2002 and justified by the policy makers as a tool for "deepening school autonomy" and "improvement", gave rise to some "insecurity" and "malaise" within schools. Therefore, hipper-bureaucratization evaluation procedures have been adopted in many schools, which some studies indicate as a tendency and evidence of reduced autonomy.

In contrast to that tendency, there are however some schools where self-evaluation good practices fostered teachers' team work and self-evaluation specific procedures as tools to produce knowledge and reflection on the school as a whole. Against the "below expected school results" (got in standardized tests, a parameter of external schools evaluation), those self-evaluation procedures provided a basis to promote a positive self-image and self-esteem to counterbalance the negative schools' image built just on standardized testing. This showed to be extremely important, once that way those schools were able to restructure, re-culture, distribute leadership and empower educators along school improvement processes, aiming at fostering equity and learning namely in socially deprived contexts.

The above referred good practices were evidenced in some master courses dissertations, over 100, available in the on-line repository of Universidade Lusófónona. Those dissertations were produced by students enrolled in courses directed by Ana Paula Silva who decided that specific topics and issues to be

worked and researched should be the students' choice. Among these students there were top and intermediate school leaders who were very much concerned with self-evaluation procedures and their own schools' improvement. Thus, within the scope of the master course, by the same token, students benefited their own institution on providing a sound feedback, empirically and theoreti-cally based on recent literature, on which they could elaborate not only their dissertation, but also specific improvement plans for their own schools, con-ceived, and most of them carried out, through action-research methodology. Maria do Carmo Clímaco, as external examiner of some of those dissertations, agreed on selecting them as the Portuguese EPNoSL partner case study on good practices.

SL policy area(s) related to good practice

The implementation of the above mentioned good practices is directly relat-ed to research on SL, autonomy, accountability, policy response and SL capacity building, and indirectly with distributed leadership and inclusion, in the way by which improvement plans were conceived and implemented. It constitutes an approach to broaden the scope of school outputs and impact, as well as a way to contribute for social integration and equity, a major goal of the field work, considering that the studied and intervened schools are located in education priority areas.

Main goals of the practice
- to promote the capacity of school leadership in meeting authorities' demands on school evaluation and improvement planning
- to enable school leaders to address issues of equity in schools,
- to leave more room to school leaders to define priorities and target resources for the purpose of tackling the issues of equity and learning in their schools:
    - on involving teachers and other stakeholders in decision making processes
    - on fostering teachers' team work
    - on promoting participation
    - on distributing leadership
    - on sharing responsibilities, and therefore
- to empower members of the school community to undertake leadership roles,
- to enhance school leaders' engagement with new learning, namely teachers and head teachers CPD.

Key initiators/implementers of good practice

Taking the policy response as a starting point, the conditions to undertake the dissertation work within the master course and the students' choices, made both the university and school leaders the initiators. The latter were also the implementers of such good practices, since they were the ones who researched, conceived and implemented self-evaluation procedures and improvement plans for their own schools.

Current/prospective beneficiaries

The current beneficiaries are specific school populations, namely in problematic areas, which are benefiting from a new schooling experience, improving learning and outcomes. Teachers are benefiting from new opportunities for professional development, and schools as institutions, where namely the quality of school life is recognized by stakeholders and the local community.

Contact information/on-line information

Research undertaken on the good practices analysed is available http://recil. grupolusofona.pt/ Search by the authors' name, all of them have abstracts in English: Cardoso, Maria da Graça (2014); Fernandes, Anabela (2014); Freitas, Maria do Carmo (2014); Alves, José Carlos (2013); Bação, Maria Marília (2013); Caeiro, Alexandra (2013); Dourado, Maria da Graça (2013); Oliveira, Maria Luísa (2013); Nunes, Marina Alexandra (2013); Rodrigues, Carla (2013); Aleixo, Aida Maria (2013); Cruz, Maria Alexandra (2013); Grou, Maria da Graça (2013); Lopes, Isabel Leonor (2013); Almeida, Célia (2012); Almeida, Maria Manuela (2012); Almeida, Maria do Rosário (2012); Almeida, Sérgio (2012); Henriques, Jorge (2012); Henriques, Maria Teresa (2012); Pereira, Maria Luísa (2012); Vinhas, Maria Isabel (2012); Góis, Carina (2011); Palma, Cristina (2011); …

Description of the implementation of the good practice

The good practice was developed within the scope of the master course on school management and leadership "blended" by EPNoSL inputs. The related research work and the respective dissertations production were based on extended literature review and highly controlled field work, since the case studies were focused on contextual data collection and experimentation.

Two analytical categories can be identified in the researched approaches to school self-evaluation and improvement planning:

a. The whole school approach strategy

The need to implement a school self-evaluation program, led to the organization of small internal "task forces" involving differently skilled elements from the school's staff to collect, treat, analyse and discuss school data. The research highlights the relationship between the processes of institutional self-knowledge production and the promotion of a positive school image. It highlights the importance of the staff's participation in the identification of areas for improvement to be prioritized and achieved, as expressed in the recognised general social well-being and its effects in the school life quality, or ethos, and in the students' behaviour and satisfaction.

Other cases studies are focused on how some schools, to guarantee the rigor of the process, opted for a readymade school evaluation model available in the market to be implemented by an external professional team (ex. CAF - Common Assessment Framework). Simultaneously, a set of internal processes of reflection on why and what for they needed "a school evaluation procedure" and on which data they would need to collect to achieve it. As a consequence, the external team was dispensed, and these schools opted by capitalizing on previous experiences on school self-evaluation and on their acquired expertise. As a rule, they started by identifying and discussing the school development priorities and by analysing the available resources and expertise, as well as how to use the existing partnerships to improve teachers' and students' performances. In this process they identified both their strengths, recognised what they were doing well, and their weaknesses, and how to benefit from other specific partnerships as complementary school resources. This decision and the following cooperation contributed to reinforce the school self-esteem translated in the social well-being; the distribution of the leadership, in teachers' professional development initiatives, and in a stronger involvement of the school headship to conduct the whole school self-evaluation process and in the discussion and selection of the areas for improvement.

b. Focused improvement approaches

Other studies focused on teachers' evaluation and their professional development needs, highlighting how teachers' classroom work benefitted from pedagogical supervision on contributing for the generation of collaborative dynamics among teachers, on leading them to share experiences and difficulties and on promoting professional autonomy and self-esteem. In other cases mention is made to the role of the Curricular Departments in promoting collaboration and team work among teachers, on setting up a set of workshops on classroom work to overcome the gap between the theoretical conceptualization and the classroom teaching practices. Issues of peer learning and peer evaluation were

brought to the forefront. Concepts of "ethics" and "deontology" in teaching practices and in teachers' assessment have integrated the teachers' discourse and concerns.

The processes followed by schools were different, each school followed its own path (the selected procedures that seemed more suitable to them), but all of them have some common aspects:

- Building up their own evaluation teams;
- Gathering sound empirical data – to broaden and deepening self-knowledge;
- Enlarged, participated and in depth data discussion and reflection;
- Upon which change for improvement has been designed and "owned".

Moreover, it is worthwhile to note the mobilization of different agents, a more effective involvement, higher levels of satisfaction and achievement for students and staff.

Quality characteristics of the good practice

Type of good practice

According to the law, all the schools in Portugal are obliged to implement evaluation. Those processes are to be implemented every four years to be followed by external evaluation, which are treated, following comparative analysis, and published in specific national reports to be openly accessed, which have been worked upon by the scientific community. It is worthy of mention that clusters of schools located in particularly deprived areas have been granted special conditions to promote social and academic achievement. It should be mentioned that not only the extra resources but also the continuous and consistent monitoring procedures on the use of those resources along with results have been showing a sustainable improvement. However, we should add that these clusters of schools benefit from higher levels of autonomy than mainstream schools.

Reflections on the reasons why the practice is recommended

Effectiveness

Research data and testing results show the effectiveness of the followed approaches, as well as the increased level of leadership consistency, the teachers' morale and stakeholders' satisfaction.

Efficiency

Yes, within the national context, but in the context of the crisis no extra resources have been allocated to schools. Though PISA results might be contested,

research proves that Portuguese students' results steadily improved in the last 15 years along with schooling massification and democratization.

Relevance

The implemented practice and its results paved the way for granting higher levels of autonomy and the recognition of equity in learning as a condition for social integration.

Sustainability

Teachers' turnover is the greatest threat to the long term sustainability, followed by possible reduction in other resources and the increasing number of students per class, which jeopardize the current efforts and menace what has been achieved so far: the increased self-esteem, self-confidence, learning conditions, teachers' team work, parents' involvement, namely by creating opportunities for raising their awareness concerning the learning progress and their responsibility as educators, on implementing what has been called "school of parents".

Synergies

Several school heads on being students in master courses had benefited from the required research effort which impacted on their own professional performance and influenced their peers' and school stakeholders' involvement and work, highlighting the relevance of the knowledge / research based action to increase involvement and confidence in the planned actions.

Transferability

The proposed practice is transferable to the extent it exemplifies some steps required in the definition of a strategy in the identification of school needs and priorities, as well as the issue of rigor in the identification of the steps to be followed in each school improvement planning.

The presentation and discussion of these good practices in the EPNoSL PLA in Nice raised the interest of different partners, which are introducing schools' evaluation procedures in their national contexts such as the representatives of Cyprus, Hungary and Poland that approached us for details and asked to be kept in touch for further developments and collaborative work.

However, more importantly than to recommend a practice is its contextualized implementation.

Relationship of good practice with wider educational issues and policy implications

Based on the reaction of some partners in Nice PLA, as mentioned above, we believe that the identified good practices on the use of school self-evaluation as a tool for improvement are related to wider realities, which therefore are "transferable", to the extent that the research work under analysis responded to field needs recognized by the administrators and teachers to be common to different contexts.

The policy implications to be derived, oblige to involve local education authorities in the analysis and discussion of research generated local data, namely in the discussion of their meanings and possible needed policies and required responses. The current nationwide increased autonomy policies will benefit from the experience collected from the case studies developed so far.