

# **POLICY EVALUATION IN EDUCATION IN FRANCE**

## **Going beyond the state sciences model?**

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*The global aim of this article is to question the evolution of the relations between knowledge and policy in the education sector and their possible effects on the current regulation of the educational systems. To do so, I focus on the policy evaluation led in education in France at the national level since the 1980s. My thesis is that in the policy evaluation of French education a particular type of knowledge production predominates, which can be understood as specific «state sciences». Through materials drawn from three main qualitative studies, two of them conducted within and for the Knowandpol Project, the article highlights the weight of state elites on the production of knowledge in the evaluation field and their particular methods of analysis. Then it stresses the key factors of explanation of the predominance of this state sciences model and its main implications on the current French education policy process.*

**Keywords:** policy evaluation, evaluative state, regulation of educational systems, knowledge and policy

### **Introduction**

It is now relatively taken for granted in the scientific literature on governance and regulation that states or governments are no longer central actors of public regulation able to impose alone their own will and their particular view because they have to take into account the interests of many actors who now intervene in growing complex, unstable and multipolar

decision processes. Among the current governing failures that public administrations have to cope with is the «knowledge problem», defined by Mayntz (1993) as the incorrect interpretation of causal links between ends and means, which is often mentioned even if knowledge as an explanatory variable of the policy process is far less taken into account in the policy literature than other classical factors such as ideas, interests, institutions or instruments (Pons & Van Zanten, 2007). Public action is defined by an original «double chain of production» in which there are inevitably discrepancies between inputs, outputs and final outcomes (Duran, 2010). The «art of muddling through» should now rely on a more evidence-based approach (Moran & Malott, 2004) and be completed by a better anticipation of the effects of policies. This focus on consequences is not new (Weber, 1959). However, from 1980 on, in order to increase the efficiency and the effectiveness of reforms, and through it – it is argued – their legitimacy, but also in order to limit the power of professionals in the policy process, new pressures have developed at the national and global level in favour of policies of accountability in various policy sectors, including education (Harris & Herrington, 2006; Maroy, 2006).

In this context, policy evaluation, conceived here mainly – at least *a priori* – as a key policy tool of a New Public Management unequally developed from one country to another (Varone & Jacob, 2004) and not as the academic field of research which was born in the University of Chicago at the beginning of the 20th century and which then travelled in various countries (Spennlehauer, 2003), is expected to play a key role. By quantifying performance and measuring the outcomes of public organisations, it is supposed to invite the latter to increase accountability and to shift to an obligation of results (Hood, 1991; 1996).

Consequently, studying policy evaluation in education<sup>1</sup>, including its institutionalisation, its actors and its knowledge production seems to be a particularly relevant indicator of the current transformations of the relation between knowledge and policy in this sector and their possible effects on the regulation of educational systems.

The aim of this article is to analyse this relation in the French context since the 1980s by focusing on the policy evaluation led in education at the national level only. Like other European countries, the current and effective regulation of the French educational system remains halfway between a traditional «bureaucratic» and «corporatist» regulation, which is still important, and several attempts to move through «post-bureaucratic» modes of regulation, through an evaluation policy and the implementation of new regulation tools (Maroy, 2006).

<sup>1</sup> The latter can be broadly defined as a reflexive and collective process of production of feedbacks on the functioning of the educational systems which allow policy actors to appreciate, in reference to various political values (efficiency, equity, quality, relevance, etc.) both their organization, their results and the effects of the various measures implemented to reform and regulate them (Pons, 2011a).

Yet, this intermediary situation leads to changes that seem to be more rhetoric than elsewhere, that still give a decisive role to professionals in the leading and the actual implementation of the evaluation policy and that are not always put to an end. The official speeches and designs of devices and regulation tools are not always supported by effective new practices and new institutional constraints (Buisson-Fenet & Pons, 2011; Pons, 2011a). Thus, we can reasonably assume that in terms of policy evaluation, the apparent compliance of France with the international standards of the New Public Management and with the new modes of regulation and governance promoted at the supra and international levels (Lawn, 2006; Normand, 2011; Ozga, Dahler-Larsen, Segerholm, & Simola, 2011) does not immediately and necessarily lead to major changes in the concrete production of knowledge in this educational system.

My thesis is that, in the French education sector, a particular type of knowledge production still predominates in policy evaluation, which can be understood as specific state sciences (Leca, 1993; Ihl, Kaluszynski, & Pollet, 2003; Pons, 2010). The latter is both the consequence of the permanence of a traditional mode of regulation and decision within the French educational system and the emblematic expression of the current hesitations of its possible new governance regarding the role given to knowledge in the education policy process.

The empirical materials at the basis of this article were drawn mainly from three qualitative studies<sup>2</sup> (169 interviews in total<sup>3</sup>, document analysis, scientific and professional literature

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<sup>2</sup> A research study coordinated with A. Van Zanten for the *Knowandpol* project (study 1) mapping the main national knowledge producers in the French field of evaluation in education (Pons & Van Zanten, 2008); a sociological analysis led with N. Mons regarding the reception of Pisa in the French national public debate until 2008 (Mons & Pons, 2009) still for the *Knowandpol* project (study 2) and a PhD study (Pons, 2010) on the French evaluators and their influence on the policy of evaluation (study 3). Even though this article has been published thanks to the support of the European Union's Sixth Framework Programme for Research – Citizens and Governance in a Knowledge-based Society theme (contract nr 028848-2 – project *Knowandpol*), the information and views set out are those of the author only and do not necessarily reflect the official opinion of the European Union.

<sup>3</sup> 78 interviews were mobilised both for the studies 1 and 3, 4 for both the studies 2 and 3, 45 for the study 1 only, 26 for the study 2 only, and 16 for the study 3 only. I have personally conducted 147 of these 169 interviews. The latter were led on the basis of a common methodological grid, which had to be adapted to the contexts, to the individuals and to each research project (specific focus on Pisa for the second study for instance). For all of them, I sought to understand both the institutional design regarding evaluation, the mandate of the interlocutors, the historical, organizational and professional context in which evaluation was, or might be, implemented, their professional practices (as they were presented), their conception of evaluation, their main partners and their sources of inspiration. In most cases, interviews were recorded. They were then either totally transcribed or synthesized in chrono-thematic tables. All the interviews were then encoded and synthesized in transversal thematic files (between 1 and 23 Word pages) to make analysis and comparison possible («institutional design», «jobs and professional identities», «conception of evaluation», etc.).

review, building of descriptive statistics<sup>4</sup>). Each of the studies adopted a specific analytical perspective and addressed particular theoretical issues. My aim here is not to detail all the aspects but to synthesize some of the findings and examine them for the purposes of the demonstration. That is why I will show first the domination of state elites in the production of knowledge in the field of evaluation and I will analyse their methods of evaluation to understand the type of knowledge that they produce. I will then put forward some factors of explanation of the permanence and the predominance of these state sciences. In the third section, I will stress some consequences of this predominance on the current French education policy process. The conclusion will question the possible changes that have occurred since 2005.

### **The predominance of state sciences**

«State sciences», like «government sciences»<sup>5</sup> can be defined as bodies of knowledge which are halfway between the experienced practices of administrators on the one hand and scientific – or academic – activities on the other. Their main purpose is to stress regularities in social phenomena in order to advise political leaders and to legitimize their actions (Ihl *et al.*, 2003). Prolonging the tradition of cameralism (Tribe, 1984), they all contemplate society from the viewpoint of the state and they try to synthesize it as a sum of issues that must be addressed (social issues, urban issues, education issues and so on). They focus more on the concrete internal organization of the state than on the consistency of the social system that policies are supposed to make change and they very often conceive the action of the state as the main policy instrument (Leca, 1993). To prove the predominance of these state sciences in France, I will first show the domination of state elites in the field of evaluation and then I will analyse the type of knowledge that they produce.

#### ***A mapping of the knowledge producers in the French field of evaluation***

In 2007, I coordinated with Agnès Van Zanten a collective research study with the aim of mapping the knowledge producers intervening in the field of education policy evaluation in

<sup>4</sup> For more details concerning these last three methods, their use and their analysis, see, for the study 1, Pons & Van Zanten (2008: 62-174), for the study 2, Mons & Pons (2009: 113-124), and for the study 3, Pons (2010: 10-12, 62-68, 76-81 and 187-194 in particular).

<sup>5</sup> In this paper, state sciences and government sciences are considered to be synonyms. This is possible because the key knowledge producers in evaluation are all state-dependent organizations.

*Knowandpol*

France at the national level (Pons & Van Zanten, 2008). While selecting the knowledge producers, we first took into account bodies with an official mandate of evaluation (*official evaluators*): the two general inspectorates and the Department for evaluation, forecasting and performance analysis within the central administration within the ministry (DEPP). For the others (*latent evaluators*), three criteria were privileged: the use of evaluation to describe their activities, the existence of formal and/or cognitive links with official evaluators and an activity that leads them to provide diagnosis or normative assertions on the functioning of the educational system.

Concretely, for each person, we had to fill in a specific grid of indicators which was common to all the research teams from the *Knowandpol* project thanks to materials gathered through the use of various methods of research (study of reports and publications, online research, interviews and, for specific actors, questionnaires, archives and internal document analysis, and descriptive statistics). This common grid, detailed in table 1, allowed us to put each knowledge producer on a three dimensional map conceived by the coordinators of this orientation for the *Knowandpol* project, distinguishing the various kinds of structures (hierarchical or organic, open or closed), actors (influential actors, circulators and brokers) and knowledge (scientific, government and field-based knowledge).

TABLE 1  
Indicators grid of orientation 1 of the *Knowandpol* research

Indicator	General description
1) Formal policy making bodies that produce and use knowledge	Listed in terms of permanent roles or office-holders Detailed discipline and level of qualification
2) Formal qualifications of office holders	Type and length of career, elected function, sector of activity, seniority, location of activity
3) Professional experience/careers of the decision makers	Total production, analysed by category: activity reports and/or participation to research/study (academic publication?)
4) Volume of knowledge production by body	Definitions of tasks: leader, follower, advisory role, expert. Whether the body/policy maker obtains the knowledge from another body or whether it produces it itself
5) Organisational tasks/responsibilities	For example: dissemination of knowledge; synthesis of knowledge; using knowledge to make a case/argument; seeking knowledge
6) Categories of knowledge production by use of knowledge	Picture of sector, priorities, issues and problems (e.g. efficiency, economy, skills, reducing budgets)
7) Cognitive categories used to describe the sector/system	

*continues*

TABLE 1  
**Indicators grid of orientation 1 of the *Knowandpol* research**

Indicator	General description
8) Budget dedicated to research	Proportion to the total budget
9) Research priorities	Areas selected for funding. How are those priorities determined?
10) Who is funded	Organisations selected for funding: public/private? Research/consultancy? National/local/international? Is the selection process public and transparent?
11) Formal Relationships between the body and others	Does the body have specific relationships with others in terms of knowledge? Are there specific instances or places for these relationships (e.g. joint membership of committees)?
12) Use of international knowledge based categories	Use of some indicators, documents, categories, discourses, words from international bodies
13) Knowledge Producers	Number, diploma, profession, scientific discipline
14) Typology of the knowledge producers according to their relations with the policy makers	By externality, association, clients, integrated, partners, etc.

Source: (Pons & van Zanten, 2008: 72).

I cannot detail here all the intermediary conclusions of this study<sup>6</sup>. I simply stress that this mapping clearly highlights the domination of state elites. All the official evaluators are state bodies (indicator 1). Except for three research institutes<sup>7</sup> that provide evaluative studies more or less regularly, the initiatives of researchers, but also of teachers and head teachers unions, remain individual and relatively isolated. Many expected actors (regarding other sectors or other educational systems) are significantly absent, such as private consultants, UNESCO<sup>8</sup>, the European Union, the CAS<sup>9</sup> or the parents associations. Conversely, the bodies depending directly on the minister of education (general inspectorates, DEPP, HCEE<sup>10</sup>, but also CEREQ and INRP) or linked to the state and its elites (*Cour des comptes*<sup>11</sup> and IGF<sup>12</sup>) are far more

<sup>6</sup> For more information, see Pons & Van Zanten (2008: 21-52 for the mapping and pp. 65-174 for the filling of the grid for each knowledge producer).

<sup>7</sup> The Centre of Study of Qualifications and Employment (CEREQ, Marseille), The National Institute of Pedagogical Research (INRP, Lyon) and the Institute of Research in Education (Dijon).

<sup>8</sup> United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

<sup>9</sup> Strategic Council Analysis depending from the French Prime Minister.

<sup>10</sup> High Council of Evaluation in Education (2001-05).

<sup>11</sup> French High Audit Supreme Court.

<sup>12</sup> General Inspectorate of the Treasury.

represented. Regarding the volume of publications (indicator 4) and the size of the bodies (indicators 2, 3 and 4), the general inspectorates (between 240 and 350 people from 1989 to 2007) have published each year between 16 and 49 reports since 1989 and the DEPP (between 211 and 253 people from 1992 to 2007) between 10 and 25 evaluative studies each year since 1992. No other body can do the same, not even IREDU (approximately 30 members) who has formally integrated in its collective themes of research the «evaluation of the functioning of educational institutions» since 1990<sup>13</sup> (Pons & Van Zanten, 2008).

This mapping (indicators 7 and 12) also reveals that the two dominant evaluation bodies (the general inspectors and the members of the DEPP) mainly use descriptive categories of analysis in their publications referring to the institutional architecture of the French educational system and its actual internal functioning (ongoing education devices, types of staff, types of administrative status, types of diplomas and structures, etc.), and more rarely categories coming from research or international organisations. What are the methodological mainstays of such knowledge production?

### ***The methods of analysis of the French dominant official evaluators***

Concerning the methods of the general inspectors, a survey of the 521 reports that were published between 1985 and 2008 shows that nearly all of the reports were based on the use of three main methods: survey of administrative documents, observations and interviews within school organisations. In parallel, in this dataset I also observed the progressive and growing use of methods allowing general inspectors to improve the degree of generality of their conclusions, like the use of official statistics, sometimes the building of specific empirical indicators, the drawing up of questionnaires or the use of typologies. Lastly, the consultation of methodological grids and interviews revealed that several methodological biases remained (sampling, relevance of the object of evaluation, low use of methodological grids, etc.). The latter were both known and voluntarily ignored by general inspectors who said that their aim was not to produce strict academic knowledge, but a telling and solid enough report to efficiently advise the ministry (Pons, 2010).

Concerning the members of the DEPP, four main conclusions can be picked up from the same kind of survey of the 439 publications edited between 1968 and 2008. First, there is a clear imbalance between the regular and massive use of every possible descriptive indicator

<sup>13</sup> This kind of calculation lies on several conventions. For a detailed presentation, see Pons & Van Zanten (2008: 62-174).

(global figures, rates, proportions and standard deviations) and the irregular use of statistical tools in a more explanatory perspective, such as indexes, regression analyses, modelling or factor analyses. Second, in parallel it can be seen an intense activity of classification through the growing use of quantiles during the period and the development of comparisons, empirical typologies and descriptive uses of the questionnaire. Third, normative statements are relatively rare (20 cases out of 439) and they consist mainly in the use of ambivalent or partial adjectives while commenting on graphs or tables. Fourth, once again, some methodological biases persist whereas they are often known by statisticians, as for example when they do not take into account specific very marginal categories in national samples, when they prefer using phone platforms rather than face-to-face interviews, and when they implement questionnaires for their panels, etc. (Pons, 2010).

In both cases, the methods of analysis of French official evaluators did not significantly change after the adoption of their new mandate of evaluation (in 1985 and 1989 for the two general inspectorates and in 1987 for the DEPP). When they evaluate, evaluators actually reconvert and update ancient skills and competencies like the field based visits for the general inspectors (*«visite de terrain»*) and the descriptive study for statisticians (*«étude»*). Thus, behind the implementation of a new regulation tool (policy evaluation), the permanence of specific old state sciences can be observed. We talk about the *«art of empirical extrapolation»* for the general inspectors, i.e. the ability to provide political leaders with general assertions on the functioning and on the results of the educational system on the basis of a small number of visits in schools or in educational organisations from which some key elements are picked up as significant of national trends regarding the long personal, professional and institutional experience within the educational system of general inspectors. For the members of the DEPP, we talk about the *«science of figure based reports»* (*«science du constat chiffré»*) rather than statistics, the periphrasis allowing us to insist on the importance given to the description and the classification in this statistical production (Pons, 2010).

## **Factors of explanation**

### ***The ambiguities of the institutionalisation of policy evaluation***

The predominance of the state sciences model can be explained by the tangle of many factors. It is first of all the logical consequence of the particular institutionalisation of policy evaluation in the French education sector. Four adjectives can be used to describe this institutionalisation: vague, secondary, parallel and incomplete (Pons, 2011a).

Vague – the official texts regulating education policy evaluation in France (articles L241-1 and L241-11 of the French Code of education), the annual business programs of official evaluators or the speeches on that topic from the political leaders never detail the notion, the expected practices or procedures and the explicit political aims of policy evaluation. This vagueness is itself the consequence of two phenomena, which are both indirect explanations of the permanence of state sciences. First, it is the direct outcome of a particular strategy of government used by successive political leaders who were very little encouraged to make their particular view of this regulation tool explicit since the latter was very likely to displease a significant part of policy actors and organisations. For them, it seems more rational to maintain vagueness to allow policy actors with different views of evaluation to coordinate themselves in specific punctual devices or projects and to massively use the term to put a soft pressure on evaluators and professionals. Second, the contribution of scholars and researchers to the conceptualisation of evaluation was relatively poor and unknown by official evaluators. An association like the ADMEE-Europe<sup>14</sup> did not play a significant role in this field. Policy evaluation, as a field of research, was not widely developed in France. The first French society of evaluation (SFE) was created only in 1999 and did not strongly contribute to clarify, in the education sector at least, the concepts and the methods of evaluation.

Secondary – this institutionalisation never brought about the creation of new organisations and policy actors (except the HCEE between 2001 and 2005), the new mandate of evaluation was always given to policy actors who pre-existed (inspectors, statisticians, etc.).

Parallel – policy evaluation in education (at least until 2005) never took the institutional and intellectual paths drawn by the development of policy evaluation at the inter-ministerial level since the beginning of the 1980s; evaluators in education argue that this sector was too specific to adopt the concepts and the methods used in other sectors.

Incomplete – policy evaluation is not uniformly implemented in France from one time and territory to another and it is not as much developed as in other French sectors of public action or other educational systems (Pons, 2011a). Given this institutional and political context, official evaluators are hardly encouraged to radically change their methods.

### ***The filter of professional identities***

Sometimes, the logics of policy evaluation strongly questions professional identities. For instance, in interviews, the statisticians of the DEPP put forward the necessity for them, as

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<sup>14</sup> European partner of the Canadian Association for the Development of the Methods of Evaluation in Education.

professionals, to certify the collection of data by the ministry and to provide objective and mainly descriptive information. This scientific neutrality is necessary for them to preserve the administrative territory that they have conquered within the ministry since the beginning of the 1970s, to maintain their credibility among policy actors and professionals in education and, if possible, to enrich and improve the evidence-based nature of the public debate on education. Consequently, policy evaluation may be a risky practice for them since it can question this credibility by inviting statisticians to provide normative statements on the functioning of the education systems and by transforming the DEPP, at least in the eyes of its interlocutors, into a communication agency for the minister. In that context, for statisticians, the descriptive study (*«l'étude»*) is a good compromise between the need to enlighten decision and the need to preserve the core of their professional identity (Pons, 2010).

Concerning general inspectors, evaluation as a process required that they constituted plural teams whereas they usually worked alone. It also implied developing a more systemic approach of educational issues, beyond the control of conformity in schools. In this changing context, the general inspectors are expected to be more than only esteemed specialists (of didactics, of particular administrative devices, etc.) and to become general experts on the functioning of the educational system, an evolution that is not accepted by the whole body. Therefore, the rationalisation of their field visits (*«visites de terrain»*) allows them to take into account the criticisms that were levelled at their former approach without questioning their main cognitive routine: going and checking in school organisations (Pons, 2010).

### ***The organisational constraints***

Internal organisational features of evaluating bodies are also serious obstacles to the preliminary capitalisation of new pieces of knowledge and new skills necessary to a radical change of methods of analysis. Actually, the general inspectors are mainly a collection of individual experts who were recruited for their specific competencies, but who are then very rarely trained to do their new job of evaluators. An analysis of the internal news bulletins that have been regularly edited by the organization since 1986 reveals that since that date very few training sessions on evaluation have been set up, even when some general inspectors asked for them. Training sessions massively concerned the command of English, the mastery of usual computer tools and software and information on recent international and European issues. Moreover, some individual external initiatives or the participation of some general inspectors in external training sessions or seminars were not systematically and widely disseminated within the organization (Pons, 2011b). In that context, on-the-job training and punc-

tual internalisations of external expertise according to the ongoing political needs of the organization remain dominant.

The members of the DEPP work in a strongly hierarchical and differentiated administrative world in which various kinds of staff members coexist. Even if a department specifically devoted to evaluation was created in 1982, the members of the DEPP never clearly and formally distinguished (in their publications and their internal organisation) their evaluating tasks from other classical statistical activities. The internal structure of the department rather depended on the implementation of specific tools (like the panels, which require the permanence of a specific office devoted to the study of cohorts), on the main functions of the department (collecting data, shaping statistical categories and nomenclatures, etc.), and on the institutional levels that the DEPP had to cover (primary and secondary education vs. higher education, pupils vs. schools, etc.). Given this, the dissemination and the generalisation of the uses of new methods of evaluation (counter-factual analyses, item response models, micro-econometric methods of analysis, like the Rubin model for instance) requires an extensive and uncertain work of coordination.

### ***The weight of the traditional mode of regulation***

The evaluators are all the less inclined to radically change their methods of analysis as the traditional mode of regulation of the French educational system is still dominant and as the production of knowledge through evaluation is to a large extent in strong opposition to it (Van Zanten, 2008, 2011). According to A. Van Zanten, this mode was progressively set by various reforms in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and evolved incrementally up to the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is based on three main pillars: a neo-corporatist mode of decision-making based on the interaction between state officials and teacher union representatives; a strong, centralized and bureaucratic administration; and the importance given in that context to the charisma and ethos of both decision-makers and teachers. These three pillars are associated to specific visions and uses of the knowledge that can be produced on the functioning of the educational system. For policy actors, neo-corporatism implies for policy actors a focus on political negotiation skills that lead to a limited consideration for the knowledge produced and a strategic use of it. Central bureaucracy led to a large extent to the «endogenization» of expertise by the state through the action of political cabinets acting as think tanks, institutions devoted to the collection and process of statistical data aggregated at the national level, and professional bodies intervening at the national and local levels. Charisma and ethos mean that legitimate knowledge on education policies must be incarnated in «personalities», linked to their intellectual capacities and values, and used to «enlighten» and exert a personal influence.

### ***The dynamics of policy evaluation***

Lastly, the evolution of policy evaluation, as a policy itself since the beginning of the 1980s, plays an important role. To say it briefly, this evolution mainly depends on the outcomes of the competition between evaluators rather than on political initiatives, for all the reasons that were mentioned above. This competition is fundamentally a cognitive competition between the evaluators and the various productions of knowledge on the educational system that they can provide to political leaders, the goal being to impose their view of the «true» evaluation and to define the kind of expertise and knowledge that must be politically legitimate. The dynamics of this competition mainly rests on a process of «subsumption»: an evaluative body is stronger than another one if it managed to prove and make recognized that the knowledge produced by the other evaluator is only a partial, unachieved or particular piece of the knowledge that it provides itself (Pons, 2010). Consequently, radically changing their methods is highly risky and costly for official evaluators who are on the contrary strongly encouraged to rationalize their initial skills and to improve the degree of generality of their analyses.

### **Consequences on the policy process**

#### ***Reinforcing Neo-corporatism***

This predominance of state sciences has of course several implications on the French education policy process. Three of these implications can be stressed, among others. First, the state science model reinforces the neo-corporatist logic. It is particularly visible in the difficulties in France to make some policy debates – on the possible fall of pupils' performance over time, on the effects of the size of classes on the success of pupils, on the need to make pupils repeat a year, etc. – going beyond classical oppositions between professionals. Since evaluation was mainly entrusted to pre-existing professional groups, given that they were already integrated in a specific set of professional relations with other groups and with their representatives (unions, professional associations, etc.), and because they did not significantly change their methods of analysis, state evaluators are alternatively described as objective external references and suspected to work for the minister (or for the «ministry», for the «administration», etc.) so that it is highly difficult to establish common and apolitical diagnoses on the actual functioning of the educational system in France and to disseminate them, especially towards teachers. An analysis of the issues of the *L'Université syndicaliste* published by the

main teachers union in secondary education (Snes-FSU) between 2000 and 2007 reveals for instance that – according to the topics, political circumstances and political interests and vision of the union – the reports by the general inspectors are alternatively presented as the productions of «sages», «experts», etc. (when they defend a specific discipline for example) and criticised because they come from «technocrats» or «high civil servants» (*«commis de l'État»*) when they meet some diagnoses put forward by the minister (Pons & Van Zanten, 2008).

### ***Lack of systematicity***

Second, the state sciences model tends to confirm both a vertical and an irregular production of knowledge on various topics according to the political circumstances and mainly the needs of the government. This trend does not favour the capitalization of knowledge on specific issues or the capitalization of skills by evaluators through the implementation of specific regulation tools. It also does not favour a more systematic production of data at every level of regulation in an educational system that has been decentralised since the 1980s (Pons & Van Zanten, 2008). There are several examples of this situation. In another study on the statistical offices of the French «*académies*» (French state regional educational authorities), I discovered how difficult it was in mass *académies* like those around Paris to simply centralise the statistical data bases at the regional level in order to enlighten and advise efficiently regional leaders. There were various difficulties (institutional, political, professional) but, among them, the vertical orientation of the data collection was particularly important since the main national and centralized operations (like the implementation of national tests or the supervision of key databases like the indicators of performance of secondary schools) tended to take most of the time of these offices, whereas these centralised operations are not always directly useful for them since they do not always allow statistical analyses at regional levels (Pons, forthcoming). A recent comparison of school evaluation in four European countries shows that the collective memory of regional evaluators in two French *académies* (regional and local inspectors, members of regional statistical offices, etc.) was relatively low concerning the former experiences of school evaluation that were conducted at the national and regional levels in other periods. Inevitably, evaluation teams tend always to reinvent methodology and to rediscover problems of conception and implementation that were already addressed elsewhere in former experiences, such as the difficulty to work with colleagues who have another professional background or the ambiguities of the political command (Buisson-Fenet & Pons, 2011).

### ***The comfortable position of political leaders***

Third, evaluation does not really restrict or counterbalance the powers of political leaders. As it is institutionalized and practized, it is even the contrary, since evaluation puts them in a relatively comfortable position. Indeed, official evaluators directly depend on the minister's cabinet. The general inspectors work only for the minister who is the only official reader of their reports and the DEPP is one of the departments of the central administration of the ministry which depends on the minister and his/her cabinet. For instance, all the publications of official evaluators must be approved by the cabinet, even those like the annual report of the inspectorate, which are provided for by law. Thus, the political leaders can commission all kinds of evaluations to «their» evaluators even if these evaluations are conducted too early to be really productive or if they are not always relevant regarding the actual evolution of the educational system. In that context, the knowledge production of evaluators tends to rationalise *a posteriori* the very numerous public measures that are regularly announced by the ministry at least as much as they tend to evaluate them. Conversely, the power of control of political leaders on the activities of official evaluators can be very strong and effective if one minister so decides. This was particularly the case between 1997 and 2000, under C. Allègre's ministry, and in 2007-2009, under X. Darcos' (Pons, 2010). As an example, only one report by the general inspectors was published in 2008. Recently, several reports were not published, like, for instance, the one which highlighted the perverse effects of the progressive implementation of a free choice policy in France. But classical political control is not the only strategy. Choosing from all the sources of expertise which are available, the one which is the more useful for one's political speeches or for one's reforms is one of them, as shown by the strategic mobilisation of Pisa in the national public debate by political leaders since 2005 (Mons & Pons, 2009).

### **Conclusion: towards a knowledge path dependency?**

Analysing education policy processes through the «knowledge» prism can be very productive to understand the current and effective changes of regulation and governance of educational systems. In the French case, one can see that, beyond policy discourses and official stances, and contrary to what is sometimes said in some international comparisons, this system is far from moving to a post-bureaucratic regulation like the evaluative state (Pons, 2010). To a large extent, the actual and effective production of knowledge in evaluation remains the same as before, a situation which does not favour new political uses of knowledge. Can we thus conclude about the existence of a knowledge path dependency in

France? Yes, we can because we saw the permanence of specific bodies of knowledge (state sciences) that rest on specific cognitive routines of professional groups. At the same time, we cannot because this permanence is as much the consequence of the current hesitations regarding the regulation of the French educational system as a whole as its cause. If this knowledge production did not radically change, it is also, and maybe first, because radical changes in the institutional design, in the governing process and in regulation were not made.

Moreover, these conclusions must be qualified and counterbalanced in at least two ways. First, I focused on the national level, but the evolution of the landscape of local expertise and evaluation seems to be stronger and very different (Pons, 2011). Second, my initial mapping mainly focused on the period before 2007. Yet, from 2005-2006, many changes occurred in the French national policy of policy evaluation. The «turn of performance» both at the European and national level and the privilege given by right-wing political leaders to other sources of expertise (Treasury inspectorate, OECD experts and commentators of Pisa, members of the DGESCO, a new department of the ministry of education), while they increased their political control on traditional official evaluators, tended to strongly redistribute the politically legitimate sources of expertise (Pons, 2010). Yet, in this last case, privilege is still given to state elites. The radical political control put on official evaluators tends to suggest that the art of government did not significantly change.

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