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In the French context, competition between research knowledge and state knowledge in terms of the interpretations of society has existed for a long time. This is due to several factors. From the research perspective, it is important to note the slow and problematic development of university research as well as its academic focus and lack of connection with both policy and practice. From the perspective of state knowledge, it is necessary to underline the development of a strong state administration whose power has been largely based on its capacity to use categories and tools in specific ways. In the last twenty years, more interaction has developed between the two areas. However, there is not yet a 'common culture' among knowledge producers that would allow them limiting government's efforts to instrument knowledge for purposes of legitimation.

Keywords: Knowledge · research · citizenship · policy-making · educational sciences · statistics · inspectorate

From critical intellectuals to «idea brokers»?

Traditions and new developments of links between research and policy-making in education in France

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It is nothing new to see knowledge in social sciences used as a tool of government. Since the 18th century, the development of modern States and administrations monopolizing government functions has encouraged top officials to appeal to science to legitimize their power (Ihl, Kaluszynski & Pollet, 2003). Once States came to expand their territories and fields of intervention, they found it necessary to draw on intellectual categories and specialist skills, and on detecting as well as effecting tools such as statistics or maps to increase their capacity to take and to enforce relevant decisions (Hood, 1986). This was particularly the case in areas such as education that were crucial for cultural, social and political cohesion and, progressively, for economic development, and which concerned very large numbers of citizens and important groups of administrators and professionals.

However, there are at least three main reasons why knowledge is coming to play a more important role than it used to in
the conduct of public policy, including educational policy. The first one relates to the exponential development of knowledge in social sciences and its much wider diffusion among ordinary citizens, as a result of education, especially of rising levels of participation in secondary and higher education, and of the growing circulation of knowledge through the media. The second one concerns the increasing instrumental role of knowledge, which is perceived as a crucial asset to confront the economic competition from other nations in the international marketplace, in other words, the development – to varying extents across countries – of ‘knowledge economies’ (Brown & Lauder, 1996).

The third factor, and the one that I will dwell on more extensively in this article, concerns the increasing use of knowledge in social sciences for purposes of legitimization and control. New forms of legitimization based on the use of knowledge by decision-makers are needed because rulers’ authority based solely on their status and ethos is not enough to meet the expectations of more educated beneficiaries of policies. New forms of control based on knowledge regulation tools (Salamon, 2002) are also necessary because it is difficult to obtain loyalty from professionals and to monitor their activities when there is an important gap between their mandate and the demands and needs of their clients (Hughes, 1984). This is particularly the case in education, and there is no uniform solution for it through bureaucratic rules as in the past. Thus the new managerial state (Clarke & Newman, 1997; Thrupp & Willmott, 2003) operates through recommendations of best practices and evaluations, that is, through instruments at least partly based on scientific theories and methods.

Although these changes, related to the uses of knowledge, are visible in many European countries, both because of structural similarities between them and because of new pressures from international agencies such as the OECD and supranational entities, especially the European Union, each of them follows a specific path. This dependency path is strongly influenced by intellectual traditions and by how scientific communities in social sciences are organised and financed in each country. It is also strongly affected by political, administrative and professional models that prevail nationally. Using the French case as an example, my purpose here is to show the interplay between past orientations and new developments, in terms of how they shape the conditions of production of educational knowledge and its uses (van Zanten, 2006, 2009).

**From the academic perspective: the pervasive influence of isolation and low status**

Is all knowledge produced by social sciences useful, and should it always be? It is important to distinguish analytically between the interests and ethics of scholars and those of politicians and policy-makers (Weber, 1968). In the first case, the purpose of the pursuit of knowledge is predominantly cognitive. The starting point of the knowledge-seeking process is an intellectual question that arises in connection with the development of a discipline or a field of research. A scholar’s goal is to make the reality more intelligible and his or her ethics is guided by the search for truth. In the second case, the knowledge-seeking process is both cognitive and instrumental, its starting point being a problem faced by decision-makers and its goal being to come up with solutions. That is, the investigation aims not just a better understanding of reality but the provision of possible solutions. In other words, research is being brought into the field of policy and
vice versa for purposes of action and control (Duran, 1999).

The weight of tradition
This distinction might be more relevant in France than elsewhere, if one looks at the mode of production of research knowledge that has long been dominant in this country. Indeed, for intellectual, institutional and political reasons, there has been a long tradition of strongly speculative, rather than empirical, research in social sciences, which has not really encouraged taking into account the issues that policy-makers face. A strong belief in the power of ideas, going back to the writers of the Age of Enlightenment, and the influence of philosophical works very different from those of the German and English pragmatic tradition on social science research encouraged theoretical rather than empirical studies. In addition to that, it is important to note that far from the US model, where since the 1920s, university research has been funded by foundations set up by major private corporations, research in social sciences has developed in France with little external resources, but in the context of greater academic independence vis-à-vis government (Chapoulie, 1991).

Also, because the training of high level professionals – except in the fields of medicine, law and teaching – as well as managers did not and still does not take place at universities, but in the Grandes Ecoles, that is, in a set of selective higher education institutions operating autonomously from universities, few links have been developed with professionals and firms. Consequently, research has been able to keep a considerable distance from economic and social demands of the government, businesses and various pressure groups as well as a strongly critical bent.

This «radical academicism» still has its champions today especially among researchers who worked with Pierre Bourdieu or have been strongly influenced by his writings (Layperonnie, 2004). With regards to education, this is particularly true in the area of research on the social dimensions of education, which is still strongly influenced by Bourdieu, who developed what can be seen as a dissociated model of the researcher-expert. On the one hand, his major analyses on social inequalities in education were conducted from a deterministic and critical approach, relying on a strong separation of the perspectives of researchers and social and political actors, and emphasizing the role of factors beyond the reach of individual actors, such as the social division of labour and cultural classifications embedded in the everyday activities of institutions. On the other hand, he was involved as a policy expert in the work of various committees and in preparation of official reports on the education system without establishing any formal links between these two aspects of his activity (van Zanten, 2005).

Distinguishing myth from reality
There are, thus, various factors that explain the pervasive influence of the ideal type of the «ivory tower» researcher in France. This model is, however, today less a reality than a myth, which is used by some national and international experts and policy-makers, sometimes, in its more modern version of the «blue sky» researcher found in some of the OCDE writings, to undermine the relevance of some types of research. However, instead of this convenient stereotype, the analysis of research publications shows that the development of empirical research in social sciences over the last forty years or so has in fact given rise to much closer links with both social and policy actors. This is particularly true in the area of the sociology of education, which has in turn provoked criticism from radical academics. Poupeau (2003),
for instance, has recently argued that the sociology of education has become a state science borrowing its data and, even worse, its major themes and interpretive categories from those developed by state agents, especially the ones working in the field of evaluation.

Although this claim is largely exaggerated both because its minimizes the maintenance of a critical strand of research and because it overestimates the links between researchers and the administration, it points to an enduring problem concerning education research, that is, its difficulty to conquer an autonomous status. The very definition of education lies at the heart of the problem. This field seems so familiar to most of those involved, to begin with, that the distinction between experts and the profane, which is central in any attempt of achieving professional and scientific autonomy (Hughes, 1984), is not easy to establish, especially, as many education researchers have come from the world of teaching and this affiliation influences their choice of theoretical frameworks and research topics. Moreover, within education sciences themselves, there is little consensus about their status as a field of basic research. This is related above all to the many disciplines involved – philosophy, psychology, didactics, history, sociology, anthropology, economics and so forth – and the differing ways in which each of them conceives of science.

The lack of autonomy and of collective voice is, however, also due to organizational factors. A crucial aspect is the fact that education sciences are absent from the main institution that coordinates research activities in France, that is, the National Center for Scientific Research (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique – CNRS). They are «late comers» to universities, where, despite a first successful attempt by Durkheim and other education specialists at the turn of the 19th century to introduce them for the training of teachers, they did not become an established discipline until the 1970s (Gautherin, 2008).

In addition to that, the lack of a strong disciplinary foundation, the characteristics of students, who are older and less theoretically oriented than those following courses in other human or social sciences, and the failure of the National Institute for Pedagogical Research (Institut National de Recherche Pédagogique – INRP) to coordinate and to disseminate academic and action-oriented studies as well as the limited amount of funding for educational research has contributed to its low status as a scientific field and to its fragmentation (Prost, 2001; van Zanten, 2004b).

From the perspective of policy: controlling knowledge and using it for control

Another enduring characteristic of the French system of relationship between knowledge and policy and a more original one in comparison to other countries concerns the fact that the State encouraged quite early the development of a specific kind of «State science» in different areas, including education, as a means to increase its control over the population and over the institutions created to play a mediating role between central government and civil society. The centralized and standardized nature of the education system has encouraged the emergence of a huge administration, with responsibility for budget, distributing resources and monitoring teachers’ activity (van Zanten, 2004a). This administration has developed a rudimentary «State knowledge» using tools such as maps or statistics to supervise the activities of schools and intermediate units. This kind of knowledge has nevertheless been inseparable from bureaucratic rules that
have been the main organisational means of control. It has also been considered a much less powerful tool for creating and changing professional *habitus* and practices than values, instilled in teacher-training institutions, the Ecoles Normales, that functioned as «total institutions» monitoring and keeping a close watch on all aspects of teacher behaviour (Delsault, 1992) and which have been continuously recalled in official texts and discourses.

The development of educational statistical sciences
State educational sciences developed nevertheless to a much greater extent in the post-war period because the widening participation of students in secondary and, later on, in higher education created new needs for information about the functioning of the educational system and about ways of improving its efficiency, effectiveness and equity. These new needs encouraged the growth of the statistical service of the Ministry of Education, which progressively became the present full-fledged Department of Evaluation, Forward Planning and Performance (Direction de l’Evaluation, de la Prospective et de la Performance – DEPP). Since the 1960s, and in a more acute way, between the late 1980s and the late 1990s, the State agents working in this department have produced important quantitative data and studies on pupils’ achievements, and to a lesser extent, on teachers, schools and education policies.

Three different short phases can be distinguished until 2000. In the first phase, during the 1960s and 1970s, the development of the statistical service and, later, of the statistical department was partly dependent on a few individuals, who had close links with research and acted as a bridge between research knowledge and State knowledge, by importing scientific problematics and working methods into the world of State figures (Seibel, 2004). However, during the 1980s, two factors led to a strong divorce from research. First, the training and professional experience of most of the agents who were progressively recruited was not that of university graduates, at least not up to that of Ph.D. holders, and their previous experience was often not in research, but rather in statistical work in other ministries or in other kinds of administrative work in the ministry of education. Second, the separation was further encouraged by the State’s will to control statistical production. During that second period, statistical studies were conducted using not only endogenous State data, but also endogenous State categories.

Nevertheless, as these studies developed, the statisticians working at the DEPP felt the need to develop more sophisticated analyses and interpretations, and this led them to borrow statistical models and analytical categories from research centres. The relationship between the DEPP and research centres was, however, not one of unilateral, but of mutual dependence, because, at the same time, the DEPP started to play a major role in the definition of the research agenda by funding a great number of research studies. A unit was set up to liaise with researchers in education and training. It developed private arrangements with researchers or worked with them through its involvement in commissioning and financing research projects on topics such as territorial inequalities in education provision or dropping out. However, this closer relationship did not lead to real collaborative work (van Zanten, 2006; Pons, 2008).

Intuition and research in the work of the General Inspectorate
The work of the General Inspectorate (Inspection Générale de l’Education Nationale – IGEN), the other major producer of State knowledge in education in France, has de-
veloped historically in a much larger isolation from research. Its high-level officials, reporting directly to the Minister for Education, draw their professional legitimacy in the field of education from several sources. First of all, their own schooling, marked by success in prestigious competitions, has made them card-carrying representatives of the educational meritocracy. Secondly, their careers, during which they have held various positions, have enabled them to claim that they master all or at least the majority of the issues affecting the education system. Thirdly, their position at the top of the hierarchy and within the institution which, although not comparable to a university, is sufficiently removed from the day-to-day routines of education, has allowed its members to look like «wise men». Fourthly, their national status has enabled them to have an overview of the whole education system. Finally, they contribute to the existence of a body whose members possess knowledge and additional know-how that can be mobilized in various relevant ways depending on the questions asked.

These aspects have, for a long time, been sufficient to underpin in-house capability in respect to the teaching profession and school curricula. Their introspective and intuitive methods of work – for which Pons (2008) has coined the very relevant expression of the art of empirical extrapolation – have been little challenged by researchers until recently because they were not considered as knowledge-seeking processes but as administrative procedures. Since the year 1989, when the IGEN inspectors’ mandate was enlarged to comprise the evaluation of not only teachers, but also of Regional educational units (Academies) and policies (but not of schools which are not evaluated as such in France), they have however increasingly used survey or evaluation protocols, indicators, statistics, service manuals, triangulation procedures and comparisons (Pons, 2004). Although there is still a considerable mistrust towards overly scientific or technical procedures, which supposedly neglect the human factor that only a «wise man» with the above-mentioned skills can bring to interpretation, this has led to the emergence of new tensions and forms of latent competition with researchers, especially with regard to what constitutes a good qualitative perspective on educational research.

It is also very important to note that although both the DEPP and the IGEN have undergone changes – more incremental than revolutionary – in their organisation and work routines, no important changes have taken place in relation to the uses and reception of their work. On the one hand, the evaluative work they produce is still conceived as an instrument for central government much more than for local educational authorities or for teachers. This is attested to by the fact that although the DEPP gives some of its collected data, especially those on pupils’ evaluations and on schools, to local actors, it has not developed new ways of explaining these results to them so that they could use them to improve their practices.

The general principle, initially put forward by one of the best-known DEPP directors, has been that these evaluations should be conceived of as ‘mirrors,’ where local actors can see themselves and proceed to self-correction (Thélot, 1993; Pons, 2004; van Zanten, 2006, 2009). This is still more evident in the case of the IGEN, whose work is prepared for the Minister, who decides whether or not it should be published, again, with no recommendations or follow-up activities for local actors. On the other hand, the Minister, his cabinet and the high education officials, who are both the main commissioners and the main recipients of these evaluations, use them very selectively for purposes of legitimization, control and com-
munication much more than for purposes of changing policy aims, resources or targets.

**Conclusion**

The present situation is still very similar to the one we have just described, but there are important emerging changes linked to pressures both on academic research and on state knowledge. On the one hand, social science research communities, already weak, are being weakened even more by the loss of autonomy. This results from converging decisions, concerning the development of more managerial procedures in universities, the reconfiguration of the National Centre for Scientific Research into small institutes with fewer resources, and the funding of research by a new National Agency for Research (Agence Nationale de la Recherche – ANR) to a larger extent through targeted programmes conceived by committees composed of researchers but also of appointed government agents. On the other hand, there is a strong demand for the production of State knowledge, showing the short-term beneficial results of government programmes and, thus, encouraging a move from the descriptive and partly analytical perspective of previous statistical studies and inspectors’ reports to a much more promotional perspective (Ball, 1997).

These changes might reduce the small degree of interaction between research knowledge and state knowledge that has been developing since the 1980s, when researchers in education started taking more into account the real problems faced by practitioners and policy-makers, and disseminating the results of their work beyond the circle of specialists, and when producers of state knowledge, on their part, started using concepts, procedures and tools from the world of research. It is important however, in order to limit the strong political will to instrument knowledge for purposes of legitimization and of control at a distance of educational processes and actors, that old and new form of cooperation develop between knowledge producers so they are able together to create a common culture around problems and issues faced by politicians, i.e., a space for reflection and dialogue allowing causes to be analysed, alternative solutions to be explored and the consequences for individuals and society to be assessed (van Zanten, 2009).

**Literature**


