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Head teachers' perceptions of secondary school rankings: Their nature, media coverage and impact on schools and the educational arena

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Abstract

This article begins by noting the significant role played by school rankings in the progressive transformation of the educational arena into a quasi-market. To better understand how schools deal with this situation, we interviewed head teachers of secondary schools. To increase sample diversity, we conducted interviews in public and private schools located in opposite extremes of the Portuguese schools ranking. The data show that, while agreeing that rankings provide a simplistic account of school work, head teachers of all schools find themselves engaged in an inescapable competition spiked by the pressure generated by media coverage. This impacts schools in several ways, including manipulation of the school's position in the rankings, parental demand and staff frustration. Finally, rankings and the associated competition reinforce the divide between public and private schools.

Keywords: public and private schooling, rankings, head teachers, social justice, grade inflation, educational market

Introduction

Recent studies have pointed to major changes taking place in the educational arena (Apple 2006; Ball & Junemann 2012; Neave 2012; Power & Frandji 2010; Torres 2009). These include increased concerns with school effectiveness, a realignment of institutional autonomy, changes in governance and quality assessment modes and a global spin towards the marketisation of education (Amaral & Magalhães 2007; Ball 2009; Dale & Robertson 2009; Olssen & Peters 2005). As a result, data collection and analysis in order to audit and rank different services and activities have intensified. Indeed, they have become standard procedure in societies focused on competition and accountability (Power 2006).

School rankings are part and parcel of these accountability and marketisation processes (Lauder *et al.* 2006; Leckie & Goldstein 2009; Wilson 2004; Wilson & Piebalga 2008). As quality assessment devices, they produce specific notions of what counts as a 'good' or a 'bad' school. As instruments of hierarchical, market classification, they typically take on the form of league tables, meaning that they are a 'single-dimensional, ordinal list going from "best" to "worst", assigning to the entities unique, discrete positions seemingly equidistant from each other' (van Vught & Ziegele 2011:25).

Apologists of school rankings present a number of aspects in their favour, namely that they enable an objective assessment of the quality of schools and increase their accountability and autonomy, as they act as a feedback device that induces organisational changes (Afonso 2009). Rankings are also said to increase the transparency and the quality of educational processes, thus contributing to academic excellence (Hope 2006). Finally, it is argued that they provide families with important, accurate information, thereby enabling better choices regarding educational trajectories.

In their turn, critics of school rankings find a number of problems in using them. To begin with, they criticise their methodology. Indeed, typically, these classificatory instruments derive, upstream, from selecting simplistic outputs as proxies for school quality and translate, downstream, into easy to read but far from thorough assessments of each school's work. In other words, their methodology is flawed. Not only their objectivity is put into question, as they really cannot assess what they claim to, but also their neutrality, as every method implies strategic choices. Furthermore, rankings are said to reinforce inequalities as different groups have different access to information and, most importantly, different resources to profit from the information they possess (Reay *et al.* 2001). Finally, by focusing on what is easily measurable, rankings shrink the goals of education as they focus mostly on items such as test results.

It may be argued, then, that the power of rankings derives not from their ability to analyse and/or explain educational processes, but rather from the fact that they have become instrumental in the promotion of competition and the development of educational markets. This productivist approach has changed fundamental activities in and representations of schools and schooling (Ball 2003a; Torres 2009). The assumption that commercial organisations are not only the 'most naturally occurring form of coordination' (Power, Halpin & Whitty 1997:344), but also the best – as measured by efficiency criteria – plays an important role in these transformations. Schools are meant to become more business-like, and students should be reframed as 'customers', 'clients' or 'consumers' (Sultana 2011). In this context, school grades become commodities.

To be sure, the buying and selling of school grades as educational commodities needs to take into consideration that education markets are imperfect or quasi-markets (Glennerster 1991). Nevertheless, as quasi-markets, they rule out 'non selective education as a democratic choice for local communities' (Glennerster 1991:1275). As Glennerster argues, this happens because 'any school entrepreneur acting rationally would seek to exclude pupils who would drag down the overall performance score of the school, its major selling point to parents' (1271). This phenomenon, which eventually leads to growing disparities between schools, is surely incentivised by the publication of school rankings. Also, a full understanding of this phenomenon requires acknowledging that not all schools are equally equipped to face these market demands. Here, an elementary, fundamental distinction needs to be made between public and private schools, namely in their ability to choose their own students and in the kind of incentives they may get from responding to market pressures. As argued by Wikström (2005), private schools are, in principle at least, more subject to market pressures and will therefore have greater incentives to play the grading game, which may degenerate into grade inflation.

In addition to these political considerations, the role of the mass media needs to be considered in making sense of the rankings phenomenon. In fact, it must be noted that 'media considerations increasingly affect education policy within the inter-mediate space between the sphere of formal political agency and the public' (Rönnerberg, Lindgren & Segerholm 2013). In this way the media become decisive in the making of popular understandings about education (Blackmore & Thorpe 2003). As will be discussed below, this embedment of rankings in popular culture is part and parcel of the contemporary Circean¹ transformation from substance to image (Gioia & Corley 2002).

In this context, the responsibilities and accountability of head teachers are increased. Their work and representations are also clearly impacted by rankings of their schools (Chikoko, Naicker & Mthiyane

2011; Melo 2009; Power & Frandji 2010; Wiggins & Tymms 2002; Wilson, Croxson & Atkinson 2006). Indeed, in the context of schools, they epitomise the uneasy tensions between pedagogy and marketing, the state and the market, a focus on processes or a focus on products. Creaming strategies are a well-known example of this. It is not uncommon that they are put into place regarding both the selection of students and their allocation to different types of exams (Wilson & Piebalga 2008). The possibility, and the desire, that schools have of implementing such strategies is a function of legal, geographical and cultural aspects, that is, of their nature (public vs. private), location and reputation, as well of the head teachers' (and, more generally, the teaching staff's) attitudes towards rankings.

As rankings gained an increasing role in promoting competition between schools and educational accountability, we lack research on the ways in which schools deal with this situation. How, then, do such important agents as head teachers perceive rankings and understand their consequences for schools and the educational arena? That is the main question this article seeks to answer. In other words, this article seeks to describe and analyse the head teachers' relationship with the incentives to competition between schools and the consolidation of an educational market. This issue is tackled considering both the nature of the schools (public or private) and their position in the rankings. It is hypothesised that different interpretations and consequences arise from the combination of such conditions.

Rankings and the marketisation of education in Portugal

In Portugal, the publication of secondary school rankings began in 2001. This was the result of a dispute between a national newspaper (*Público*) and the Ministry of Education regarding the right of media to access and publish administrative, anonymised information held by public bodies. Through a legal injunction, the Ministry of Education was forced to release the data on the scores obtained by the students in the national exams held at the end of secondary schooling, that is, the 12th grade (Santiago *et al.* 2004). Rankings, published yearly by several newspapers, have since become a key element of public debates and academic research on secondary schooling (Afonso 2009; Matos *et al.* 2006; Neto-Mendes, Costa & Ventura 2003; Neves, Pereira & Nata 2012; Santiago *et al.* 2004). Currently, rankings are also published for the 9th and the 6th grades.

Portuguese school rankings are based on the raw data of the scores obtained by students in a given selection of subjects. That selection is usually made up of the eight subjects in which more exams were taken. In 2012, these were Portuguese, Maths, History, Geography, Biology and Geology, Physics and Chemistry, Economy, and Descriptive Geometry.

In 2012, for the first time, and after a decade of criticism on the lack of information on students' backgrounds, additional data were supplied by the Ministry of Education regarding socioeconomic aspects. These were data on the academic qualifications of students' parents, the profession of the father and the proportion of students with social benefits in every school. However, those data refer only to public schools (and have a significant proportion of missing cases, thereby jeopardising their usefulness).

The publication of rankings has given rise to a 'cold war' between schools, which is 'most evident between public (free) and private (paid) schools' (Neves *et al.* 2012:8). The fact that the first 20 places of the rankings are almost always occupied by private schools – something that is systematically highlighted by the media – in addition to the fact that only about one-sixth of Portuguese secondary schools are private (approximately 100 out of 600) is certainly a major force driving this war. This has given rise to abundant debate in the media and in academia. While some see this as evidence that private schools and, more generally, private management are better and more efficient, others argue that one cannot compare what

is incomparable, precisely because rankings do not take into account the geographical location of schools or the socioeconomic and cultural status of students (Matos *et al.* 2006).

Thus, as elsewhere, the Portuguese debate on school rankings has revolved around the echoing of pure merit and the cloaking of socioeconomic conditions (Afonso 2009; Cowley & Easton 2000; Leckie & Goldstein 2009; Power & Frandji 2010; Wilson 2004). Two aspects, however, add extra sauce to this debate. One is the fact that Portugal is one of the most unequal societies of the so-called developed countries, together with the UK, the USA and Singapore (Wilkinson & Pickett 2010). The other is that access to higher education in Portugal is governed by a generalised use of the *numerus clausus* system, meaning that all students must compete for a limited, fixed number of places per course and per institution. Given that, as defined by the Ministry of Education, scores in national exams weigh at least 35% of the higher education access score, the position occupied by each school in the rankings is seen as a proxy for its ability to put its students through to higher education. Therefore, rankings present very pragmatic, market-oriented information that can be summarised as follows: the higher the position of a school in the rankings, the higher the global average of its students' results in the national exams, thus the more chances they have of entering higher education. This is further complicated by the widespread perception that private secondary schools inflate grades to give an advantage to their students in access to higher education. This is a rumour that has been circulating for years (Barroso 2003; Martins 2009), and its intensity led a former Portuguese Minister of Education to argue that grade-inflation practices should be subject to surveillance and regulation (Justino 2005). This rumour was recently put to the test by Neves *et al.* (2012), who have shown that private schools do indeed benefit their students by being more benevolent than public schools in assessment procedures. This is clearly visible in the fact that private schools systematically present a bigger average difference than public schools between the scores obtained in national exams and internal scores (that is, in assessments carried out in the schools). Because access to higher education is based on a weighted average of the scores obtained during the last three years of secondary education and the scores obtained in national exams taken at the end of secondary education (12th grade), this difference introduces a clear element of procedural unfairness in access to higher education. It is also clear that this procedural unfairness reinforces social inequality, as it benefits students with a privileged (on average) socioeconomic condition, that is, students from private, fee-paying schools. In short, a layer of procedural unfairness based on grade inflation is added to pre-existing socioeconomic disparities, and this reinforces social inequality. While it is understandable that personal and emotional attachment to students may bias the assessment carried out by teachers (Yu & Frempong 2012), scientific research on what goes on in some of these schools and classrooms is all the more important (Henning 2012) as it may sometimes get dangerously close to criminal investigation. In addition, in Portuguese top-ranked private schools at least, it is word of mouth that underperforming students may be invited to leave so as to avoid damaging the school's position in the rankings.

This research seeks to address, through head teachers' perspectives, these tensions between public and private, the well ranked and the poorly ranked, educational processes and educational products. It does so through analysis and discussion of the fairness (or rather the unfairness) of rankings in regard to their methodology, their media coverage, the competition they promote and the changes they bring about in schools.

Methods

In order to achieve the goals mentioned above, we carried out interviews with head teachers of secondary schools in Porto, Portugal. Porto is the second largest town in Portugal, after Lisbon, the capital. While the town itself is not very big, with a population of approximately 240,000, it is the centre of a much larger metropolitan area, with nearly 1,400,000 inhabitants.

The major topics of the interviews were the following: the methodology behind rankings; the impacts of rankings on school work, the notion of quality education and the choices of families; the ability of rankings to portray a comprehensive image of schools and school work; the difference between internal scores and scores in national exams; the relationship between position in rankings and context elements, such as the nature of the school (public or private) or the socioeconomic status of its students.

The interviews were conducted with head teachers of ten secondary schools in Porto in rather extreme locations in the 2010 rankings: the top and the bottom deciles. The single exception to this was one public school located in the sixth decile (that is, just above half the table). In all, we interviewed head teachers of six public schools (four in upper positions, two in lower positions), and four private schools (three in upper positions, one in a lower position). This was done to increase diversity within the sample. Convenience sampling guided the selection of the schools included in the study. To be sure, the perspectives of head teachers do not necessarily represent the views of the entire teaching staff at any given school. However, head teachers were chosen because they are ultimately responsible for a range of aspects, from micro-management chores to raising success rates, through to communication with families, educational authorities and the press.

Ten schools represent nearly 40% of the secondary schools in Porto (the total is 26). The interviews were conducted from late 2011 to mid-2012, and lasted between 45 and 90 minutes.

The interviews were transcribed and subjected to qualitative thematic content analysis (Burnard 1991; Ezzzy 2002). This option was in tune with the qualitative approach of this research, and also with the fact that we were listening to opinions from individual head teachers. Transcripts were analysed in search for emergent themes. Where appropriate, excerpts were categorised and tabulated. Thus, categories were not established *a priori*, but rather through a back and forth analytical process. The goal was, as argued by Bardin (1977), the creation of nuclei of meaning. Head teachers were guaranteed anonymity, and results – namely quotations from their interviews – have been reported accordingly.

Results: Presentation and discussion

As mentioned above, the interviews focused on a range of topics, from the methodology of rankings to their impacts on school work and families' choices, through to their ability to portray educational contexts and relationships. In brief, four major topics emerged from the analysis of the interviews: while (1) rankings are in a sense devalued because they are simplistic and unfair, (2) media coverage engenders an inescapable game that needs to be played, even if (3) it has important negative consequences for school work and the educational arena. Finally, (4) rankings structure and reinforce a divide between public and private schools.

Below, we present excerpts from the interviews with the head teachers. Throughout this presentation, we strive to exhibit data from all major groups considered in this research: public and private schools located either in top or bottom positions of the school rankings.

Rankings devalued: Simplistic and unfair

To begin with, rankings are unanimously deemed to be unfair because they fail to acknowledge the diversity in a number of variables – the socioeconomic status of students, their cultural level, the school climate, the territories in which schools operate, and the public or private nature of schools, which determines different student selection procedures. Those variables have a relevant impact on school work and performance. In short, rankings are unfair because they compare what is incomparable.

I guess that the socioeconomic situation ... the number of students, the performance of the school, the school climate ... All those are relevant variables. (Head teacher of private school in the top decile)

... the reality here is totally different from other schools. It's unfair to compare other schools with us, to compare them using the same data, because their contexts are different and they are what enable a degree of success. It's things that are light-years away, isn't it? (Head teacher of private school in the top decile)

The students' sociocultural level is not taken into account! ... How can we compete with elite schools where only those who can afford them get in? ... How can we compete with structured families? Here we have students whose families are very unstable: divorce, alcoholism, etc. (Head teacher of private school in bottom decile)

The excerpts above also highlight the fact that this incomparability may occur even within the same type of schools: in this case, private schools, as their students do not necessarily share the same above-average socioeconomic status. This may point to different private schools having different social and educational missions. While most appear to be oriented towards enhancing performance – as measured by academic results – some may be particularly concerned with providing educational services to off-the-grid and underprivileged populations. Due to this methodological lack of sophistication, rankings are also unable to track and assess the progress of any given school. Rankings are photos rather than film. Their static nature neglects consideration of the dynamic nature of educational processes.

... because it's a different population, with different characteristics, they had a lower starting point. ... Perhaps in relative terms they have even improved more. Because if they started from a lower point and went a couple of places up, their effort may have been bigger than those who also went up but were already in a higher position. This is what rankings don't show. That's why I say they're blind and mislead people, and parents' choices. (Head teacher of public school in the bottom decile)

There are private schools that work really well and have all it takes to do it. They have good students who have private tuition outside the school in all subjects So, there are private schools that work hard and get good results because they work hard and have very good raw material. The students who get into those schools, the raw material, is very good. ... Public schools are out of that league... (Head teacher of public school in the top decile)

This turns out to be quite unfair because many schools realise clearly that they work three or four times more than other schools but will never get the results they get almost effortlessly. ... To us, that is a major injustice. (Head teacher of public school in sixth decile)

As such, rankings do not take into account the changes in the schools' ranking position across different years. This is mentioned mostly by schools located in the bottom decile:

The funny thing, though, is that we got a terrible ranking position this year and the year before that. What is interesting to note is that the teachers are the same, the curricula are the same; only the students are different [We moved] from being excellent to being the worse! (Head teacher of private school in bottom decile)

Two years ago we were in the penultimate place in the ranking. Last year we came 19 places above that. ... People no longer say: "You're at the very bottom". ... For example, when I want to convey a very positive image of the school, I say that we went up 19 places. (Head teacher of public school in bottom decile)

These rankings (based on students' exam grades) are therefore portrayed by head teachers as simplistic. Importantly, they do not take into account fundamental dimensions in the schools' missions. These also

deserved to be assessed, such as a comprehensive approach to education (rather than a narrower focus on instruction) and concerns with the integration of minorities. Head teachers of schools in poorer socioeconomic contexts emphasise that schools may need to double their functions, playing relevant roles in ensuring students' health and nutrition. This will impact negatively on the time and energy those schools can dedicate to exclusively academic purposes. Schools are seen as having different starting points – 'raw material' – as some head teachers put it, using the language of human capital theory while at the same time taking a critical stance against rankings.

Here we build the character of men. Of men and women. We take their integral being, their personality, their behaviour. (Head teacher of private school in bottom decile)

We are a school with an approach and an educational project that is far more wide reaching than just focusing on academic results. (Head teacher of private school in top decile)

If we think about the students with special needs, obviously they are not students "for the rankings", but the work we do with them is very important. I feel every progress they make very passionately, and although that doesn't appear in the rankings, it is very important for us, for them and for their families. (Head teacher of public school in bottom decile)

We integrate Chinese, Ukrainian students, and many more That's why rankings are worth what they're worth... (Head teacher of public school in bottom decile)

... citizenship, values, solidarity are just as important as that [academic results]. (Head teacher of public school in top decile)

To be able to articulate different teaching levels; to be able to offer new activities in order to have an appealing teaching; to be able to offer extracurricular activities. To me, this is quality (Head teacher of public school in sixth decile)

Given that academic results correlate positively with socioeconomic status, these simplistic rankings are necessarily unfair, in the sense that school work alone cannot reverse external structural conditions.

Media coverage and the inescapability of the 'rankings game'

Although (these) rankings are unanimously deemed to be strongly biased, unfair, limited and therefore downright inadequate as a measure of the schools' quality and performance, the interviews nevertheless show that schools are sucked into playing the 'rankings game'. This is largely blamed on the media coverage. Indeed, head teachers blame the media, which they see as the major factor responsible for the lack of sophistication of rankings.

... everyone can access the assessment carried out by the General Inspectorate of Education on the internet. The problem is that most people don't know about that. Of course, this kind of assessment is far more complex [than rankings]. And, for the media, this is not as attractive as the simplistic process of rankings, in which any given school is attributed a single number. It is much more straightforward information, it can be really bombastic. Now, to say that a school is average in results, very good in the leadership, good in curriculum integration ... people don't know what that is all about. The media themselves don't know. So, they are not covering topics they don't know about. (Head teacher of public school in sixth decile)

However, it is not the case that rankings are simply lacking information, and that they would reach flawlessness if those elements were added. Rather, it is also the case, as argued by Afonso (2009), that not everything that counts in education can be measured or compared. From affective relationships to social support, through to extracurricular projects, all is shoved under the rug with the reification of

rankings. The media, then, act as an amplifying source of unfairness, which clearly derives from the growing 'mediatisation of school governance' mentioned by Rönnerberg *et al.* (2013), following Fairclough's (2000) suggestion that we are living in times in which media events have a considerable potential for governing. Blackmore and Thorpe (2003:577) had already pointed out how the media are instrumental in manufacturing 'consent for change by mobilizing popular opinion about education', with clear impacts on school governance.

By neglecting the relationships between academic performance and socioeconomic conditions, media rankings obscure the process of the social construction of inequalities. As such, unequal achievements are naturalised, explained by individual merit. Thus, both success and failure are naturalised.

The media just won't let go It's always the same: what do we think about rankings? What may have contributed to...? But they don't dig deep enough! They don't get to the bottom of things ... It's always rather superficial. If you read the newspapers, it's all very superficial: "Oh, we have very good students, and the teachers are very good too ... We are all very committed...". It doesn't go much beyond this. (Head teacher of public school in sixth decile)

That is why when they [the newspaper reporters] ask me for an interview, I tell them not to come because I have nothing to say to them. ... Let them go to the General Directorate of Education, let them make a fuss, but I am not giving an interview. I don't give an interview because I feel the school is treated unfairly. (Head teacher of public school in bottom decile)

The rankings produced by the media entail – as argued by all but one head teacher – a reduction of the educational reality, often mistakenly taken for transparency and objectiveness.

It's objective data, they measure what they measure and no-one can pick and choose the results: they are there. That's the starting point for the media. They only see the tip of the iceberg. (Head teacher of private school in top decile)

In short, the media coverage is criticised for promoting and amplifying social inequality through its simplistic account of school work.

Media coverage always seeks to amplify phenomena to make them more sensational, more attractive for the audience. (Head teacher of private school in top decile)

And reporters – I am sorry for saying this – really don't know much about this topic, and make very ... facile interpretations of the results. (Head teacher of public school in bottom decile)

To jump to conclusions like many reporters do ... That is clearly unfair for some territories, for some schools. ... this kind of treatment by the media is almost dishonest! (Head teacher of public school in bottom decile)

The consequences of rankings: Families' choices, the state of mind of teachers and the adaptation of schools to the 'rankings game'

Head teachers identify three main areas in which rankings impact schools: the educational choices of families, the state of mind of teachers and the strategies used by schools to improve their position in the rankings. Interestingly, rankings are not portrayed as helpful to improve schools' assessment and work. In fact, head teachers' discourses show that rankings are far from being a neutral, productive assessment device.

Regarding parents' and students' choices, it should be noted that we are talking mostly about those from the middle and upper classes. This is in accord with what has long been widely acknowledged, that socioeconomic factors, while not direct determinants, play a relevant role in academic choices and

success (Coleman 1966; Duru-Bellat & Kieffer 2000). Recent research confirms that this keeps occurring in the Portuguese context (Martins, Mauritti & Costa 2005; Pereira 2010). This fact, by itself, increases segregation and contributes to the ghettoisation of some schools.

An English expert in evaluation uses an old adage that says: "Weighing the pig won't make it fatter". That is, the fact that we evaluate, evaluate, and evaluate does not induce changes by itself. (Head teacher of private school in top decile)

The reproduction of inequalities is thus identified as a major problem:

It's like this: if you're on the last or the next to last place in the ranking, who will come to you? Those who have low expectations! Those families that do not think the school is something valuable. Those parents who did not value the school when they attended it. Those who have low expectations regarding jobs, too. (Head teacher of public school in top decile)

Our students' parents ... usually do not have the economic status of those from [the head teacher mentions the names of three public schools attended mostly by middle and upper class students]. For them, rankings are not a very relevant matter. Now, for the parents of the students from those schools, rankings are a major concern. (Head teacher of public school in sixth decile)

This is a clear acknowledgement that rankings bring about a loop effect that reinforces existing divides. This seems to contradict the argument that the publication of rankings necessarily enhances overall quality.

If we lived off rankings, we'd be gone by now. We'd be shut down and locked. We would have no chance. Because this is how it works: if you're last or penultimate in the ranking, who's going to look for you? Only those who have low expectations! Only those families that do not value school. ... Those whose expectations regarding the labour market are also low. Those who value social benefits highly and work lowly. (Head teacher of public school in bottom decile)

They take their children from here and try to put them in other schools. All of this due to rankings. (Head teacher of private school in bottom decile)

It is worth noting, then, that this loop effect affects both public and private schools. That is, while the public-private divide runs through head teachers' discourses (see below), there are nevertheless instances that render this divide less linear. Indeed, as the demand issue may also apply to private schools, there may arise another relevant divide: the one between private schools at the top and at the bottom of the rankings. In fact, the head teacher of this private school located at the bottom of the rankings states clearly that it does not have the luxury of selecting the best students. Therefore, it may be trapped inside the loop effect and continue to operate in this low position because of the students it caters for and will probably continue to cater for in the future.

Rankings also appear to impact the state of mind of teachers – and even of students – bringing satisfaction to those well classified and frustration to those poorly ranked.

We have no other option [but to give in to the pressure to focus on good academic results]. We are bombarded by a million comments every time rankings are published, and this happens in the bakery, in the hairdresser, in the supermarket, with our friends and family ... And these things mess around with our professional dignity. It's very complicated! (Head teacher of public school in top decile)

I am not going to act falsely humble and say I am not pleased to see our work recognised in the national rankings as a kind of external evaluation, right? (Head teacher of private school in top decile)

When we are evaluated and we get a bad score and that is published in the media ... deep down it causes shame, upset, isn't it? (Head teacher of public school in bottom decile)

When this [the publication of rankings] began to have impact, I guess I felt it. I did. And those teachers who have been working here for 20 or 30 years, they felt a tremendous burden. From the moment some educational policies brought down some more structured thoughts about education, they felt more at will to say: "I don't feel a part of this". (Head teacher of public school in bottom decile)

When we are poorly assessed and the news are in the media – television, newspapers, radio, everything – deep down it is embarrassing, it is upsetting, it is disturbing. (Head teacher of private school in bottom decile)

Head teachers themselves admit that rankings may take away the will to do anything other than trying to improve academic results. Most important, perhaps, is to recognise that several head teachers mention that (at least some) schools may be adapting to this assessment device through more or less debatable procedures. One way in which they might be doing so is through the change of their assessment and selection procedures.

We don't do it, contrary to what people say ... selecting students based on their academic performance. If we actually did that, we'd probably be in another position in the rankings (laughter) because there are many ways of getting better positions in the rankings. If the worse students are left out it is much easier to get there; obvious, isn't it? ... But we know that not all schools work that way. (Head teacher of public school in bottom decile)

There are some tricks that we do not resort to. On the contrary, we send to the national exams students we know will not perform very well. ... [Other schools] send a lot less internal students to the national exams and show up really nicely in the portrait. We don't do that. (Head teacher of public school in top decile)

If the best students do their exams in the first stage [the only one that the media use when elaborating their rankings], and the worse students are left for the second stage, the school's result is greatly benefited. (Head teacher of private school in top decile)

Around here we have a few private schools that work well and some that work not so well, but they all get good results. And those who work best have more stringent entrance criteria, based on previous academic performance. And that is very well! Because if it is a private business they want to have their profit, and so they choose the best raw materials. (Head teacher of public school in top decile)

Head teachers go further by suggesting that some schools might be engaging in shady and even illicit behaviour to respond to the 'rankings game'. To be sure, getting evidence of such (mal)practice would probably require police rather than scientific investigation.

In the first year that the rankings were published, we were all in a state of innocence. That state of innocence is over! And one of the things I like to appreciate is the changes that have occurred meanwhile ... and the strategies used to show up nicely in the portrait. (Head teacher of public school in top decile)

Solutions to the exams written on the blackboard, exam invigilations that are no invigilations at all, is this true or not? All of us know it happens but pretend it doesn't. We all hear about it... (Head teacher of private school in bottom decile)

If you want to forge exam results, you forge them. ... [after the exams are carried out] they are kept in the school's safe until the next day, when they are picked up. What guarantees do you have that the exams that were put in the safe are the ones that will be picked up tomorrow to be assessed by independent teachers? If it's not for my moral integrity ... What if, for example, I handed the same kind of pen to all students? So that they would all write with the same pen? In multiple choice questions, it's easy! Providing it's the same pen, the person who scores the exam does not realise something is going on. This is all possible. It's just a moral issue, because it's so easy [to cheat] on multiple choice questions... (Head teacher of private school in top decile)

Finally, changes in admission practices will further accentuate the existing inequalities between schools and their population, thus becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy: extremely well-ranked schools get caught up in a social demand dynamic that will, by itself, end up fixing the school's position in the ranking.

After making their own [student] selection, they will send to other schools those students who didn't make it. And that is going to make the issues of school assessment and rankings even more acute. So, we will have two extremes: some schools will be fantastic and have fabulous students, whereas others will have really difficult students, with emotional handicaps and all that comes with it. (Head teacher of public school in sixth decile)

The public/private divide

In addition to socioeconomic and cultural aspects, the public/private divide also revolves around procedural elements. Typically, public schools have long argued that private schools engage in selective, cream-skimming practices. These practices involve not only the selection of those with highest academic performance – as measured by their previous results – but also the discarding of those who, in addition to involving greater costs, may not achieve the same results.

I don't think public and private schools should be put together [in the rankings]. Because, really, they are not in equal conditions. They [private schools] can choose their teachers, isn't it? ... They can choose their teachers, they can choose their students ... Two or three years ago our classes were already full, 28 students per class in accord with the legal limits; but as soon as we get a call from an institution requesting that we take in an institutionalised girl, a pregnant girl, for example, our capability of saying no is virtually inexistent. (Head teacher of public school in top decile)

However, private schools now also claim that public schools engage in cream-skimming procedures, and thus the argument is made that procedural unfairness is pervasive, providing any given school has enough demand.

Despite all the talk that goes on, that schools in the top positions in the rankings are those who select their students, that is not exactly true. I tell you this: I am convinced that there are more public schools selecting students than us. Because all our students who are in basic education can move on to secondary education in our school. ... [now if there is a student who is bad at Maths], he/she may not have access to a given public school, because in addition to the catchment area, when demand exceeds supply – and that is beginning to happen in the best public schools – then they select students based on their academic background. (Head teacher of private school in top decile)

In their turn, head teachers of public schools argue that rankings fail to reveal the unfairness in student assessment procedures. By focusing only on the scores obtained in the national exams, rankings erode the fact that private schools are more benevolent in the internal assessments they make of their students, and thus benefit them in access to higher education.

Now, what is the situation in private schools? What we see is inflated internal scores, and then lower scores in national exams.... (Head teacher of public school in bottom decile)

You know as well as I do how private schools operate when it comes to rankings, don't you? They give very high scores in subjects that have national exams, and put very little effort in those that don't. Also, they put on extra hours in subjects that have national exams in order to get good results – but we, we can't do that! (Head teacher of public school in top decile)

In some private schools, they work so that at the end of the day they can say: "We put x of our students through to Medicine, y students through to Architecture...". It's a business! We must realise that this is all a business! (Head teacher of public school in bottom decile)

Interestingly, this type of argument and analysis is never put forth by head teachers of private schools. A tentative explanation for this might be that, while they recognise the unfairness of rankings, the competition model is embedded in the very nature of those schools and, according to some head teachers, in their students' approach to life. As such, competition is something to embrace rather than criticise, even if its parameters are recognizably unfair (and, to be sure, private schools tend to be on the privileged side of this specific unfairness). Another possible explanation is the existence of different understandings on the nature and scope of education. While for some academic results may be the ultimate measure of academic quality, others are saddened by the fact that school work focusing on things other than results is regarded as mere entertainment or folklore. Both these possible explanations articulate with the (average) different socioeconomic status of students from public and private schools.

Conclusion

The power of rankings, then, is visible in the ways in which relevant agents in the educational system – head teachers – while acknowledging the limited ability of rankings to describe reality, end up adapting to it and transforming their practices, thus creating in fact a new educational reality. Indeed, it is the power of media that makes it possible that '[i]n some significant sense all the things wrong with the rankings matter considerably less than the plain fact that the rankings matter' (Gioia & Corley 2002:112). The fact that they are noticeably flawed and unfair subsides in the face of their instrumentality for political and managerial purposes. Debord's notion of *spectacle* is quite useful to make sense of this phenomenon, as this might be seen as just a sign that, after all, the so-called *information society* and *knowledge economy* sit comfortably with the *society of the spectacle*, the obstruction of critical thought and the colonisation of social life through commodities and its representations (Debord 2012).

To be sure, it can probably be argued that there is, to paraphrase La Boétie (1986), an element of voluntary servitude in the acceptance of rankings: their legitimacy comes not only or necessarily from top-down imposition by brute force. Rather, if we were to reframe this in Foucault's terms, we could argue that this process 'shows how coercive disciplinary pressures devolve into forms of self-management ... that amplify institutional influences by changing members' perceptions, expectations, and behavior' (Sauder & Espeland 2009:64). This is where the surveillance of performance, the enactment of fantasies and managerialism come together (cf. Ball 2003b). Fighting inequalities and striving for the common good are goals that do not really belong to this game.

The power of rankings also comes from their simplicity: not necessarily of their methodology, but certainly of their interpretation. As Sauder and Espeland (2009:72) argue, 'rankings are abstract, concise, and portable, and because they decontextualise so thoroughly, they travel widely and are easily inserted into new places and for new uses'. However, the hyper-realistic spectacle creates a wall that informed reasoning finds difficult to penetrate. As a management tool, rankings are presented as an 'objective, technically neutral mechanism, dedicated only to greater efficiency; the one best method'

(Ball 1990:157). For informed, critical reasoning this is naïve, of course. It presupposes that efficiency is an unproblematic notion, that methods are ideology-free, and that technical options are made purely at a technical level. And, in addition to being naïve – or perhaps falsely naïve – it is also dangerous in that it curtails the very thought of alternatives; in this case, alternatives to assessing the quality of school and students' work. The spectacle relegates analysis, technicalities cloak ideologies, the belief in the Holy Grail of marketisation desensitises to the inequalities it creates and/or reinforces.

The methodology of rankings is widely regarded by head teachers as promoting unfairness. This happens, in good part, because rankings neglect what most see as relevant contextual elements: the cultural and socioeconomic characteristics of students and their families; a range of differences between public and private schools; the differentials between internal scores and scores obtained in national exams; selection and cream-skimming practices.

If rankings are seen to promote unfairness, the mass media are seen as amplifiers of that unfairness. In this way, the media eventually create a given reality, as representations are not simply ideas about the world but rather structuring elements, integral parts of reality. This explains why the media emerged as a recurring topic in the discourses of the head teachers.

While the flaws of rankings are unanimously acknowledged, the media keep elaborating and publishing them because they sell well. In this sense, not much has changed for more than a decade:

Perhaps the most striking thing on reading the press presentation is the degree of ambivalence shown by a number of newspapers towards the league tables. They publish them because this is seen as commercially important, but their education commentators are fully aware of the degree of controversy surrounding the issue. (Maw 1999:4)

It appears, then, that virtually no-one considers that the rankings provide an accurate, comprehensive picture of educational quality, much less of educational processes. It is quite paradoxical, then, that rankings have gained such widespread legitimacy and authority. This paradox is not only a sign of their power, but ultimately a sign of the power of the forces pushing for the rise and consolidation of educational markets. To be sure, the Ministry of Education is responsible for the way it disseminates school rankings, above all for not making a serious attempt to present statistics on school performance that incorporate the socioeconomic background of students or other data that would enable a better understanding of the value added or the improvement achieved by schools (this is common practice in other countries). Also, the Ministry of Education is responsible for not granting higher education institutions autonomy for setting their own admission criteria, which at present are forced to give considerable weight to internal scores. It is hoped that this situation will be revised in the future, as research and public debate highlight the paradoxes and unfairness it generates.

Note

- 1 In Greek mythology, Circe was a goddess of magic who had the power of transforming others against their will (into animals or monsters).

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