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Influence of International Organisms in the School Management Autonomy as an Education Policy

Abstract

A “worldization” process of the education system started during the later years of the last millennia. This movement has been strengthened through the participation of supranational organizations, in which their recommendations have served as the source of guidance in the definition of educational policies of the associated countries. One of the phenomena related to the context of *globalization* is the *decentralization of the education systems*, in which the process is paired with the generation of policies that promote education management independence. Through this context, we analyze the role that *globalization* plays on the emergence of *supranational policies*. How have these processes of *decentralization* occurred, in which way is the *dissemination mechanism* promoted, and what is the incidence of *veto players* in the positioning of an educational public policy, and its supranational, national and sub national dissemination.

Keywords: educational policy, management autonomy, supranational organisms, education system, comparative study

Introduction

Globalization, considered not only through an economic context, has influenced the transformation of the education systems, particularly through the declarations of the supranational organizations. These organization have influenced the way educational systems organize their schooling centers, their plans and academic programs, as well as the way performance, also known as educational accomplishments, is measured. For us, it is of special interest to analyze in what way the decentralization processes have been generated in Latin America, particularly the processes by which autonomy of education management is achieved. Therefore, we consider that this work constitutes a space to review and analyze the role of supranational agencies in the definition of policies routed to achieve educational management autonomy in Latin America, mainly considering the public-school system in Mexico.

It is worth pointing out that this investigation is part of line of investigation to generate knowledge about educational policies, social subjects, management and institutional development corresponding to the “Cuerpo Académico de Estudios Comparados en Educación de la Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Hidalgo” [“Academic Body of Comparative Studies in Education of the Autonomous University of the State of Hidalgo”].

The work is structured in four sections:

- 1) The position of supranational organization in a globalization context.

- 2) The relation between decentralization and education autonomy.
- 3) The *dissemination mechanism* as an example of the external effects in the conformation of an educational policy.
- 4) The role of the *veto players* in the definition of educational management autonomy.

The position of supranational organization in a globalization context

We focus on the problems affecting educational management autonomy as the starting point, and the phenomena of globalization and its components: politics, economics, and cultural, which are essential to comprehend how relations are integrated between the Nations and the people involved. As a political process we can identify that ‘... each time it is less determined within isolated units, that is, within the hierarchically organized and relatively autonomous structures that we call States; rather, it stems from a complex series of multi-level games that are played in fields of many institutional layers, not only in the interior but above and across state borders’ (Cerny, 1997, p. 253).

Faced with these changing circumstances, States relations have taken two basic forms of action: at the level of individual unity, it is viewed as a ‘competitive State’ (Cerny, 1997) and at the collective level, it is seen as an entity of ‘governance without government’ (Rosenau, 1992), as with the establishment of a framework of international organizations it seeks to establish criteria of common action homogeneity in the formation of states.

Among the supranational agencies involved in the installation of *governance without government* are the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank (WB) and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which are driven by ideological preferences developed as “orthodox” responses to the problems posed in rich countries, and by changing circumstances in the global economy. This common ideology has received diverse labels, which can be found summarized in the ten characteristics of the *Washington consensus* that John Williamson identifies (1993), these include: fiscal discipline, public spending priorities, fiscal reform, competitive exchange rates, financial liberalization, trade liberalization, foreign direct investment, privatization, deregulation and property rights. Aspects that together constitute the preferred ideological filters that shape the guidelines in national policy decisions. Thus, identifying that the educational systems of different countries (Zabala, 2014; Reimers & Chung, 2016) are having *structural coupling* to redefine educational practices from the complex global system.

Before continuing with the exposition of the components previously mentioned, it is important to clarify that, according to the analysis of the social systems developed by Niklas Luhmann, the double contingency in the treatment of complexity requires the coupling of its structures (*structural coupling*) that are adequate and flexible enough to allow the making of decisions that do not unbalance the system (Torres, 2004).

From these premises, we can analyze how external (supranational) policies can be interpreted and operated differently in diverse countries, even at the organizational level, where the impact is more direct.

Relationship between decentralization and school autonomy

One of the most evident aspects that has emerged from supranational visions is that most OECD countries are adopting policies with similar trends, which undoubtedly presents a process of *isomorphism* within the organizational field, that are obtained through the assumption of common institutions, that allows reduction of the uncertainty in the relations between organizations. That is, if we consider that *isomorphism* refers to ‘a limiting process that forces a unit in a population to resemble other units that face the same environmental conditions’ (Di Maggio & Powell, 1999, p. 108), we can mention that since the early 1980s, *new public administration* structures have emphasized *decentralization*, *school management autonomy*, shared decision-making, results-based evaluation and school choice. Factors that have become the predominant school governance approach in many countries and have significantly altered education systems (Mulford, 2003). The reason behind these governance approaches is that autonomy and accountability can respond more effectively to local needs.

This is how the OECD countries have increased decision-making authority at the lower levels of education systems. Educational decentralization of decision-making can be implemented in a variety of ways, because it involves delegating responsibilities to the school, or at intermediate levels such as state, provincial, and local education authorities (OECD, 2004). Therefore, Glatter et al. (2003) distinguish two models: local empowerment and school empowerment (or school autonomy).

For reasons of space and emphasis on the thematic axis of the presentation, we deal with the second model, which refers to the devolution of responsibilities. In other words, ‘transferring decision-making powers to schools has been a main objective of the decentralization and restructuring reforms since the 1980s’ (Pont, 2009, p. 24). Where it is argued that in contexts of greater school autonomy, school leaders fulfill responsibilities that require specialized knowledge, however, often this is not acquired through formal training.

In highly centralized systems, such as the case of Mexico, decisions are still made at the national or state level, the work of the school leader remains confined, rather narrowly, to apply the policies decided at superior administrative levels to a reality for teachers and students, leaving aside the possibility of empowerment of school actors.

Dissemination mechanism, as an example of the external effects in the formation of educational policy

If we take the external *mechanisms* as an analysis reference in the formation of educational policies, developed by Roger Dale (2007), we can identify how they influence national education policies, and how they can relate, but not exclusively, with globalization, as part of a ‘globalizing effect’.

Dale identifies five mechanisms, understood as the expression of the different forms in which the Globally Structured Educational Agenda (GSEA), which are: harmonization, dissemination, standardization, installation of interdependence and imposition.

In this space, we only deal with the *mechanism of dissemination*, since it is identified with the transfer of policies that allows discussion of the autonomy of school management and its incorporation into the educational agenda. An illustrative example is the role of the OECD, as a supranational body, which in most of its documents focuses on leading the destinies of member states towards the definition of educational agendas with specific directions.

For the Mexican case, the *Mexico-OECD Cooperation Agreement* focuses on improving the quality of education in schools, where two specific recommendations are made:

... *First, to increase school autonomy, to professionalize leaders and hold them accountable, for which, it is necessary to participate in the key decisions that occur in their school, stories such as hiring or dismissing teachers. Decision structures that fit their school contexts can also have a positive impact on their performance.*

... *Second, guarantee funding for all schools; in practice, schools have almost no autonomy or funds to allocate to their priorities, and there is a disparity in the resources available to schools in rich communities and poor communities. The distribution of resources must be equitable, avoiding difficult bureaucratic burdens for schools* (OECD, 2010, p. 7).

For this policy transfer mechanism, the development of national indicators for and from education systems is overriding; for example, for *school autonomy over resource allocation* the OECD proposes: *a) selection of rental teachers, b) dismissal of teachers, c) establishing teachers' initial salaries, d) determining teachers' salary increase, e) formulating school's budget, f) the decision on budgetary allocations within the school* (OECD, 2013, p. 131).

For the OECD (2011), countries where schools have greater autonomy with regard to teaching subjects and how students are evaluated tend to perform better. Therefore, according to this organization, those with less autonomy have lower yields. This is complemented by the perception of Wößmann (2005), for whom school autonomy or the decentralization of decision-making, is to delegate tasks to schools so that they are the ones who oversee carrying out the tasks that facilitate the student learning. For that, the *economic models of school administration (governance)* have demonstrated that the greater the autonomy of schools, the greater the efficiency with which they work (Nechyba, 2003).

Once the school management autonomy policy is inserted in the global and national agenda, it is necessary to understand what happens during its implementation in the arenas of political struggle.

Role of the veto players in the definition of the autonomy of school management

The concept, *veto players*, provided by Tsebelis (2002), allows to explore the impact that the different political institutions have on a public policy, in this case, the autonomy of school management. The results of the different political systems, understood as legislative production, depend on the preferences of the actors involved in the decision, as well as on the institutions in which they interact. To change the legislative *status quo* requires the agreement of several actors, individual or collective, which varies from one political system to another.

These actors are called *veto players* and may be defined by the political system, for example, the *Pacto por México*, a Mexican national political agreement signed on December 2, 2012 by the President of the Republic and the three main political parties of Mexico, in which among others, we identify *1. Agreements for a society of rights and freedoms*, which on axis 1.3, *includes education with quality and equity*, which in its commitment 9 says:

Management autonomy of schools will be strengthened with the aim of improving their infrastructure, purchase educational materials, solve basic operating problems, and foster participation conditions so that students, teachers and parents, under the leadership of the principal, become involved in the resolution of the challenges that each school faces (Pacto por México, 2012, p. 5).

These *veto players* can also be defined by the Constitution, as it happens when we review the third article, reformed in 2013, estates:

To strengthen the management autonomy of the schools before the corresponding orders of government with the aim of improving their infrastructure, purchase educational materials, solve basic operational problems and foster participation conditions for students, teachers and parents under the leadership of the principal, to become involved in resolving the challenges facing each school (DOF, 2013, p. 4).

For Stein *et al.* (2006), the political system and the Constitution, only conceal the real *veto player -the executive-*, who is manipulating the issue of management autonomy with the improvement of education as part of a broader work program of modernization and development to maintain global political stability, where ideologies play a role to influence modernization and efficiency.

A second *veto player* are the unions, who argue for ‘security in employment, creation of teaching positions, control of appointments and functioning of the educational system (captive), maintenance of bargaining power at national level, better wages’ (Stein *et al.*, 2006, p. 247). This player is usually characterized by labor and left ideologies. For example, the Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación [National Union of Education Workers] (SNTE), does not manage a uniform position in its message in relation to the autonomy of school. That is, for the former leader, (Prof. Gordillo, who remained in the union leadership for about twenty-four years), the union organization identifies a set of risks and limitations when talking about strengthening the autonomy of management of schools:

It is an old strategy driven by various business organizations and political formations [...they quote Smith (1993)], the reality was that schools ended up fighting each other, competing for resources and students; schools specialized in the resolution of standardized measurements; there was a disloyal competition between teachers, since they were remunerated on the basis of not-quite-clear criteria that showed their production, and the students' evaluation was carried out according to uniform criteria, without considering the disparities. The immediate effect of this so-called ‘management autonomy’ will be to transfer to school the tensions and discomfort arising from serious budgetary constraints on education (SNTE, 2013, p. 6).

However, when the new leader assumed the coordination of the SNTE, the message changes, instead of questioning, it now supports such a policy; a total *alignment* and *isomorphism* that is directed to the organizational modification of the Mexican schools is identified:

... strengthen the management autonomy of schools through the recognition of parents' support and representation agencies by government bodies, society and citizens' organizations (SNTE, 2016, p. 12).

However, the dissidence, represented by the Coordinadora Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación [National Coordinator of Education Workers] (CNTE), argues that education in Mexico is being privatized when they say:

... this legislation opens the door so that, in the name of autonomy, and under the pretext of involving the parents in the management and maintenance of schools, the fees are legalized, allow companies to enter schools so that the constitutional precept that guarantees the free public education becomes a death letter. That has a name: privatization (CNTE, 2013, p. 6).

A third *veto player*, as proposed by Stein *et al.*, are the *subnational actors*, who seek to 'create and/or expand opportunities for political influence, obtain votes, avoid unfunded mandates or limits on discretionary spending, improvements in the local economy in the context of interjurisdictional competition' (Stein *et al.*, 2006, p. 247). Among them, the civil association *Mexicanos Primero*, that in its publication *Metas. Estado de la Educación en México 2011* [Goals. State of Education in Mexico 2011], establishes as Goal 5: Schools with autonomy and parents participating:

To achieve in 2015 the formal recognition of the legal identity of each school, with sufficient powers to specify the management mechanisms and articulate with the certification of standards by the Federation and the work assignment of teachers by the states; to achieve, as from 2016, a socially agreed national policy on Social Participation that specifies ways of action, complementarity and mutual strengthening between parental associations, participation councils and civil society organizations; By 2019, count with a comprehensive and functional system of accountability for educational outcomes of each school. The school is placed at the center of the system, it has an explicit budget ceiling, it generates the conditions for teaching and management positions to take root in the school, management shared with parents is both support and surveillance of resources, processes and results, the whole system functions in frank dialogue with the expressions of civil society without closing to the binomial authorities / union (Calderón, 2011, p. 46).

Conclusion

The discourse of the institutional autonomy of educational establishments is closely related to that of the quality and freedom of choice of education. It is not so much a question of increasing resources, but rather of managing better and, above all, establishing competition between schools. For this, nothing better than giving autonomy to schools, so that they can compete with each other for the students. The problem is not in institutional autonomy, but in the means and limits.

If conditions are not created for the construction of a true pedagogical, economic and administrative autonomy, the public schools will not be able to generate the conditions for the development of a quality education, nor will they be able to contribute to the formation of autonomous citizens capable of transforming the conditions of inequality existing in the country, or at least achieve the empowerment of educational actors as it is preached in the speech.

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