Knowledge and Regulation through Quality Assurance. An Analysis[1]

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Abstract. The main point of the article is to explore some of the normative and cognitive dimensions of the standard based regulatory instrument: quality assurance in pre-university education. In methodological terms the article processes sections from case studies and interviews made within the international comparative research, KNOWandPOL. One of the orientations of the project approached the relationship between knowledge and policy through knowledge-based regulatory instruments. Since policies encompass different kinds of knowledge, the focus here was put on the users, street level actors' knowledge, questioning (1) what kind of perceptions and interpretations could the regulation induce, and (2) whether the process of regulation could lead to transformative or paradigmatic learning at users' level. The introductory sections describe the context of the research and of knowledge-based regulatory instruments, while the second chapter discusses the relationship of knowledge, policy and regulation through the presentation of the national political and knowledge context, social mapping in quality assurance together with the normative aspects and cognitive dimensions of regulation. The article argues that knowledge as a process can be tracked in this regulation, but since it lacks synthesis and summaries, the evidence accumulated here cannot generate action, the use of users' knowledge is limited. Since practice has not really brought radical or qualitative changes,

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paradigm shift cannot yet be considered; however, signs of paradigmatic change are visible. Consequently, the tool calls for improvements in order to develop the instrument so that it could strengthen the functional aspects of regulation.

Keywords: knowledge based regulatory instruments, cognitive dimension, paradigm-shift, transformative learning

Introduction

KNOWandPOL[2] is a research project on the role of knowledge in the construction and regulation of education and health policies in Europe. Twelve research teams from eight different countries are engaged in the analysis of sector-based policies in respect of the education and health sectors. The multinational and multilevel project looks at the aspects of knowledge and governance at local, national and international levels. Through the complex set of research the KNOWandPOL project intends to move – both in theoretical and practical terms – towards a sociology of knowledge–policy relation (Delvaux and Mangez, 2008).

The research was organized around three complementary research orientations[3], each of these orientations being already completed. The first section intended to identify the knowledge sphere of decision-making processes. For this reason the research teams mapped the knowledge potentially available to decision makers and traced the relationships between the actors holding or producing knowledge and actors who take the policy decisions[4]. The second orientation served to analyze decision-making processes through public actions (Comaille, 2004). This phase of the research paid special attention to processes of meaning making, understanding and learning. The central issue was the role of knowledge in the complex process of public action, and the aspects of policy learning[5]. The point of departure of orientation three was the growing use of regulatory instruments (Salamon, 2002), consequently the researches focused on the use of knowledge as an instrument of regulation at international and national scenes. Here special attention was paid to the role of knowledge in the fabrication, production and dissemination of the instrument, to the diffusion and use of information by the actors – especially decision-makers – for whom they are intended[6]. The knowledge-based regulatory instruments were interpreted as tools specifically concerned with the diffusion of a particular kind of

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[2] www.knowandpol.eu. The 5 years project started in 2006.
[3] http://www.knowandpol.eu/index.php?id=15
[4] For the research reports of this phase see: http://www.knowandpol.eu/index.php?id=245
[5] For the research reports of this phase see:
 http://www.knowandpol.eu/index.php?id=235&no_cache=1
[6] For the research reports of this phase see: http://www.knowandpol.eu/index.php?id=257

knowledge in order to shape the behaviour of actors at a given policy field (Afonso, Carvalho, Costa, Freeman, Smith-Merry and Sturdy, 2009).

The present paper connects to orientation three, and discusses some aspects of the national knowledge-based regulatory instrument the Romanian education team[7] chose to study: quality assurance in pre-university education. This instrument consists of external school evaluations and internal self-evaluations, the two representing the base for quality assurance. Within these actions the institutional capacity, the efficiency of education and the management of quality at the level of schools are evaluated. All quality assurance procedures function based on standards, taken over from the international level (EU Quality Assurance policies, procedures and guidelines), aligned to national conditions. The two evaluation procedures involving the management of quality (which means the organizational structure managing the activities and processes that satisfy quality requirements) are interconnected between each other. This interconnectedness gives the possibility to get a more exact view on the relationship between knowledge and policy.

The paper focuses on the functioning mechanisms of this regulation, aiming to discover through the experience-based knowledge of the users the impacts of quality assurance procedures. Through this approach we aim to capture the aspects of possible or supposed movements towards a paradigm shift in quality assurance. We assume that the last years' practice started only a kind of paradigmatic change that cannot yet be considered paradigm-shift.

In methodological terms we draw on two main sources: on the interviews conducted with target persons (experts, school inspectors, principals, teachers and so on), and field research (visiting schools to study the perceptions and thinking on the external examination and self-evaluation procedures of quality assurance).

Theoretical context for knowledge-based regulatory instruments

The KNOWandPOL project uses the term 'governance' in the context of knowledge–policy relation. According to the definition of de Boer, Enders and Schimank (2007), the governance perspective means 'the rise of a profound skepticism about the possibilities of hierarchical control of complex social systems' (p. 137). Following this idea the governance perspective is an open analytic tool for the analyses of the state of governance (de Boer et al., 2007; Altrichter, 2010) within a given context. Since educational governances are changing intensively – from 'hard' to 'dual' or soft-governance forms – (Altrichter, 2010), questions of new modes of regulation (Mangez, 2007) and new public management (Hood, 1991) arise. After Mangez (2007) the new modes of regulation combine different levels of power and evolve a growing number of actors, consequently result in

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[7] http://www.knowandpol.eu/index.php?id=55

much more complex relationships between knowledge and policy. The run of multi-actor and multi-level policies is possible where a shift towards new, post-bureaucratic modes of regulation happened or happens. This condition means the terms and possibilities of soft-governance as well. The new modes of regulation emphasize the autonomy of actors and organizations and the relevance of negotiation and persuasion, while they reinforce the key role of knowledge in legitimating the policy making process, achieving thus knowledge-based decision-making (Afonso et al., 2009).

The project distinguishes – according to the Durkheimian approach – between normative and functional regulation. In this context the goal of normative regulation is to ensure commitment to the political system or to a given set of local or professional norms, while the functional regulation is to ensure efficiency and effectiveness (Barroso, Freeman, Ramsdal, Sturdy and van Zanten, 2007). Through the case studies of orientation three the research is seeking – in the case of regulatory instruments under study – to what extent they represent a normative or functional instrument of regulation. Furthermore, the distinction between regulation and self-regulation is also emphasized since the identity of the actor responsible for the regulation is of major importance: regulation is in general carried out directly by the government or by an appointed body, while in case of self-regulation the government allows a social or economic actor to set its own standards and to ensure that they are met (ibid).

The specifications and guidelines of this research phase (Barroso et al., 2007; van Zanten and Ramsdal, 2010) use Salamon's (2002) definition of policy instrument. According to this a regulatory instrument might be a mechanism, object, tool or process which defines, specifies or structures the work of information gathering, planning, coordination, implementation, accounting or evaluation in a given domain of public action. In the case of the national instrument we consider quality assurance rather a mechanism or process, which defines and structures the work of examination and evaluation in educational quality assurance. This instrument gives a push for the actors from the field of education towards consciousness and towards doing something they otherwise might not do (or not in this form). Creating the instrument did not mean a completely new concept and practice at a national level; however the new structure, the renewed concept and the quality assurance based on standards and performance indicators meant novelties in pre-university education. The intention to diffuse a particular kind of knowledge (quality assurance based on standards coming from the international – mostly EU – level as an aspect of Europeanization) and the introduction of a particular kind of action (external school evaluation and internal self-evaluations) is to shape behaviour, consciousness, accountability and education quality management issues at a national level.

According to the literature, qualifications frameworks, quality indicators, standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European education space are partially to solve the challenges which national education systems are facing due to globalization and increased marketization (Cort, 2010). This is particularly prevalent for countries which have just recently joined the EU. These frameworks, indicators and standards frame the perception of how education should be organized and managed. The regulatory instrument is based on values and principles[8], therefore it calls to follow, practice and accomplish them. The international sources of this instrument[9] direct our attention to the possible processes of reception, reinterpretation, translation and adaptation in the context of policy formation. In this case the overall aim is to improve the quality of education corresponding to standards. Standard based quality assurance targets common understanding on issues of quality and the improvement of transparency, comparability and accountability.

In the project the instrument of regulation is understood as a knowledge-based instrument of regulation. Various forms of knowledge are considered here; however, the new, emerging forms of knowledge – representing the results/consequences of mutual conscious or unconscious acts of construction (Ozga, 2010) – are important as well.

Researching knowledge, policy and regulation

The national political and knowledge context

Through the short description of the national political and knowledge context we aim to discuss the most important preconditions for the introduction, operation and development of the standard-based quality assurance system.

The period of 1998–2005 prepared the issue of quality assurance in the Romanian education system, when – due to international trends, pressures of modernization, national developments and EU pre-accession requirements – professional and political discussions came to the forefront. However, the national education context in which the quality assurance policy had developed contained weaknesses and difficulties as well. The national education reforms of the last two decades consisted in series of initiatives and processes where actions were not built consistently one after the other (Rostás, Kósa, Bodó, Fejes and Kiss, 2009). Therefore the diversified efforts did not contribute to achieve consistency within

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[8] See: 'Declaration of Principles' – http://www.edu.ro/index.php/articles/c628/ – and 'Values and Principles of Quality of Education' – http://www.edu.ro/index.php/articles/c627/.
[9] RAQAPE (Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance on Pre-University Education) Strategy for the period 2007-2010, p.3. http://www.edu.ro/index.php/articles/c629/

education. Of course, there have been lots of positive attempts, efforts and plans in education, but the overall picture is quite heterogeneous, mosaic-like and contradictory. In general, reforms and practices are somewhere between rational and random (Crişan, 2008), and there is difference between policy narratives and reality, consequently the gap between policy rhetoric and policy socialization is significant. Since the education system faces unexpected challenges, it gives sudden and accidental reactions and responses. In reforms, successes alternate with stagnation. Due to this the position and role of educational institutions is, as well, uncertain and changing. For all these deficiencies Crişan (2006) mentions the need to move towards the democratization and opening up of the elaboration of education policies, interactive decisional mechanisms, interactive policy learning, definite, coherent and continuous education policies, financial projecting and the moral maintenance of policies.

The importance of these needs is also supported by globalization trends, Europeanization and international regulations. However, the systematic construction is mostly hindered by an important paradox, namely that although there are several discussions, regulations, policies that encourage and accelerate the full-scale reform of the education system, this reform is limited by centralization, since the announced decentralization could not yet happen (Biró, Biró and Kiss, 2010). And there is also a kind of limitation on the part of society as social actors are not yet partners in issues of education; society does not assume responsibility in promoting school and learning. These are the reasons why education reforms are always on agenda.

Furthermore, the national political and knowledge context is also defined by the lack of long term education policy agreement between political parties. This way the priorities settled by the new governments are dominant in every governmental period. Structurally the central administration of education often re-examines the logic of governance, and its priorities are stronger than the governance's priorities. Since decentralization could not yet happen, the chances to move towards soft-regulation and new public management are limited.

In this seemingly negative but real situation most of the actors perceive and discuss these problems. The professional discourses and narratives pay more attention to it. Nevertheless there is no such alliance between educational actors that could result in public action whereupon education policy could exit the political game or could overwrite it in order to professionalize.

Social mapping and antecedents in quality assurance

Establishing the quality assurance system was a process of learning and construction that through translation from the international context and re-constructing the national device turned into a process of shaping and reshaping,

this way providing meaning to the regulatory instrument. Different actors (specialists and experts) and institutional bodies (political and professional) took part in the preparation of the decision. However, introducing this system remained a political decision and act: the efforts to modernization, the pressure coming from the representatives of private education institutions, target persons and experts nominated by the Minister, professional issues approved by the Minister of Education – all served (and serve) the strong political direction (as a matter of fact, control) not only in decision-making, but in the whole practice as well.

The involvement of some professionals (in a very limited number), school inspectors and experts (former external examiners) in the shaping of the instrument shows a macro level network in a process of translation (Callon, 1986). Although there have been different interests and views of groups and individuals that contributed to the social construction of knowledge on quality assurance (theoretical aspects, concepts, content, methodologies), the process of construction of the regulatory instrument could not be a multi-actor process because of the lack of power and alliance between the different actors, and the excessive political control and interest over the tool.

The quality assurance system has its institutional, professional and political antecedents. The first means the former institutions and bodies engaged in quality control and quality assurance at national level; the second refers basically to the EU and OECD documents regarding the quality standards; while the last is connected to the country's EU pre-accession process. From the point of view of knowledge we can say that the social mapping and antecedents show a gradually developing structure and practice, which needed the national political approval defined by the external/international trends. The fabrication of this instrument was – in the first step – a process of reception, but also an adaptation to the international standards, the incorporation of these into the national practice. This intention of harmonizing with the international standards, accepting their effects on the processes within national context, and the intentions for development (especially in the last three years, accelerated with the country's EU accession) is an aspect of Europeanization (Vink, 2003). This instrument considered as knowledge-based regulation tool (KRT) aims to be embedded into the wider national education policy, however, the standard-based quality assurance presents an individual/separate way of action compared with other education regulations; it seems to encompass the national educational evaluation policy.

The normative aspects of regulation

Introducing the quality assurance system at pre-university level happened relatively quickly compared with the general practice of introducing education reforms. According to the interviewees, it was exactly this quickness which caused

the first difficulties actors had to deal with: the lack of knowledge about the institutional framework and the system of quality assurance, about putting theories into practice, and the lack of knowledge regarding practical solutions and general expectations. Since the social debate – that could contribute to the circulation of knowledge – gained only little ground, the introduction of this instrument started with a kind of knowledge deficiency. Though the hierarchical structure of the education system (through the County School Inspectorates) and the given administrative knowledge present in it (routines in managing tasks) the instrument managed to be operated.

The process of evaluation and quality assurance was started during school year 2006–2007. Ever since, the concrete operation of the instrument is represented by two procedures: (1) the external evaluation of pre-university education institutions (especially the particular institutions and those state institutions which start new study programs or specializations), and (2) the internal evaluations (in form of self-evaluations) on the level of each school, in order to assure the management of quality. The two procedures are not exclusively linked, but are neither independent from each other: the internal (self) evaluation is a constant activity at the level of schools, while the external evaluation is its audit. Self-evaluation prepares schools – at the level of documents and practice – for the external evaluation.

The external evaluation of schools takes place in certain school units (mainly private schools) and in those state financed (public) school units which want to introduce new study programmes or specializations. In compliance with the given standards, a committee of 4-6 experts verifies – on the basis of documents and school conditions – whether the school conditions meet the quality requirements (whether the institutional capacity, the efficiency of education and the management of quality meet the standards). In case of negative judgment the institution is given suggestions for development, and after carrying them out can ask for starting the evaluation process over again. This practice aims to ensure that schools function systematically, based on a unified acknowledgment, and it tries to put into practice a normative regulation, which ensures commitment to a set of professional norms, standards. By entering such an evaluation system, some types of schools (state and private schools) and levels of schools (kindergartens, primary schools, high schools, post-lyceums) can contribute to the forming of a unified picture about educational institutions. Consequently it becomes possible to see and understand systematically the institutional capacity, the educational content and the management of quality.

Internal evaluations go parallel with the external evaluation procedures meaning constant action at the level of schools. There are school committees[10] for

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[10] CEQA – Committee for Evaluation and Quality Assurance

this purpose being in charge of all issues related to the quality of education in a given school. These help schools to achieve self-evaluation and to make the results public. Thus it serves the creation of community knowledge and raises the awareness on the school's (community's) goals and plans, serving in the same time the proper functioning of the school. Ideally, actors who are able to be reflexive on their work and critical considering the strengths and weaknesses of the school are willing to work on improvements, consequently in practical terms the management of quality is realized.

The procedures of quality assurance could only start with the involvement of specialists and experts. For this reason it was necessary to enroll/employ experts for external evaluations. Followed by preparation and training, this action tried to familiarize participants with the elaborated materials (concepts and methodologies), in order to form a widely significant knowledge-base. Trainings were part of dissemination, and were offered to school inspectors and teachers. However, trainings were preceded by autonomous and informal learning processes since the lack of necessary knowledge for the procedures of quality assurance resulted in an instrumental learning process (Skogstad, 2007). Training and learning aimed to clear up some notions, to become acquainted with the concepts, and to find answers to the questions of practical utilization. This way the possibility was given for the participants to learn a lot not only from specialists, but also from each other. During training, besides the preparation and practical work, special emphasis was put on particular case studies and situational practices. At the same time training was also a possibility to get in touch with people from other counties and to exchange experience with them, a possibility for interpersonal relations and informal discussions. After the first training it is a permanent task for the County School Inspectorates to continue dissemination, to initiate methodological days and discussions on issues of quality assurance. These institutions are regular partners of school committees, contributing to the knowledge-flow on quality assurance, offering information and consultancy. There is an expressed demand for this, because questions related to concepts or practices arise continuously, and actors permanently call for information to update their knowledge. Furthermore, trainings ensure these actors' role as advisers, which helps legitimating the procedures of quality assurance.

In conclusion we can say that the external and internal school evaluations and the trainings and discussions initiated within this regulation represent a significant knowledge-flow and translation between the different level actors aiming to achieve understanding and a degree of consensus related to this instrument of regulation.

Cognitive dimensions of knowledge and regulation: how the instrument functions

This section gives the snapshot of a few cognitive aspects, discussing important experiences on how the external and internal quality evaluations are perceived, experienced and used by principals and teachers, which are the actors' general reactions and actions, how are the social relations among actors determined, and how the roles and identities of actors change through their involvement in quality assurance procedures.

Reactions

The observation of the experts doing external evaluations is that during school inspections they meet a community, which shows a very sensitive society (the elite schools are characterized by an increased sensitivity), where people are quite sensitive to critics and to evaluative opinion. As one of our interviewees said: '*this* [external evaluation, examination] *is not something we are used to*' (expert, principal). This is why street level actors are offended by the inspections, being hostile towards them. According to one of the experts this reaction is a matter of mentality. Since school communities do not see the added value of education, do not focus on the school performance and are very much engaged in complaints over the unpleasant situation of low performance, it is really hard to achieve developments through quality assurance procedures.

At the end of the external evaluations a general report is written, consisting of three chapters and a summary, which will be made public. This publicity is the reason why sometimes schools are very critical with the experts doing the evaluation. As we found out, the experts are also quite sensitive when they are criticized, the difference being that they need to handle these critical remarks in a flexible way (showing patience, awareness and self-confidence) due to their work and the concept they represent.

The internal practice of evaluation and quality assurance is viewed by several street level actors as a burden, as extra work. Its reception at a local level is rather ambivalent. It is a general experience that these actors define the practice of continuous self-examination and self-evaluation as an extra work that brings no supplementary income and as an obvious burden (especially those who have not chosen but have been given the task). However for the principals and for those who are more deeply involved into the procedures of quality assurance, and are responsible for the successful functioning of the school, this work is considered as a benefit, an added value. It helps to understand the situation of the school, contributes to accountability, serves finding the deficiencies and supports drafting developmental strategies.

As a matter of fact there is a very strong complaint-mechanism functioning on system level, these complaints arise connected to the implementation of new initiatives, policies and tools. Usually there are two reasons: either because the kinds of innovations/initiatives which arise are not coherent with the educational practice, or because there is no appropriate financing/supplementary income that comes with the new tasks. This kind of attitude – the expectations, complaints and outcries – can be explained by the significant amount of administrative work in education and by the low or medium financial allowances. But there are some exaggerated complaints as well. We could discover such problems in connection with procedures of quality assurance as well; however, here the counter-reaction was evoked by the way the central apparatus tried to put quality assurance in practice (forced, obligatory, demanding more paperwork, and obligating uncomfortable, unpleasant external inspections upon schools).

Besides the complaints, there is no real opposition, but rather a constrained acceptance of the practice. Some actors try to protest against being directed from the central level (there is only little local, institutional autonomy regarding the main educational issues), against quality assurance based on standards (they would support the quality assurance principles complied with the different levels of education) and against the inspection of external experts. But this is mostly an individual and passive resistance. Most actors are aware of the fact that they share the same opinion, but there is still no collective and organized action connected to these complaint-narratives.

This situation raises the question whether the actual practical work is accurately and correctly done, or the work is rather perfunctory. For our questions connected to this issue we basically got positive answers. The school inspectors share the opinion that at the beginning one could feel the superficiality concerning the work, but the experiences and practices of the last years helped to change these attitudes. This way, on the level of schools and school committees there are more and more actors who admit the importance of this work, taking it seriously and trying to do the best for the assurance and development of quality. The number of actors directly involved in this work is increasing, but it cannot be completely generalized to teachers, auxiliary staff or social actors.

In cases of authorization, accreditation or periodical monitoring, the documentations of the procedures are sent to the central level (the Ministry) for approval. This generally takes a long time since procedures slow down at this central level, which causes more confusion, discontent and criticism from the part of street level actors. Furthermore, the difficult communication between the different levels contributes to the formation and strengthening of complaint mechanisms coupled with strongstave off mechanisms.

Meaning making

Regarding the regulatory instrument, special emphasis was put – from the beginning – on the sense and use of evaluations, self-evaluations and quality management activities, seeking why these initiatives are important. As one of our interviewee said: '*The use of this regulation is to encourage people to work more and better. To list the negative indicators and to make changes.*' (school inspector) However, the opinion of the street local actors and of those working in the field is divided. There are actors who – based on the experience of the last four years – consider these initiatives to be positive, and there are some very critical views as well, especially when it takes the external inspection. There is a definite knowledge on what the quality of education means: '*it is an issue known by all principals, it is evident, obvious, and it is based on human resources: on the skills and competences of the teachers and on the potentials of the students.*' (principal) This opinion refers to the significant empirical – but somehow lay – knowledge of the street level actors.

It is an issue of reception to see the extent to which the actors concerned with quality assurance (school inspectors, principals, and teachers) understand the use of this regulation. In case when the experts see the school-staff looking for the main principles and conceptions of the school in the documentations, it is obvious for them (who are external observers) that there is no common conception that the school shares. The aim of the documentations and paperwork in quality assurance is to help the actors understand the main principles. Because '*if inside the system people do not understand the reason why things happen in a certain way, then it is very difficult to achieve meeting the standards. It is important to be aware of things, not just to work mechanically. This is about to work consciously with responsibility.*' (principal, expert in external evaluation)

Actions

Regarding street level actions, a form of communication has developed between some schools which discuss between them how they compile some given documents, what proposals they put forward for certain problems, and so on. This was necessary because the new tasks coming from the central institution were different compared with the earlier practices. According to school inspectors this kind of exchange of experiences and communication has a positive effect on the cooperation between schools in a region and on the formation of informal relationships between them.

The external evaluations need to be paid, and the amount of money necessary to this process is considered significant by most actors. This aims to make those working in the field of education aware of the fact that certain educational services have a price, the state cannot cover all expenses and the financial problems of the

school are of community responsibility. However, it is much more important that this situation determines the relationship and cooperation between schools and their maintainers. Our case studies showed remarkable impetus and basically positive courses of negotiation between the parties.

With regard to actions, misunderstandings appear even after the last four years of evaluation. Some schools still mix up the standards of different kinds of evaluations, do not show seriousness in filling the papers, are quite poor in their ideas of quality improvement, take self-evaluation to be a formality, and so on. Based on the evaluation report of the 3rd year[11] the culture of quality management is (still) missing from the national education system.

Proposals and options

Evaluations do not involve sanctioning. The overall aim is to draw attention on the weaknesses and threats, to show that further changes and developments are needed in order to improve the quality of education. Consequently, solutions are advised for schools to follow, suggesting the necessity to engage in learning at school community level. As one of our interviewee said, this means – beyond the critical remarks – a certain kind of security and help in their work. Since more and more street level actors share this opinion, this kind of attitude and act can be interpreted as a sign of a move towards grounding soft-governance in a bureaucratic and still centralized education system.

Experts doing external evaluations can see and understand the situation of schools (and of the education system) more deeply because of the empirical knowledge gathered during inspections. However, the use of this kind of knowledge is limited, sometimes ignored by decisional actors. It cannot always be incorporated in the written expertise, although it is an important type of knowledge regarding both the functioning of the system and the effects of regulation. We may partially consider it tacit knowledge, but it is rather epistemological knowledge about quality assurance. It has a significant potential which could help the better functioning of this regulation and the use of knowledge; however, until now there was no decisional actor interested in it. Since some street level actors formulate – based on their experiences – even solutions for the improvement of the quality assurance system, it seems necessary to engage in the use of this kind of knowledge, because it could serve to bridge the gap between experience and 'great expectations'. These solutions support decentralization, since they suggest more autonomy for the County School Inspectorates and for schools. In this view the Inspectorates know most schools in the given county, so they have the potential to contribute to quality assurance at regional level for example. This might be a solution that would necessitate less financial and human resources, and the

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[11] Activity Report of RAQAPE, 3rd year of functioning, 2007-2008.

delegation of tasks to lower levels would make resolving the problems less difficult. The suggestions also contain messages on how it would be possible to create regional schools (in case of minority education), and to produce high quality education in these schools. Furthermore street level actors differentiate between those who are more deeply involved into this work of quality assurance and those who are less involved. The former are certainly more aware of the benefit of this regulation, and they can better use their experiences for thinking on developments. But all these kinds of potentials have not really been exploited so far.

Regarding future visions, street level actors think that if there will be further changes in development, these will not necessarily affect schools and street level actors in a positive way. Most people are pessimistic; they presume more paperwork, less allowance, complications, and so on. There are fewer street level actors who consider and mention the possible positive future tendencies of quality assurance. In the opinion of some experts, the future of quality assurance depends very much on the political power relations and the general economical (financial) situation; however, intensified street level engagement, consciousness and responsibility in action could lead to self-determination and autonomy at the level of schools. The practice possesses a good chance by itself, but probably the progress of decentralization will significantly motivate schools to compete and to do the management of quality more efficiently.

To sum up: there are different scenes in regulation representing variable knowledge flows and ways of using knowledge. Quality assurance here represents a process in which knowledge, perceptions and practices of the regulator and the regulated co-evolve, and they commonly contribute to the co-construction of reality. The question – as Ozga (2010) mentions – is whether the actors are aware of the work of construction. The ideas from the conclusions will probably illuminate this question.

Conclusions

Through the snapshot on cognitive dimensions we could meet different kinds of knowledge: significant epistemological knowledge – as the result of the work of external and internal evaluations – is present, a great amount of practical empirical knowledge comes into limelight, which is a kind of mixture of lay knowledge (Sturdy, 2008) and tacit knowledge. All these can be considered as the knowledge capital of the local knowledge culture. However, based on the street level actors' lived experiences, the knowledge defined often lacks formal coherence and logical consistency, which limits the use of knowledge. Similarly, the form of regulation – as a central, top-down initiative – gives less space for individual ideas and novel practices, narrowing down the space of instrument and regulation to the usual and routine practices. When it comes to practical realizations, there are reservations –

varying from acceptance and compliance to resistance and opposition –, explicable with the knowledge deficit problem related to the theory and practice of quality assurance. Since this regulation lacks synthesis and summaries, the evidence accumulated here cannot generate action. Although the developmental suggestions given to each school determine the individual perceptions and actions, and promote shared responsibility in the improvement of the school, in overall it is not the experience-based knowledge of the street level actors that governs this regulation.

The different scenes give the general impression that the standard-based quality assurance initiated is considered meaningful, while objective obstacles determine the more ideal use of knowledge in the process of regulation. In spite of the significant investments into financial and human resources, our experience is that at the most important level – among schools and teachers – the concept and practice has not really brought radical changes. This way the practice could not change or transform so far. But the street level practice of the last years contributed largely to the beginning of a paradigmatic change, which cannot yet be considered a paradigm shift, as it has not yet caused a qualitative change in attitude even in the most open and active actors. So, the promotion and support of self-reflection and self-evaluation would be much more useful, as there is a need of deeper recognition and awareness on the level of street level actors. Building on the positive aspects and best practices, we can say that the regulation tool has partially reached its aim, but it could not use its full/complex potential. The narratives and discourses connected to the quality of education let us conclude that in the concept of quality there is more, consequently 'a comprehensive understanding of the complex nature of education quality in schools' is needed (Cheng and Tam, 1997). For this reason systematic conceptions on school development and quality improvement that could contribute to paradigmatic learning within actors are welcome.

Because of this explicit need and necessity we can say that the regulatory instrument represents much more a normative than a functional regulation. It ensures commitment to a set of standardized professional norms, objectifying in methodological guidelines, trainings, deontological codes, standards; the procedures of evaluation give less arguments on aspects of functional regulation: the supposed results on efficiency and effectiveness are not yet clearly visible. Consequently, the results so far call for action and improvements of the managers of regulation that should integrate and use the users' knowledge, the experience-based knowledge of street level actors in order to induce a paradigm-shift, and to develop the instrument so that it could strengthen the functional aspects of regulation.

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