

ÍRIS SANTOS

# Externalisations in the Portuguese Parliament and Print Media

A complexity approach to  
education policymaking  
processes



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ACADEMIC DISSERTATION

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Íris Santos, October 2021



# ABSTRACT

This doctoral dissertation presents an analysis of the complex dynamics emerging from the interactions between global, national, and local actors in policymaking processes in Portugal. It takes the stance of earlier research analysing policy transfer, borrowing, and lending in taking ‘the process of globalisation for granted’ (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004, p. 4) with a context-focused perspective. This line of research recognises the importance of local features and societal conditions, and that at the national and local levels global trends are received, interpreted, and used in very diverse ways (e.g. the authors in the book edited by Steiner-Khamsi & Waldow, 2012). Bearing this integration of international elements in local policy processes in mind, this dissertation analyses how references to international organisations (such as the OECD), their tools of assessment and guidance (such as PISA), and practices of other countries are used in discussions of education in Portugal.

I apply qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2014), rhetorical analysis (Edwards et al., 2004; Leach, 2011), and frame analysis (Entman, 1993) as my research methods, and use the complexity thinking approach as my onto-epistemological background to enable the construction of a theoretical framework composed by several theories to analyse references to international elements (externalisation) in local policymaking processes: the multiple streams approach (Kingdon, 2003), the epistemic governance framework (Alasuutari & Qadir, 2019), and thematisation theory (Saperas, 1987; Luhmann, 1996; Pissarra Esteves, 2016). These theories share an understanding of social systems and the processes within them as complex and non-linear (Capano, 2009, p. 8). Complexity thinking incorporates a vast array of theories and concepts from diverse research disciplines, enabling an examination of the interactions and dynamics between the elements of a system to understand the complexities that are manifested at the system level (Cilliers, 1998, pp. 2–3).

Portugal is the context of this study for two main reasons. First, a broad analysis of the uses of international references in education discussions remains scarce and is non-existent regarding the Portuguese parliamentary context. In addition, I found it interesting that, unlike the many other countries and regions already analysed in previous research, PISA and its results were not incorporated in education discussions until later rounds of the survey (after 2005), which led me to wonder if

other international elements were used by political and social actors in education discussions, what they were, and why they were chosen. More specifically, I focus on the context of the Portuguese parliamentary debates and print media articles within the timeframe of 2001–2018, because a) parliament, and more specifically its plenary debates, are the main context for policy actors to perform for their policy opponents and the wider national audience (Ilie, 2017), they are open access through parliament’s diary, and they are broadcast on a TV channel; and b) the media is the main venue for citizens to inform themselves about what is happening in the world. The media brings policy issues and a sense that they need to be addressed to the public, influencing public opinion (Luhmann, 1996). The analysis of parliament and the media is complementary, providing a more thorough understanding of the functions of externalisations in education policy discussions in Portugal.

I reached several intertwined conclusions from the various layers of analysis. The selection of the international elements used in education policy discussions is influenced by several factors, which are largely context-related, as initially suggested by Schriewer (1990) in his *externalisation to world situations* thesis. These factors tend to emerge from the national or local *socio-logic*: externalisations are contingent on national and local historical paths, and the interactions and selections of political and social actors. Furthermore, the epistemic work (Alasuutari & Qadir, 2019) developed by the actors involved in policy processes leads to emerging needs for authoritative elements to strengthen their arguments and sustain appeals to the audiences’ reasoning and emotions, which may change their understandings and decisions. References to international elements bring such authoritative elements to the discussions, as these elements can be used as knowledge and evidence claims, allowing the depoliticisation of the themes being discussed. However, to be useful, international elements must be considered authoritative by the audiences the speaker is addressing. Hence, political and social actors need to constantly observe their audiences and make assumptions about what they think are the major issues that need to be fixed, which entities or institutions are perceived as helping to address the relevant issue, and what the audiences understand to be desired outcomes. Externalisations to international elements are therefore important tools of (de-)legitimation used by political and social actors involved in policy processes. They are used in attempts to manage the contingency of the policy process and thus reduce the process’s complexity, with the aim of initiating social change.

This dissertation offers theoretical and empirical contributions to advance knowledge in the fields of comparative education and policy studies. The applied methodological approach brings to light patterns of externalisation that unveil the

complexities of both the policy process and the flows of global-national-local interrelations by investigating multiple facets of actors' interactions beyond 'facts, figures and stable (causal) relations' (Teisman & Klijn, 2008, p. 288). More specifically, this multifaceted analysis expands our understanding of the societal features that can lead to the need to use international elements as sources of authority, and what makes these sources authoritative.

The theoretical and methodological pluralism that I adopt in this study also contributes to ongoing research work (e.g. Zahariadis, 1998; Howlett et al., 2016) attempting to demonstrate that methods and theories of different research fields can benefit from being aggregated. Besides theoretically advancing each of the theories used, the combination of complexity thinking with externalisation to world situations, the multiple streams approach, the epistemic governance framework, thematisation theory, and some insights from Luhmann's theory of social systems sheds light on the policy process from various complementary perspectives, leading to a well-informed understanding of policy processes, and the interactions between the global and local actors within them.

# RESUMO

Esta dissertação apresenta uma análise das dinâmicas complexas emergentes das interações entre atores globais, nacionais e locais nos processos políticos em Portugal. O estudo surge na linha de pesquisas anteriores que, embora considerem 'o processo de globalização como garantido' (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004. P. 4), reconhecem a importância das características e condições sociais locais, tais como investigadores que analisam a transferência e empréstimo de políticas. Estes autores entendem que as tendências globais são recebidas, interpretadas e usadas a nível local de maneiras muito diversificadas (ex.: Steiner-Khamsi & Waldow, 2012). Tendo presente essa articulação de elementos internacionais nos processos políticos locais, analiso a forma como são feitas as referências a organizações internacionais (ex.: OCDE), às suas ferramentas de avaliação e orientação (ex.: PISA), e às práticas de outros países nas discussões sobre educação em Portugal.

Como métodos de investigação aplico a análise de conteúdo qualitativa (Schreier, 2014), a análise de retórica (Edwards et al., 2004; Leach, 2011) e a análise de quadros, (Entman, 1993); partindo da abordagem do pensamento da complexidade enquanto fundo onto-epistemológico na construção de um quadro teórico composto por diversas lentes com vista a analisar as referências a elementos internacionais em processos de formulação de políticas educativas: a abordagem dos fluxos múltiplos (Kingdon, 2003), a abordagem da governação epistémica (Alasuutari & Qadir, 2019) e a teoria da tematização (Saperas, 1987; Luhmann, 1996; Pissarra Esteves, 2016). O pensamento da complexidade é composto por diversas teorias e conceitos pertencentes a disciplinas distintas. Teve origem nas ciências naturais e expandiu-se amplamente com o desenvolvimento das ciências computacionais, alargando-se posteriormente às ciências sociais (Morrison 2006; Cairney et al., 2019). O pensamento da complexidade 'estuda o comportamento de sistemas que se consistem num grande número de componentes em interação que interagem e se adaptam aos seus ambientes, levando a comportamentos emergentes' (Erat & Luqmani, 2017, p. 2). O pensamento da complexidade oferece um caminho que, embora não seja novo (Morrison, 2006), difere das 'ciências da certeza' (Stacey, 2010, citado em Bates, 2016, pp. 22-25), permitindo observar as interações e dinâmicas

entre os elementos de um sistema para compreender as complexidades que se manifestam ao nível do sistema (Cilliers, 2002, p.2).

As três teorias utilizadas partilham uma visão dos sistemas sociais e dos processos dentro deles como sendo complexos e não lineares (Capano, 2009). A combinação dessas teorias permite uma investigação mais profunda das condições sociais que não só fazem referências a elementos internacionais necessários, mas também ao modo como estes são selecionados, às razões pelas quais são considerados fontes de autoridade e como são usados em discussões sobre educação.

A abordagem dos fluxos múltiplos (Artigo II), desenvolvida por Kingdon (2003), descreve o processo político como envolvendo cinco elementos essenciais: três fluxos independentes (política, problemas e políticas), janelas de oportunidade política e empreendedores políticos. O fluxo político refere-se ao contexto do processo político, o fluxo do problema é constituído por situações construídas como problemas, o fluxo das políticas refere-se às diferentes soluções apresentadas. As janelas de oportunidade política traduzem-se nos momentos em que os três fluxos se combinam e os atores políticos têm maior probabilidade de ser bem-sucedidos em chamar a atenção para as suas propostas. Os empreendedores políticos identificam janelas de oportunidade política e tentam combinar os três fluxos, apresentando soluções aos atores políticos (Kingdon, 2003). A abordagem dos fluxos múltiplos fornece uma ferramenta teórica eficaz na análise das dinâmicas de elaboração de políticas e na compreensão do modo como atores no parlamento português referenciam elementos internacionais dentro de cada um destes fluxos com o objetivo de abrir janelas de oportunidade política em educação.

A abordagem da governação epistémica (Artigo III) (Alasuutari e Qadir, 2019), analisa as mudanças sociais nas sociedades modernas, constituindo uma camada analítica adicional no estudo do modo como o poder é desenvolvido e administrado, analisando a dinâmica da governação e da formulação de políticas (Alasuutari e Qadir, 2019). Na análise apresentada utilizo esta abordagem para explorar externalizações como um recurso de ‘capital epistémico’, um banco de elementos com autoridade utilizados por atores sociais e políticos em argumentos que têm por objetivo persuadir as audiências da (des)adequação de uma ideia ou proposta políticas na resolução de problemas específicos, apelando ao raciocínio, desejos e emoções do público. Essa abordagem é especialmente útil na investigação das razões pelas quais os atores parlamentares escolhem certos elementos internacionais em momentos específicos, a identificação dos fatores contextuais que afetam essas escolhas e a forma como estes elementos são utilizados em argumentos políticos.

A teoria da tematização (Artigo IV), desenvolvida por Luhmann como parte da sua teoria dos sistemas sociais, analisa a forma como o sistema dos media, tal como outros sistemas sociais, é operacionalmente fechado, auto-organizado e autopoiético – e, portanto, autónomo [dentro dos limites da aceitabilidade pública] – no que seleciona como tema de comunicação (Luhmann, 1996). Apesar do seu clausura operacional, a seleção de temas pelos media funciona como uma externalização do sistema mediático para além das suas fronteiras, permitindo a sua interligação com o seu ambiente ou outros sistemas (Luhmann, 1996). Segundo Luhmann (1996), eventos fora do sistema dos media tornam-se irritações ao nível do sistema que este tenta processar enquanto prepara a sociedade para constantes novidades. Nesta dissertação utilizo a teoria da tematização para analisar as externalizações para elementos internacionais (Schriever, 1990) nas discussões sobre educação na imprensa escrita portuguesa.

Portugal é o contexto deste estudo por duas razões principais: a) uma análise abrangente da utilização de referências internacionais nas discussões sobre educação continua a ser escassa e é inexistente no contexto parlamentar; b) considere interessante que, ao contrário de muitos outros países e regiões, o PISA e seus resultados não foram incorporados nas discussões sobre educação no parlamento até 2005, o que me levou a questionar se outros elementos internacionais foram usados nas discussões sobre educação, quais e por que foram escolhidos. Foco-me nos debates parlamentares em plenário e em artigos da imprensa escrita porque a) os debates em plenário, são o principal contexto para os atores políticos tentarem influenciar quer os seus oponentes políticos, quer o público em geral (Ilie, 2017) já que são de acesso aberto; e b) os media são o principal meio para os cidadãos se informarem sobre o que acontece no mundo. Os media apresentam ao público questões políticas e enfatizam a necessidade que há em discuti-las, influenciando desta forma, a opinião pública (Luhmann, 1996). A análise do parlamento e dos media permitem uma compreensão mais aprofundada das funções de externalizações nas discussões sobre educação em Portugal.

As diferentes camadas de análise desenvolvidas, levaram a várias conclusões interdependentes. A seleção dos elementos internacionais usados nas discussões das políticas educacionais é influenciada por diversos fatores, maioritariamente relacionados com o contexto local. Tais fatores tendem a emergir da sócio-lógica (Schriever, 1990) local: as externalizações são contingentes da história nacional e local e das interações e seleções dos atores políticos e sociais. O trabalho epistémico (Alasuutari & Qadir, 2019) desenvolvido pelos atores envolvidos nos processos políticos levam à necessidade de elementos com (ou dotados de) autoridade para

fortalecer argumentos e apelos à razão e emoções do público, o que pode eventualmente alterar pontos de vista e decisões. Referências a elementos internacionais trazem este tipo de autoridade para as discussões, uma vez que elementos os mesmos podem ser usados como alegações de conhecimento e evidência, permitindo a despolitização dos temas discutidos. Contudo, para serem úteis, os elementos internacionais devem ser considerados dotados de autoridade pelas audiências. Conseqüentemente, os atores políticos e sociais precisam de fazer suposições e observar cuidadosamente as suas audiências de modo a identificar os problemas que necessitam ser resolvidos; as entidades ou instituições potencialmente capazes de resolver o problema em questão; e os resultados esperados pelas audiências. As externalizações para elementos internacionais são, portanto, importantes ferramentas de (des)legitimação utilizadas pelos atores envolvidos em processos políticos. Elas são usadas na tentativa de gerir a contingência do processo político reduzindo, conseqüentemente, a complexidade do mesmo.

Esta dissertação oferece contribuições teóricas e empíricas para o avanço do conhecimento nos campos da educação comparada e dos estudos políticos. A abordagem metodológica aplicada identifica padrões de externalização que podem revelar complexidades quer no processo político quer nas interações entre os níveis global – nacional – local dentro destes processos, através de uma análise multifacetada, além de “factos, números e relações (causais) estáveis” (Teisman & Klijn, 2008, p. 288). Mais especificamente, esta análise amplia a compreensão sobre as características sociais que podem conduzir à necessidade de usar elementos internacionais como fontes de autoridade e o que torna essas fontes autoritárias.

O pluralismo teórico e metodológico aplicado neste estudo, contribui igualmente para a investigação (ex.: Zahariadis, 1998; Howlett et al., 2016) que procura demonstrar que a agregação de métodos e teorias de diferentes campos pode ser benéfica. Além de avançar cada uma das teorias utilizadas, a combinação do pensamento da complexidade com externalização às situações mundiais, abordagem dos fluxos múltiplos, abordagem da governação epistêmica, teoria de tematização e alguns conceitos da teoria dos sistemas sociais de Luhmann, leva a uma compreensão mais bem informada dos processos políticos e das interações entre atores globais e locais dentro dos mesmos.

# TIIVISTELMÄ

Väitöskirjatutkimukseni tarkastelee globaalien, kansallisten ja paikallisten toimijoiden kompleksista dynamiikkaa Portugalin poliittisessa päätöksenteossa. Aiempien politiikan liikkumista ja lainaamista tarkastelevien tutkimusten tavoin, tutkimus ottaa globalisaation prosessin lähtökohdakseen (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004, s. 4) ja sitoutuu samalla kontekstisidonnaiseen näkökulmaan. Kontekstisidonnainen näkökulma painottaa paikallisten ja yhteiskunnallisten tekijöiden merkitystä sekä sitä, että kansallisella ja paikallisella tasolla globaaleja trendejä otetaan vastaan, tulkitaan ja sovelletaan monin eri tavoin (esim. kirjoittajat teoksessa Steiner-Khamsi & Waldow, 2012). Väitöstutkimus tarkastelee sitä, miten kansainvälisiin organisaatioihin (kuten OECD:hen), kansainvälisten organisaatioiden toteuttamiin arvioinnin ja ohjauksen välineisiin (kuten PISA) sekä muiden maiden käytäntöihin viitataan Portugalin poliittisessa koulutuskeskustelussa.

Tutkimuksen menetelmät ovat laadullinen sisällönanalyysi (Schreier, 2014), retoriikan analyysi (Edwards ym., 2004; Leach 2011) sekä kehysanalyysi (frame analysis, Entman, 1993). Epistemologisena ja ontologisena lähtökohtana on kompleksisuusajattelu, mikä mahdollistaa uuden teoreettisen viitekehysten rakentamisen aikaisempien kansainvälisiin ilmiöihin viittaamista (eksternalisaatio, externalisation) paikallisesti tarkastelevien teorioiden pohjalta. Näitä keskeisiä teorioita ovat multiple streams approach (Kingdon, 2003), episteemisen hallinnan viitekehys (Alasuutari & Qadir 2019) ja tematisoinnin teoria (Saperas, 1987; Luhmann, 1996; Pissarra Esteves, 2016). Edellä mainitut teoriat jakavat ymmärryksen sosiaalisten systeemien ja niiden sisäisten prosessien kompleksisuudesta ja epälineaarisuudesta (Capano, 2009, s. 8). Kompleksisuusajattelu pitääkin sisällään laajasti useita eri teorioita ja käsitteitä monilta eri tieteenaloilta, mahdollistaen systeemeissä ja systeemien välisessä vuorovaikutuksessa ilmenevän kompleksisuuden ja dynamiikan tarkastelun (Cilliers, 1998, s. 2–3).

Tutkimukseni kohteena on Portugali kahdesta keskeisestä syystä. Ensinnäkin analyysia ei ole kattavasti aiemmin tehty siitä, miten Portugalin parlamentissa vedotaan kansainvälisiin ilmiöihin osana koulutuspoliittista keskustelua. Toiseksi, poiketen muista maista, Portugalissa PISA-tuloksiin vedottiin koulutuspoliittisessa



keskustelussa verrattain myöhään (vuoden 2005 jälkeen), mikä johti pohtimaan, mihin kansainvälisiin ilmiöihin poliittiset ja yhteiskunnalliset toimijat ovat viitanneet, mitä nämä kohteet ovat olleet ja miksi juuri ne on valittu. Tutkimukseni tarkentuu Portugalin parlamentin väittelyihin sekä sanomalehtiartikkeleihin vuosilta 2001–2018. Parlamentti ja sen pääistunnot ovat keskeinen areena poliittisille toimijoille vaikuttaa poliittisiin vastustajiin ja laajempaan kansalliseen yleisöön (Ilie, 2017). Parlamentin väittelyihin on avoin pääsy ja ne ovat nähtävissä televisiolähetyksinä. Media on puolestaan pääkanava kansalaisille saada tietoa maailman tapahtumista. Media myös välittää kansalaisille poliittisia kysymyksenasetteluita sekä sitä, että ne ovat jotain mihin tulee reagoida, vaikuttaen edelleen yleiseen mielipiteeseen (Luhmann, 1996). Parlamentin ja median rinnakkainen analyysi tarjoaa kattavan ja perusteellisen ymmärryksen siitä, miten Portugalissa vedotaan kansainvälisiin ilmiöihin osana koulutuspoliittista keskustelua.

Analyysini pohjalta päädyin useisiin, toisiinsa limittyneisiin johtopäätöksiin. Ensinnäkin ulkoiset kontekstisidonnaiset tekijät vaikuttavat siihen, miten ja missä määrin kansainvälisiin ilmiöihin vedotaan – tämä tukee Schriewerin (1990) esittämää ajatusta eksternalisaatioita (externalisations to world situations). Nämä ulkoiset kontekstisidonnaiset tekijät selittyvät kansallisen ja paikallisen tason sosio-logiikasta: eksternalisaatio on kontingenttia suhteessa kansalliseen ja paikalliseen historiaan sekä poliittisten ja yhteiskunnallisten toimijoiden vuorovaikutukseen ja valintoihin. Tämän lisäksi poliittiseen päätöksentekoprosessiin kiinnittyneiden toimijoiden episteeminen työ (Alasutari & Qadir, 2019) tuottaa tarpeen vahvistaa omia argumenttejaan arvovaltaisilla lähteillä. Tämä taas mahdollistaa yleisön järkeen ja tunteisiin vetoamisen, mikä voi edelleen muuttaa asioiden merkityksiä ja jo tehtyjä päätöksiä. Vedotessaan kansainvälisiin ilmiöihin arvovaltaisena tietona ja näyttönä, erilaisia teemoja epäpolitisoidaan. Toisaalta, jotta viittaukset kansainväliseen kontekstiin ovat uskottavia ja vakuuttavia, yleisön tulee pitää kansainvälistä kontekstia vartenotettavana. Tästä johtuen poliittisten ja yhteiskunnallisten toimijoiden tulee alati tarkkailla yleisöä ja tehdä oletuksia siitä, mitkä ongelmat yleisön mielestä kaipaavat ratkaisuja, mitkä entiteetit tai instituutiot nähdään tarpeellisiksi tilanteen ratkaisemiselle, ja mitä pidetään toivottuna lopputuloksena. Kansainvälisiin ilmiöihin vetoaminen on siis tärkeä (de)legitimoinnin työkalu, jota poliittiset ja yhteiskunnalliset toimijat käyttävät poliittisen päätöksenteon prosesseissa. Pyrkimyksissä yhteiskunnalliseen muutokseen, vetoamista kansainvälisiin ilmiöihin käytetään myös keinona hallita poliittisen päätöksenteon kontingenttia luonnetta sekä vähentää itse prosessin kompleksisuutta.

Väitöskirjatutkimukseni tarjoaa teoreettisen ja empiirisen kontribuution vertailevan koulutuksen sekä koulutuspoliittisen tutkimuksen kentille. Tutkimuksessa sovellettu metodologia, jonka keskiössä on vuorovaikutuksen tarkastelu eri tulokulmista faktojen, lukujen ja staattisten syysuhteiden ulkopuolella (Teisman & Klijn, 2008, s. 288), tuo näkyville kansainvälisiin ilmiöihin vetoamiseen liittyviä piirteitä. Näiden piirteiden avulla voimme paremmin ymmärtää sekä poliittiseen prosessin että globaalin, kansallisen ja paikallisen tason kompleksisuutta ja yhteen kietoutuneisuutta. Tekemäni monesta eri tulokulmasta lähestyvä analyysi lisää ymmärrystä yhteiskunnallisesta ja sosiaalisesta kontekstista, jossa kansainvälisistä ilmiöistä rakennetaan jotain, johon vedotaan auktoriteettina.

Tutkimukseni teoreettinen ja metodologinen pluralismi tuo osallistuu tutkimukselliseen työhön (esim. Zahariadis, 1998, Howlett ym., 2016), jossa pyritään nostamaan esille eri tutkimusalojen menetelmien ja teorioiden yhteensovittamisen hyötyjä. Teorioiden kehittämisen lisäksi kompleksisuusajattelun yhdistäminen eksternalisaation teoriaan, multiple streams -lähestymistapaan, episteemisen hallinnan teoriaan, tematisaation teoriaan sekä Luhmannin systeemitteoriaan valottaa poliittisen päätöksenteon prosessia erilaisista, toisiaan tukevista näkökulmista. Tämä johtaa tarkempaan ymmärrykseen poliittisen päätöksenteon prosesseista sekä globaalin ja paikallisten toimijoiden vuorovaikutuksesta osana näitä prosesseja.

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# ABBREVIATIONS

EU	European Union
ILSA	International large-scale assessment
KnowandPol	Knowledge and Policy in education and health sectors
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
PISA	Programme of International Student Assessment
TCuPS	Tampere Research Group of Cultural and Political Sociology
TIMSS	Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study

## ORIGINAL PUBLICATIONS

Publication I - Santos, Í., & Centeno, V. G. (2021). Inspirations from Abroad: The Impact of PISA on the choice of Reference Societies in Education. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*. DOI: 10.1080/03057925.2021.1906206

Publication II - Santos, Í., & Kauko, J. (2020). Externalisations in the Portuguese parliament: analysing power struggles and (de-)legitimation with multiple streams approach. *Journal of Education Policy*. DOI: 10.1080/02680939.2020.1784465

Publication III - Santos, Í. (2021). Epistemic work in Portuguese parliamentary education debates: Externalisation to world situations as a source of epistemic capital. *European Educational Research Journal*. DOI: 10.1177/1474904121990474

Publication IV - Santos, Í., Carvalho, L. M., & Melo, B. P. (2022). The media's role in shaping public opinion on education: A thematic and frame analysis of externalisation to world situations in the Portuguese media. *Research in Comparative and International Education*, 17(1), 29-50. DOI: 10.1177/1745499921105775317





# 1 INTRODUCTION

The interconnectedness of the social world blurs the physical territorial borders that define countries and regions. This does not mean the end of nation states as such, but rather the inclusion of an additional realm that is broader and accommodates the global and transnational dimensions (Rizvi & Lingard, 2000; Lingard & Sellar, 2014). Since World War II this has happened not only due to the movement of people, but more importantly, due to the modernisation of industry, the intensification of the international flow of products and capital movements, the development of scientific knowledge and information and communication technologies, and the emergence and consolidation of international organisations (see Tilly, 2004, pp. 13–17), which have led to a significant increase of travel and the exchange of ideas and practices.

This growing interconnectedness of the social world leads to an increase of the complexity of modern societies, which, analogically to the biological systems, can be described as a ‘systems of systems’ (Jacob, 1974, cited in, Trewavas, 2006). Modern societies are therefore composed of many systems (themselves often complex): economic; legal; health; education; and so on. These systems, although worldwide, are locally organised within blurred territorial borders in which processes such as policymaking occur more intensively, within a country or boarder region, for example. In this study I depart from the view of modern societies as complex systems constituted by smaller ones, which in their turn contain different organisations or communities that are themselves also systems. A system is here understood as ‘self-organizing and display emergent properties which cannot be traced to the behaviour of the individual agents alone.’ (Klijn, 2008, p. 302).

The complexity of the social world is in this sense also observable in the political system and in the policymaking processes within this system. These processes involve intricate levels, organisations, and communities, and various actors from the global to the local contexts, including the state and well beyond it, with diverse and often opposed interests and preferences (Sabatier, 2007; Cairney et al., 2019). All these features of policymaking make the process highly ambiguous and uncertain. In this study I align with previous research (e.g. Teisman & Klijn, 2008; Sanderson, 2009; Osberg & Biesta, 2010; Kauko, 2014; Bates, 2016; Cairney & Geyer, 2017; Cairney, 2012; 2019; Cairney et al., 2019) in adopting a complex systems thinking

approach to the analysis of the political system, and more precisely to the study of education policymaking processes. The main benefit of using a complexity approach is that ‘in addition to the well-established analyses of facts, figures and stable (causal) relations’, complexity thinking ‘focuses on storylines through time, different from place to place and evolving in an often surprising way’ (Teisman & Klijn, 2008, p. 288). In this sense, I emphasise the importance of analysing the local<sup>1</sup> (be it national or regional) context, and how the interactions among local actors (be they individuals or a collective such as communities and organisations – for example, political parties) involved in education policy discussions<sup>2</sup> and between these and global actors unfold over time. Thus, in this study I take complexity as an ontological and epistemological premise not only as a way to understand and describe the policy process, but also to facilitate the articulation of different theories and concepts utilised in the analysis of Portuguese education policymaking processes.

This dissertation studies how references to international elements are made part of the national processes of education policymaking. The concept of reference to international elements broadens the understanding of ‘externalisations to world situations’ (Schriewer, 1990), including international actors such as international organisations, their assessment tools and guidance or practices of other countries (reference societies<sup>3</sup>). This analysis unfolds along four articles published in scientific journals in the education and education policy field. These articles serve as basis for the dissertation presented in this document: one systematic literature review on the effects of PISA (Programme of International Student Assessment) results on the choice of the reference societies used in specific countries or regions (Article 1); two articles on the analysis of the uses of international elements in the discussions of education in the Portuguese parliament (Articles II and III), and one article on the use of international elements in the media discussions about education after the launch of each PISA cycle’s results (further details are found in Sections 5 and 6).

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<sup>1</sup> The term ‘local’ is often preferred in the context of this study, because it helps bring the idea to the fore that policy processes involve a diversity of actors at different community levels. Thus, the idea that although policy processes occur mainly within the political system inside national borders, this system interlaces with other systems and is composed of smaller ones, meaning communities and organisations – for example, political parties, stakeholders, civil society, unions, etc.

<sup>2</sup> The use of the term ‘discussion’ in this integrative chapter is in line with the definition presented by *Oxford Lexico* (found in <https://www.lexico.com/definition/discussion>). Thus, ‘discussion’ is ‘the action or process of talking about something in order to reach a decision or to exchange ideas’, ‘a conversation or debate about a specific topic’, and ‘a detailed treatment of a topic in speech and writing’.

<sup>3</sup> Concept explained in Section 2.1

## 1.1 The research questions, aims, and theoretical and contextual backgrounds

Broadly speaking, in this study I aim to expand the understanding of the intricate and dynamic entanglements of relations between the global and national or local levels of actors within Portuguese education policymaking processes. In other words, I seek to shed light on how the interactions between the actors involved in education policymaking can lead to emergent often unexpected behaviour at the system level. I specifically focus on understanding why and how references to international elements become necessary and are used as authoritative tools of (de-)legitimation in the discussions of education in Portugal. To fulfil this main aim, I construct four smaller questions (hereafter referred to as sub-questions) that guide the investigation of the data as presented in each of this dissertation's articles. In turn, the answers to these sub-questions (SQ1–SQ4) help in answering the main research questions Q1 and Q2 (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Research questions and sub-questions

<b>Research questions (Q1–Q3) and sub-questions (SQ1–SQ4)</b>
<p><b>Q1</b> – <i>What factors influence the selection of international elements used in the discussion of education?</i></p> <p><b>Q2</b> – <i>How are international elements used in discussions of education in the Portuguese parliament and print media?</i></p>
<p><b>SQ1</b> – <i>How does PISA affect countries' choice of reference societies used in education policy? (Article I)</i></p> <p><b>SQ2</b> – <i>What, why and how are external references used in the Portuguese parliamentary discussions on education? (Article II)</i></p> <p><b>SQ3</b> – <i>How are references to world situations used as epistemic capital in the Portuguese parliamentary education debates (2001–2018)? (Article III)</i></p> <p><b>SQ4</b> – <i>How does the media in Portugal utilise external references in the thematisation and framing of education after each PISA cycle's results are published? (Article IV)</i></p>
<p><b>Q3</b> – <i>How do multiple theoretical perspectives contribute to understanding the use of externalisations to international elements in education policy processes?</i></p>

**SQ1** – ‘How does PISA affect countries’ choice of reference societies used in education policy?’ – was explored in Article I. It consists of a systematic literature review in which the focus of the analysis is on identifying how PISA affects (or not) the selection of reference societies used in education discussions in diverse contexts, and what other factors may influence these selections. Articles II–IV also share the aim of contributing to the body of research focusing on which countries or regions become reference societies, and what contributes to this selection, by analysing the Portuguese selection and use of reference societies (as will be presented in Sections 6 and 7).

Sub-question **SQ2** – ‘What, why and how are external references used in the Portuguese parliamentary discussions on education?’ – guides the analysis presented in Article II. This is the first article reporting on the exploration of the Portuguese data, more specifically, parliamentary debates. The qualitative content analysis conducted focuses first on the identification of all the international elements used in the Portuguese parliamentary education debates, and second on identifying their function in the debate and their tone of use, exploring how they become a tool of (de-)legitimation in policymaking and power struggles among diverse political forces.

Sub-question **SQ3** – ‘How are references to world situations used as epistemic capital in the Portuguese parliamentary education debates (2001–2018)?’ – is presented in Article III. It analyses more deeply why and how international elements were used by policy actors during Legislature X [2005–2009], when there was a peak in the use of international elements in parliamentary debates. Rhetorical analysis helps identify policy actors’ assumptions about their audiences, how these guide which international elements are selected, and how they are used in the presented arguments.

Finally, sub-question **SQ4** – ‘How does the media in Portugal utilise external references in the thematisation and framing of education after each PISA cycle’s results are published?’, motivated the analysis presented in Article IV. Through content and frame analysis I identify all the international elements used by media actors in print media articles about education, exploring how they are used to variously thematise education and frame these selected themes, depending on the writer’s agenda.

The findings of each of the analyses presented in the articles contributes to the overall understanding of how and why international elements used in policy discussions in Portugal are selected, and how they are used in these discussions, which answers research questions **Q1** – ‘What factors influence the selection of international elements used in the discussion of education?’ and **Q2** – ‘How are

international elements used in discussions of education in the Portuguese parliament and print media?'. These questions will be answered in Section 7 of this text.

The last research question (**Q3** – ‘How do multiple theoretical perspectives contribute to understanding the use of externalisations to international elements in education policy processes?’) is mainly explored in this integrative chapter. Restrictions on space in the articles meant there was no space to elaborate on the complementarity of the three theories applied in this study and the benefit of applying different theories to the analysis of one phenomenon. In addition, although it was implicitly indicated that the theories applied in Articles II, III, and IV convey the onto-epistemological stance of complexity thinking, the analysis of how these theories contribute to the understanding of externalisations within education policy processes is made explicit only in this text. Thus, this study’s complexity thinking approach enables several theories of the policy process to be assembled, as well as specific features of social systems theory (Niklas Luhmann), for the analysis of externalisations as elaborated by Jürgen Schriewer for comparative education, and applied by Gita Steiner-Khamsi and other researchers in the specific field of policy borrowing and lending (see e.g. Steiner-Khamsi, 2004; Steiner-Khamsi & Waldow, 2012). Hence, I use three complementary theories to identify and scrutinise the phenomena of externalisations in education discussions: the multiple streams approach (Kingdon, 2003) (Article II); the epistemic governance framework (Alasuutari and Qadir, 2019) (Article III); and thematisation theory (derived from Luhmann’s systems theory and developed by his German and Italian followers: see Saperas, 1987; Pissarra Esteves, 2016) (Article IV). These three theories share an understanding of social systems and the processes within them – including policy processes – as complex and non-linear (Capano, 2009, p. 8). In my view the combination of these theories’ assumptions about the social world allows a deeper investigation of the societal conditions that not only make references to external elements necessary to support the policy arguments presented, and how they are used, but also help understand the selection of the specific external elements, and why they are understood as valid and authoritative sources of legitimation (these theories will be discussed in Section 3).

I focus mainly but not entirely on the context of the Portuguese parliamentary debates and print media articles within the December 2001 – December 2018 timeframe. As will be demonstrated later in Section 5 of this text, the systematic literature review (presented in Article I) analyses the research literature about the selection of countries or regions used as a reference, and how these selections have (or have not) been influenced by PISA, the international education assessment tool

with the largest number of participant countries, because the research project started with a major focus on this topic. However, because this study's methodological design is abductive, meaning that the research process's empirical and theoretical aspects are polished as the research proceeds, and 'both are successively re-interpreted in the light of each other' (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009, p. 4), its focus was expanded after the first readings of the data to an analysis of all the references to international elements present in the discussions of education in the Portuguese context.

My focus in this analysis therefore concerns how external elements are presented by political and social actors to their audiences. The choice to use 'audiences' in the plural is related to the aggregation of two publics – political opponents and the broader national audience. The Portuguese parliamentary discussions and print media articles are the contexts chosen to perform the analysis, because parliament, and more specifically the plenary discussions, is the most suitable context for policy actors to perform for their political opponents and the wider national audience (Ilie, 2017): the plenary debates are open access, broadcast on TV, and integrally published in the *Diário da República*. In addition, the media is the main venue for citizens to inform themselves about what is happening in the world. The media system therefore plays a major role in the themes about which citizens inform themselves, and how they think about them. The media brings policy issues and a sense that they need to be addressed to the public (Nery, 2004; Luhmann, 1996). Consequently, this system plays an active role in influencing the public policy agenda, working as a constraint or motivator of policy change. The analyses of these two contexts are complementary and can provide a more thorough understanding of education policy processes in Portugal by enabling the identification and comparison of patterns of the use of international elements in each of these contexts, and the analysis of their use over time (explained further in Sections 6 and 7).

This study stands at the crossroads of the field of comparative education and policy studies. While comparative education theories help explore the global policymaking dimension and the understanding of how actors and tools from the international realm are intertwined with the national and local policymaking levels (and vice versa), the theories of the policy process shed light on the details of the policy process itself, including why and how elements of the global dimension come to be needed and thus involved in national education policymaking. My aim is also to contribute theoretically and empirically to both research fields. By identifying and describing the dynamics of the intertwinements between the national, local, and global in the specific context of the Portuguese parliament and print media, this

study contributes to comparative education by expanding the understanding of why and how international elements are adopted and translated within these local contexts. It also contributes to policy research by advancing the knowledge of the societal conditions that lead to the need for and strategic use of references to the international as authoritative elements that aim to validate the arguments presented, and how are they selected by local actors. I also aim to contribute to the body of research that analyses policymaking as non-linear processes by focusing on the interactions among actors in and across two different yet complementary systems (more specifically political and media systems) and the contingent aspects of policymaking processes, with the understanding that these features of the policy process lead to emergent, more or less unexpected behaviour, including changes in the focus of the education discussions as a result of the launch of international rankings or reports.

## 1.2 The structure of the dissertation

This dissertation unfolds as follows: in the next Section I present the analysed phenomenon and its problematisation. In Section 3 I present the theoretical discussion, which is followed in Section 4 by a description of the context and a discussion of the reasons for its selection. In Section 5 I present the research process and its components in detail. In Section 6 the findings of each of the articles constituting this dissertation are synthesised and presented. Section 7 aggregates and discusses the findings. Finally, Section 8 answers research question Q3 – ‘How do multiple theoretical perspectives contribute to understanding the use of externalisations to international elements in education policy processes?’ and presents some reflections.

## 2 THE PHENOMENON AND PROBLEMATISATION: POLICYMAKING AND THE USE OF EXTERNALISATIONS IN POLICY PROCESSES

Capano (2009) argues that a process can be understood as progressing in a linear or non-linear fashion. Linear means that there is a predetermined sequence of steps in which the process develops. Non-linear refers to processes that do not follow a predetermined sequence of steps, whose different moments are not necessarily closely interlinked; a change in any one factor may lead (or not) to changes in other factors or aspects (Capano, 2009, p. 11), making it unpredictable.

Regarding policy, and public policy more specifically, the range of definitions can be broad, yet most remain somewhat simplistic. Frequently they appear to define a linear progress of policy processes, insufficiently acknowledging the uncertainty and ambiguity caused by the intertwinement of the influences of and pressures from the various actors involved. These theories also seem to assume that power belongs only to a central unit composed of a small number of actors, mainly government bodies, while leaving unacknowledged the power of other communities such as civil society and consultation boards (Cairney, 2019). Many definitions of policy therefore appear to devalue the uniqueness of each policy process, very much focusing on the role of government decisions and subsequent normative outcomes. Examples are the definition of policy provided by Mackay & Shaxton (2007, p. 1) as ‘a distinct path of action which is suitable for the pursuit of desired goals within a particular context, directing the decision making of an organization or individual’, which the authors distinguish from public policy in particular, described as ‘a decision made by government to either act, or not act in order to resolve a problem’. Similarly, Birkland (2010, p. 10) defines public policy ‘as a statement by government – at whatever level – of what it intends to do about a public problem’.

Meanwhile, complementing these definitions, one can find authors such as Kari Palonen (2003, 2006, 2018) who, while discussing ‘politics-as-activity’ (in line with Max Weber’s school of thought), conceptualises politics through four aspects: as policy (‘regulating aspect of politics’); polity (the space in which politics occurs, ‘with specific possibilities and limits’); politicking (performative aspects); and politicisation



(‘opening of something as political’) (p. 171). Palonen (2003, pp. 172–175) sees politics as a ‘contingent, fluid and disorderly’ activity that focuses on ‘changing the existing state of affairs’, and thus as an uncertain and ambiguous activity that aims to initiate social change. Continuing this perspective on politics, in the specific context of a legislative parliament, Palonen describes politics as a ‘contingent, controversial and temporal activity’ (2018, p. 7); nevertheless, policy or legislation should be seen ‘as something “more” than a contingent result of parliamentary struggles’ (2018, p. 13). He defines policy as ‘a direction of activities, to a line, project, plan, program, or doctrine’. Hence, policy has an ‘orientation toward the future’ in a non-predetermined manner; it ‘has a normative character as a criterion in the selection of what should be realized among possible futures’ (Palonen, 2003, p. 175; 2006). Policy is thus a ‘projective activity’ (Palonen, 2006, p. 24). Palonen concludes that ‘(...) we can call a policy a complex of inclusion and coordination of measures into a project unified (...)’ (2003, p. 175). Palonen’s policy definition is interesting for this study for various reasons. First, it accommodates the analysis of power relations and struggles among a diversity of actors at different levels and in various communities and organisations over time, while highlighting the contingent features of both the political relations among actors and the policy processes with which they engage (Palonen, 2018). Second, Palonen’s definition of policy also gives salience to the continuous selection of one among several available possibilities, which emphasises the contingent nature of policy processes in which choices made could have been otherwise (Palonen, 2003; see also Kauko, 2014). Third, the view of policy as a ‘direction of activities’ and its ‘orientation toward the future’ bring the idea of policy as a process constantly under construction to the fore. Thus, ‘time’ is conditioned by directionality in Palonen’s definition of policy, for which a performative activity focusing on achieving a final consensus starts in the past and aims at the future. This view also highlights the historical path dependency of the policy process, in which past choices are irreversible, and which influences the policy choices of the present (Wimmer, 2006, p. 1). These historical paths therefore influence ‘policy threads’, because these threads are sensitive to the initial conditions under which an issue came to exist and the policy changes to which it has been subject (Wimmer, 2006, p. 4; Kauko, 2014, p. 1684).

In this dissertation I depart from the view of policy presented by Palonen as a long-term construction activity, directed at the future, contingent on the past and on the interactions among the actors involved, and the choices they make and for which they advocate. Policymaking is here assumed to be a complex, decentralised, ambiguous, and uncertain process in which one path of action regarding an issue

depends not only on past policy choices, but also more generally on the history of the context in which the policy process takes place, in this case the political system and more broadly the country's history. In addition, this study views the policy process as dependent on power struggles and developed through negotiation among diverse political and social actors located at different levels of the social world, belonging to numerous communities and organisations, and presenting a diversity of interests that can converge or collide. Consequently, these processes lead to outcomes that are difficult to predict *a priori*.

## 2.1 The analysed phenomenon: externalisations to international elements in policymaking discussions

Policymaking processes have become increasingly intricate in modern societies. They include a diversity of actors such as elected politicians and other social actors from different social levels, communities, and organisations (e.g. local, national, global – for an example see Figure 1). All these actors are influenced by their social and cultural background, and local societal events emergent from specific historical paths. In this context policy actors engaged in policymaking processes are challenged by the need for more sophisticated strategies to convince others of the validity of their ideas and proposals. In modern societies these legitimisation strategies have often moved from traditionally used arguments based on political interests to attempts to make rational and even scientific arguments. With this aim, less ideological arguments are used and replaced by claims of ‘evidence’ and ‘knowledge’<sup>4</sup> (Barroso, 2009). One of these strategies is externalisation, a concept developed by the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann in his theory of self-referential systems (within his theory of social systems), which emphasises a shift in modern societies from self-reference to external reference. Luhmann and his colleague Karl Eberhard Schorr categorised three kinds of externalisation: reference to ‘scientific rationality’; reference to ‘tradition and values’; and reference to ‘organisation’ (Steiner-Khamsi, 2002, p. 69; 2003, p. 2). In addition, in the field of comparative education Jürgen Schriewer (1990, pp. 28–83) developed the externalisation to world situations thesis. By aligning with Luhmann’s understandings of the social world as constituted by many complex and functionally closed systems, Schriewer argues that there is a certain ‘socio-logic’ based on internal cultural values and societal conditions that

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<sup>4</sup> ‘Knowledge’ is considered in this context as socially constructed conceptualisations that circulate within and across spaces (Centeno, 2017, p. 29).

drives the choice of certain world situations as tools that help strengthen arguments and justify the introduction of reforms.

Externalisations bring benefits to systems. As they are usually auto-referential and autopoietic, these openings of the systems to their environment bring fresh information that is then interpreted and adopted by each system through its own logic, as if it was its own (Steiner-Khamsi, 2021; Luhmann. 1982, 1996). Thus, external references bring new meanings to the system that free it from its feedback loop of self-referentiality, enabling it to continue its autopoietic process and more effectively differentiate itself from other systems (Rappleye, 2012; Steiner-Khamsi, 2021, p. 5). Comparative education research suggests that externalisations to world situations tend to occur when the conversation is about contested policies that cannot gain political and popular support through the traditional reference to internal features and experiences (Steiner-Khamsi, 2002, pp. 68–70). Furthermore, Waldow (2012, p. 418) argues that externalisation is a useful tool for legitimising one’s arguments. Thus, through acts of externalisation policymakers filter and select elements from the international realm and ‘rearrange it according to a given system’s internal needs for “supplementary meaning” ... [and this meaning] not only varies *between* different societies or nations, but also changes over time in the course of successive political eras *within* the same society’ (Schriewer & Martinez, 2004, p. 32).

Of course, the analysis of externalisation to world situations is only one way of studying the intertwinements between the local and global dimensions in education policymaking. In the field of comparative education several other approaches are equally useful in developing an understanding of these dynamics. Such is the case with world culture theory (e.g. Ramirez & Boli, 1987), which posits that the social world is converging into a single world culture with the isomorphism of policies and practices, including in education; social network theory, where the focus of the analysis is directed at the interrelations between people, organisations and communities at different levels of society – local, national, and global (e.g. Schulte, 2012; Vera & Schupp, 2006); critical theory of space (e.g. Robertson, 2009, p.2), analysing ‘the ways in which space is deeply implicated in power, production and social relations’. Here, space can be associated with a physical locale, but it is also imaginary – socially constructed. Yet another example of this interesting line of approach, also used in the field of comparative education, is ethnography, in which a space more than ‘place-bounded’ is a ‘social context’ and thus asserts that people at the local and global levels are tightly intertwined in various ways, thus ‘as a relational social space of action, not “a people” living in a geography’ (e.g. Stamback, 2016, p. 490).

However, in this dissertation I opted to explore the acts of externalisation to international elements, which adds to Schriewer's externalisation to world situations thesis (Schriewer, 1990). This update on the concept of externalisation made in the analysis presented in this integrative chapter aims to clarify the inclusion of externalisations to any element belonging to the international dimension – individual (such as specific political and social actors) and collective actors (such as international organisations), tools of assessment (such as ILSAs) and guidance (such as the Bologna Declaration), and practices and policies of other countries or regions (such as Finland, Shanghai, or the 'EU countries' – thus, reference societies) – used as a source of evidence, knowledge, or expertise. These are investigated in this study in relation to their use as strategic tools of (de-)legitimation in political and social actors' attempts to achieve political consensus. 'Reference society', a term originally coined by Reinhard Bendix (1978, in Waldow 2017, 2019), refers to countries or regions used as a reference in countries looking to improve. However, although reference societies are usually understood as countries, due to the increasingly blurring of the modern world's territorial borders, it is necessary to update the original concept of reference societies to include larger regions such as 'European countries' and smaller areas such as cities, for example, 'Shanghai' (Waldow, 2017, 2019). It is also necessary to include in the concept both positive reference societies, which are countries or regions whose practices are seen as examples to follow, and negative reference societies whose practices serve to demonstrate a path to avoid (Waldow, 2019). Also important to the concept of reference society and relevant for this study are the concepts of projection (Waldow, 2017), or as Phillips and Ochs (2003) refer to it, 'phoney borrowing'. This means that what happens in the reference society used is quite often of little relevance, and the opportunity it affords to project one's own education agendas onto other countries or regions to validate the presented proposals or ideas is more important (Waldow, 2017). This argument, along with others regarding reference societies and the effects of PISA in the choice of these societies, is further explored in Article I (Santos & Centeno, 2021).

In the analysis presented in this dissertation I am also inspired by the relevance given by Steiner-Khamsi to actor agency in externalisation (see, for example, Steiner-Khamsi 2004; Rappleye, 2012). The focus of the Luhmannian social systems approach is on communications within the system and in specific moments with its environment. To a large extent, when analysing functional systems, Luhmann leaves people (the communicators) aside; they are seen as part of the system's environment. However, in line with 'actor-centred' research (Rappleye, 2012, pp. 122–123) I consider it necessary to acknowledge at least to some extent the role of actors

(whether they are communities, organisations, or individuals such as party leaders, members of civil society groups, schoolteachers, academics, policy entrepreneurs, media actors, etc.). I agree with the view of ‘realists’ that actors can act in their own self-interest, but beyond this, what I consider most important in this analysis is that actors play a role in ‘how information flows as symmetrical or how actors view other actors or interact with policy-related information’ (Rappleye, 2012, p. 122). The interactions among actors and between them and information can be influenced by actors’ backgrounds, memberships in different communities and organisations, and their own aims. Actor-centrality helps explain the use of external references as strategies that serve such purposes as to legitimise their own ideas or de-legitimise others’ in political praise and blame games: situations in which diverse actors externalise to the same external element to feed rather different and even opposing arguments. In addition, like other researchers (e.g. Takayama, 2009; Rappleye, 2012), I recognise and attempt to plug the gap created by the caveat identified in the literature exploring externalisations to world situations: ‘it seldom provides a comprehensive explanation of the reasons why externalisation ‘works to mobilize people at a particular time in history’ (Takayama, 2009, p. 58).

This dissertation departs from the informative conclusions of Article I (Santos & Centeno, 2021), and develops the findings of Articles II (Santos & Kauko, 2020), III (Santos, 2021), and IV (Santos et al., 2022). Using theories of the policy process (especially in Articles II and III), I attempt to address the caveat presented above by providing insights on both a) details of Portuguese education policy processes and b) the role played by historical and societal features in the assumptions made by speakers externalising to international elements. These assumptions may explain why only specific international elements are mobilised in the Portuguese context, and how they are used when advocating for policy change or continuities.

## **2.2 The international dimension: the complexities of the use of international elements when discussing education at the local level**

Since World War II policy processes have been influenced by the emergence and expansion, in number and diversity, of international organisations such as the United Nations, the World Bank, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and many others (Resnik, 2006; Akkari & Lauwerier, 2015). These organisations can be considered ambivalently as on the one hand a result of

an intensification of social interconnectedness, and on the other as partly responsible for the growing complexity of modern societies, in the sense that within and through them ideas are spread globally. Some scholars in the field of comparative education argue that the continuous intensification of this interconnectedness between social and political actors is leading to an international convergence of policies and practices. This is the case with John Meyer and his colleagues at Stanford University, who use the perspective of the neo-institutionalism's world culture (e.g. Ramirez & Boli, 1987; Meyer et al., 1997; Ramirez, 2012). However, other researchers, while taking 'the process of globalisation for granted' (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004, p. 4), use lenses that are more context-focused. They recognise the importance of local features and societal conditions, demonstrating that at the local level global trends are received and translated in very different ways (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004, pp. 1–5). This is the case for research in policy transfer, borrowing, and lending, as with the authors of the edited volume, *Yearbook of Education 2012* (Steiner-Khamsi & Waldow, 2012).

In this study I focus on the intricacies between the local, national, and global dimensions of participation in the policy process. While analysing why references to international elements are necessary, and how they are used, I aim to understand the interactions between actors located in these different dimensions, and how these interactions influence education policy processes. I pay special attention to the particularities of the national context and the translations of global ideas and trends made by diverse local actors located at different social levels and in varied communities and organisations. I focus especially on why and how contextual particularities enable the infiltration of certain international elements, and how these infiltrations are translated and discursively used by this diversity of social and political actors involved in education policy processes in Portugal. Through this study I explore an apparent paradox: on the one hand international elements such as international organisations increase the complexity of policy processes – especially through rankings and policy advice – adding one more level of actors and tools involved in education policy processes; on the other local policy actors utilise these international elements in attempts to reduce the complexity of these processes with the aim of achieving consensual support for their reform (or continuation) proposals.

Due to the increasingly accepted view that educated people make a better workforce, and citizens' skills and competences therefore influence countries' development, education has become a public policy field that is considered central (Niemann & Martens, 2018, p. 2). Ydesen (2019, p. 2) calls attention to the

emergence of a ‘contemporary governing complex in education’ developed from the interdependencies between diverse actors and stakeholders and their ‘collaboration’ and ‘struggles’. Although most international organisations might have no jurisdiction in national public policy, they have become active policy actors at the national level (Sellar & Lingard, 2013), intervening in national policymaking processes through the use of soft tools such as rankings, benchmarks, funding, and policy suggestions (Altbach, 1988; Akkari & Lauwerier, 2015). These tools pressure nation states to act in areas of public policy perceived as underperforming.

In the area of education policymaking the OECD is a prominent example of an international organisation with a powerful actorhood in processes of ‘transnational education governance’ (Grek, 2009, p. 3; see also e.g. Rinne et al., 2004; Moutsios, 2009; Sellar & Lingard, 2013; Carvalho, 2016; Morgan & Volante, 2016; Centeno, 2017; Ydesen, 2019). In the past three decades this organisation, more than any other, has developed international assessment tools that enable the evaluation and comparison of education systems, highlighting best practices and prescribing improvement policy recommendations (Centeno, 2017, p. 23; Sellar & Lingard, 2013, p. 722). Through its tools of education assessment and guidance the OECD steers education at a distance not only in national spaces, but also at broader regional levels such as the European Union (hereafter the EU) (Grek, 2010, p. 396), by helping ‘... to shape understandings of the education systems that national governments must create to increase productivity and sustain economic growth’ (Sellar & Lingard, 2013, p. 722). Although mainly concerned with the economic system and its improvement (Grek, 2009, p. 2), via statements such as that ‘The OECD’s work on education helps individuals and nations to identify and develop the knowledge and skills that drive better jobs and better lives, generate prosperity and promote social inclusion’ (<http://www.oecd.org/education>, retrieved 02.02.2021), this organisation justifies the importance of its involvement in national education systems. It emphasises the role of education in the improvement of quality of life and prosperity while aiming to improve workers’ skills, which, it is explicitly said, will therefore improve countries’ economic development (Niemann & Martens, 2018; see also Nóvoa & Yariv-Mashal, 2003).

Among the OECD’s education tools, the international large-scale assessment (ILSA) Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA), has become the most prominent evaluation tool (Carvalho, 2012; Pons, 2017; Zhao, 2020). From 34 participants in the 2000 cycle, in 2018 PISA had 79 participating countries and regions. It assesses 15-year-old students’ knowledge in maths, sciences, and reading and their ability to use their knowledge in these areas to solve everyday problems.

With the OECD's carefully planned PISA results' launch of each of its seven cycles (taking place every three years, starting in 2000) PISA has attracted the attention of politicians, policymakers, the media, and researchers. Although PISA and its policymaking uses are not the specific phenomena analysed in this study, the survey is the main large-scale education assessment tool used and is developed by one of the international actors that is most often used for (de-)legitimation in Portuguese education policy discussions, the OECD. It is noteworthy that other international actors and tools may have constituted strong authority references in the discussions of education policy in Portugal at other times; however, during the specific timeframe analysed in this study (2001–2018) the OECD, the EU, their member countries (as a whole, a broad regional reference society – the OECD and EU countries), and its perceived tools, the Bologna Declaration (often wrongly seen as an EU tool) and PISA have consistently been the most used external elements when education is discussed in the media and parliament (see Table 4 in Article II, Appendix 2 in Article III and Section 7 of this dissertation).

The complexities emerging from the infiltration of the OECD and PISA in Portuguese political contexts become evident as the survey's authoritative status increases in the country over its different cycles. In this sense, PISA is an increasingly important element in education policymaking discussions. It is also the ILSA in which the effects on local policymaking contexts have been most studied in comparative education. It is therefore relevant to understand what the literature has demonstrated regarding the uses of both the OECD and PISA in education policy discussions.

Despite a vast range of criticism of PISA concerning its conceptualisation, implementation, influence on education, and questionable use in policy (Zhao, 2020, p. 246; see also Bittlingmayer et al., 2016), the OECD has created a 'new orthodoxy' through this survey in which education development explicitly entails the improvement of performativity and the surpassing of standards created through this and other ILSAs (Bates, 2016, pp. 3–15). Due to the diversity of ways through which different nation states receive and interpret inputs provided by international organisations, with the OECD occupying a central position, relations between these organisations and national and local policy actors are 'complex' and 'ambiguous' (Ydesen, 2019, p. 3). Despite the seemingly worldwide implications of OECD's PISA, at the national, regional, and local levels actors receive and interpret the information the survey provides according to their own societal features and schemata of interpretation. Hence, they translate other countries' rankings, policy recommendations, and practices in conformity with their own lenses and needs.



Furthermore, within national or local policymaking arenas a diversity of actors (collective or individual) moulds these external elements according to their own ideologies and agendas (e.g. Takayama, 2008; see also Santos & Kauko, 2020; Santos, 2021). The intricacies of all these levels and types of actor relations, along with the diverse meanings they produce, may explain the ‘complexity’ and ‘ambiguity’ of policymaking processes in modern societies Ydesen (2019) describes.

These networks of relations between the global and the national or local dimensions have been well studied in the field of comparative education research in the last quarter of a century, with the studies focusing on the one hand on the creation of tools able to ‘measure the “efficiency” and the “quality” of education’ (Nóvoa & Yariv-Mashal, 2003, p. 425) and on the other on the development of the understanding of how international organisations and these measurement tools become part of national and local policymaking arenas. In the last two decades some of the context-focused research mentioned at the beginning of this section has analysed the reception, translation, influence, and uses of international elements at national and regional levels. Within this literature some research is of special interest for the development of this dissertation, especially given this project’s initial focus on PISA’s role and influences in the context of the Portuguese education discussions, and its role in defining the study’s timeframe. First, it is relevant the research directly analysing the reception, translation, and impacts of PISA and its influence on policymaking; second, it is significant for this study the research focusing on understanding how PISA has promoted or demoted the countries and regions (reference societies) used as references in policy discussions. The research project whose findings are presented and explored in this dissertation builds strongly on the analysis and conclusions presented by these two branches of comparative and international education research.

First, regarding the research directly analysing PISA’s impacts and uses at the national and local levels, a vast number of researchers has explored how political and media actors use PISA in education policymaking (e.g. Takayama, 2008; Afonso & Costa, 2009ab; Berényi et al., 2009; Costa & Afonso, 2009; Rautalin & Alasuutari, 2009; Carvalho & Costa, 2009, 2014a; Elstad, 2012; Pons, 2012; Dixon et al., 2013; Bonal & Tarabini, 2013; Rautalin, 2013; Baroutsis & Lingard, 2017; Carvalho et al., 2017; Rautalin, 2018; Baird et al., 2016; Tan, 2017; among many others). For example, Natércio Afonso & Estela Costa, (2009b), while analysing the use and circulation of PISA in Portugal within the European Project KnowandPol<sup>5</sup> between

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<sup>5</sup> An EU multi-country, multi-sectoral study of the use of knowledge in the construction and regulation of public policy.

2000 and 2009, concluded that PISA changed how political and social actors think about assessments. In addition, it also changed how these actors validate their arguments. PISA became a knowledge tool used as an authoritative source of information utilised in debates on the reform of education. In Portugal the survey became an indirect (e.g. reference to ‘recent OECD assessments’ or similar immediately after the PISA result’s launch) or sporadic legitimisation tool after 2004, and more intensively during the XVII government (2005–2009). During this government the minister of education was a strong advocate for using statistical data in education decision making, actively legitimising her reform arguments with such data. The same authors (Costa & Afonso; 2009b) compare the use of PISA as a regulation tool in six European countries and regions (Portugal, Francophone Belgium, Scotland, France, Hungary, and Romania), concluding that PISA ‘produces a circular relationship between knowledge and politics, given that, as a policy instrument, it produces knowledge and, as a scientific instrument, it produces policy’ (p. 1052). Again, it is demonstrated that the survey becomes a tool for legitimisation and decision making, mainly due to its credibility, mouldability, and symbolic relevance, being instrumentalised in support of arguments by a variety of actors such as journalists, union members, government members, researchers, and so on (p. 1051).

Marjaana Rautalin & Pertti Alasuutari (2009), in studying how Finnish central government officials interpret PISA results, suggest that PISA is seen as a scientific tool, and as such it offers the government scientific evidence that is used in support of recently made decisions. PISA is used to legitimise the government’s own agenda, and although Finland, as a top performer, was not significantly influenced by the survey’s aims, global trends become evident in the recommended practices that the central government sends to teachers, for example (Rautalin & Alasuutari, 2009, p. 551). Furthermore, several others have analysed how the media utilises PISA to feed debates on education and legitimise all sorts of education arguments. Marjaana Rautalin (2018) explores how the media discusses PISA during the first three cycles, when Finland was a top performer, and compares these discussions with the 2013–2014 period, when the Finnish performance in the survey declined. The study demonstrates that different actors used PISA results in attempts to influence other’s views, but only when the results concurred with their needs: while during the first cycles Finland performed well, the government used the survey results to highlight the great qualities of Finnish basic education. When the Finnish results in the survey declined in the survey’s 2012 cycle, it was the turn of the reformists, who had until then dismissed the importance of the PISA results, to use its rankings as indicators

that the education system needed intervention, leaving the government with no arguments in support of the excellence of Finnish education.

Jo-Anne Baird and her colleagues (Baird et al., 2016) also compare the reception of PISA in media outlets in six countries: two high performers, Canada and China (Shanghai); and four average performers, England, France, Norway, and Switzerland. They demonstrate that the shocked reception of PISA (in four of the countries) helped initiate policy change. However, countries that performed similarly in the survey engaged in different kinds of reform which reflected ‘their differing cultural and historical education system trajectories’ (p. 121). PISA is a rhetorical tool used in arguments legitimising very different policy proposals.

Another good example is the study developed by Xavier Bonal & Aina Tarabini (2013). In analysing the direct and indirect effects of PISA in Spain, the authors identify two mechanisms utilised in policy discourse: selectivity and instrumentalisation. National and regional government actors use PISA reports to justify their policy reforms by selecting only the parts of the reforms that are helpful for legitimising their arguments, or their interpretations of the PISA results are biased (instrumentalisation). One way or another what justifies PISA’s various impacts in different contexts, the authors say, is the mediating role of local actors. Charlene Tan (2017) reaches similar conclusions elsewhere. She concludes that Chinese education policy actors interpret PISA reports and select specific information about them to ‘legitimate and consolidate contested reform messages and initiatives in Shanghai’ (p. 1), concluding that Chinese policy actors also interpret PISA results in a way that opens new possibilities for reform.

The studies listed above are some good illustrations of a vast body of research that highlights PISA’s ability to influence the national policy processes, because it is seen as a provider of ‘knowledge’ and ‘evidence’ that are reinterpreted and utilised differently in different contexts and by different actors, emphasising the importance of actor agency. These studies seem to share the idea that PISA results above all work more often as a strategic tool for legitimation that is somehow a distraction from underlying political ideology for policy proposals that have frequently already long been on the agenda and are thus not new ideas brought in by the survey reports.

Second, a set of studies is concerned more specifically with the impacts of PISA on the choice of reference societies used as examples or references in education policy discussions (e.g. Takayama, 2009; Dobbins & Martens, 2011; Carvalho & Costa, 2014b; Waldow et al., 2014; Baroutsis & Linagard, 2017; Rook & España, 2018; Waldow & Steiner-Khamsi, 2019). These studies reached interesting yet contradictory conclusions (see Santos & Centeno, 2021). Some research results

demonstrate that PISA can redefine the countries or regions used as references in education policy discussions. For example, Keita Takayama (2009) examines media articles, scholarly and teacher professional journal articles, and book chapters, with the aim of understanding how Finnish education came to be used in debates about education reforms in Japan after the Nordic country's success in PISA 2000 and subsequent cycles. He concludes that both progressive and neoliberal actors picture the Finnish education system by identifying in it what each of them perceives as good aspects of the old post-war Japanese education system.

Furthermore, Luís Miguel Carvalho and Estela Costa (2014b) analyse the reception of PISA and its impacts on the reference societies used in six European spaces (Francophone Belgium, France, Hungary, Portugal, Romania, and Scotland) between the 2000 and 2006 PISA cycles. They conclude that PISA is seen as a tool of knowledge that opens opportunities for policy action. While offering information often perceived as reliable, the survey serves as a legitimisation tool for arguments supporting policy reform. The characteristics of the local context define how PISA and the reference societies it helps construct are received and translated in different national or regional contexts. There is therefore a variety of factors that explain why reference societies emerge: a) political and cultural connections; b) high performance in international league tables or significant progress made; c) because they react quickly to its low scores in ILSAs; d) because they share the same problems or are radically different; e) because of historic competitive relations between countries (pp. 4–5).

In pushing the analysis of the impact of PISA on the choice of reference societies used a little further, Florian Waldow (2017) examines the emergence of positive and negative reference societies in Germany by analysing print media articles. He concludes that although the East Asian region and countries are as successful in PISA as Finland, the latter is used as a positive reference society, and the East Asian region and countries are used as negative reference societies. The author points to pre-existing stereotypes and cultural beliefs as justification for the occurrence of this phenomenon. Ultimately, the author explains, reference societies can be used by policy authors to legitimise their own agendas by projecting them onto other countries. While positive reference societies help advocate for policy reforms, negative reference societies are useful for validating arguments highlighting which policies and practices must be avoided.

Another good example of this line of research is Aspa Baroutsis & Bob Lingard (2017), who focus on the analysis of print media articles to understand the portrayals of Australia's PISA performance between 2000 and 2014. The analysis leads them to

conclude that the media contributes to shaping public opinion by selecting and promoting certain stories and agendas rather than others. References to other countries in the media articles focused first on Finland and then on Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Singapore after the PISA 2006 report was made public, demonstrating the high performance of these countries, with which Australia has competitive relations. These references to the Asian countries show a shift in the societies chosen: they are now more connected with the placement in the PISA global rankings and less with traditional sociocultural and sociopolitical relations.

All the above studies highlight the ability PISA results have to influence the reference societies used in specific countries. Nevertheless, they also emphasise the fact that in addition to the survey results, national societal characteristics, relations of competition and cooperation, and historically developed stereotypes and preconceptions strongly contribute to the selection of the countries or regions used. However, some studies contradict these results. Indeed, recent research also shows that in some cases PISA did not influence which countries or regions were chosen as a reference in education discussions (Sung & Lee, 2017) or the frequency of these references (Rautalin et al., 2018). In exploring if the USA's lower PISA ranking influenced its referential status in South Korea, Youl-Kwan Sung & Yoonmi Lee (2017) concluded that although countries like Finland also became reference societies in the education debate in South Korea, the USA remained the main country of reference and from which education policies were borrowed, despite its poor PISA results. The authors point to historically constructed relationships as the main possible reason for this. Marjaana Rautalin, Pertti Alasuutari and Eetu Vento (2018) also analyse 'how references to the international community are used in domestic policymaking and whether – and how – this has changed in recent years' (p. 7) in parliamentary debates across six countries (Australia, Canada, Trinidad and Tobago, Uganda, the UK, and the USA) between 1994 and 2013. These researchers conclude that even though references to the global context have been increasing slightly since the launch of the PISA results in 2001, especially regarding references to the OECD and its expertise, policymakers have actually made fewer references to the policies of other countries in recent years (2000–2013) than in the past (1994–2000).

What the studies above, as well as many others not mentioned here, seem to indicate is that it is the versatile character of international elements, being PISA the example here, that is interesting for political actors seeking sources of (de-)legitimation. In this dissertation I depart from the findings of the two bodies of research presented above and explore the situation in the context of Portugal

regarding externalisation to international elements. Despite the extensive and respectful research already developed in these topics, thus far it is rare for them to delve long and deeply into an analysis of the policymaking process itself. These studies frequently leave aside the analysis of the aspects of these processes, such as why international elements become necessary, and how policy actors select and use them. In addition, how these elements help deal with the constraints caused by the uncertainty and ambiguity characteristic of policy processes, and their attempt to manage contingency so that it is more likely to earn support for their ideas when several policy options are available. What are the local political dynamics that lead to the opening of the Portuguese political and media systems beyond its borders? And what are the Portuguese societal factors that result in self-references being considered insufficient? These are some of the underlying questions that guided me through the study this document presents.

Furthermore, the use of PISA and its participants in policy discussions have repeatedly been studied, much less research has been undertaken that seeks to answer open questions about the identification of the international elements used without pre-set boundaries except for a timeframe. However, an exception could be made for some works of the Tampere Research Group of Cultural and Political Sociology (TCuPS), Tampere University (e.g. Alasuutari, Rautalin, and Tyrkkö, 2018; Pi Ferrer, Alasuutari and Tervonen-Gonçalves, 2019 focusing on analyses of the reference to other countries – not necessarily related to PISA – and possibly, Alasuutari, Rautalin, and Syväterä, 2016, exploring the use of international organisations in general as a source of authority in policy conversations). This dissertation attempts to plug these gaps and contribute to this branch of research by analysing which references to international elements in general (including, but beyond PISA) are selected, and why and how they are strategically used by political and social actors engaged in or attempting to influence Portuguese education policymaking.

### 3 THEORETICAL DISCUSSION: A COMPLEXITY APPROACH TO THE ANALYSIS OF EXTERNALISATIONS IN EDUCATION POLICY PROCESSES

The theoretical framework is one of the very basic pillars of any research project. Collins & Stockton (2018, p. 2) define theoretical framework as ‘the use of a theory (or theories) in a study that simultaneously conveys the deepest values of the researcher(s) and provides a clearly articulated signpost or lens for how the study will process new knowledge’. Furthermore, as Elinor Ostrom (2007, p. 26) aptly posits, good frameworks ‘provide a metatheoretical language that can be used to compare theories’, it identifies the different components of each theory and how they can be useful to develop knowledge of a particular phenomenon (Ostrom, 2007, p. 26). In the following sub-sections of this text I elaborate on the theoretical framework developed for the analysis of the acts of externalisation to the international dimension occurring within education policymaking discussions in Portugal.

The journey to design this study’s theoretical framework, as with other components of this research process, was adapted as the analysis unfolded. Initially, the idea was that externalisations to world situations (Schriewer, 1990) would be the main theory guiding the research. However, after data collection and during the first readings of parliamentary debates, it became clear that the study would benefit and become more informative if theories of the policy process were also applied (see more details on this in Section 5 ‘research design’). Without abandoning the theoretical background of Schriewer’s externalisation to world situation thesis (1990) at this stage the acts of externalisation to international elements became the phenomenon under analysis, and theories of the policy process were used as lenses to scrutinise the externalisations within policymaking processes occurring in the Portuguese parliament. While theories in the field of comparative education focus on the dynamics of international trends and the global-local nexus from different angles, political science theories, specifically of the policy process, inform the analysis of the political dynamics that lead to the use of externalisations within the processes of policymaking and an understanding of how they are used. In addition, when

analysing the media articles, thematisation theory (the selection of themes as part of Luhmannian's social systems theory) was later used to understand the role externalisations play in bringing certain education themes to the discussion and managing public opinion, and therefore how they can influence policy processes. With this aggregation of theories it seems possible to construct a comprehensive understanding of the interactions between the local and global dimensions of policymaking processes. In other words, the combination of these three theories can enable an efficient multifaceted analysis of when and why international elements are selected, and how are they received and translated within the dynamics of policy processes when the themes of education battle to gain a place on the political agenda.

Given that the policy process is dynamic, with policy actors constantly promoting their favourite reforms (or continuities), I understand the theories used in this study as *theories of change*, which accommodate the study of change but also account for the analysis of continuities (Capano, 2009, p. 9). In this vein, Capano (2009) departs from and further updates Van de Ven and Poole's (1995, in Capano, 2009), five 'ideal-type theories of social and political development: *life-cycle theories*, *evolution theories*, *dialectic theories*, and *teleological theories*', to which he adds *chaos and complexity theory* (pp. 9–10). Among other assumptions these ideal-type theories explore from different perspectives how political and social change happens – for example, linearly or non-linearly, characterised by cumulative or adaptive logics, and through evolutionary or revolutionary dynamics. Although such epistemological dichotomies can be helpful to situate the researcher's own theoretical positionality, they can also be too strict, because epistemic lenses can also be blurry. Hence, I consider that in any theoretical context diverse degrees can be identified between dichotomic extremes. For example, although I consider this study to be located within the complexity perspective – which Capano describes as assuming policymaking is a revolutionary process – through my analysis I have come to understand that most policy processes in Portugal have been more evolutionary and incremental, without emergent radical changes. For example, Barroso (2016) argues that if we examine a longitudinal timeframe, the themes on the agenda have been the same, with mostly small policy updates when the government changes.

In this study I attempt to demonstrate the fruitfulness of combining different theories in the study of externalisations in policy processes. I take a complexity thinking approach as the onto-epistemological lens that enables the combination of the multiple streams approach (Kingdon, 2003), the epistemic governance framework (Alasuutari & Qadir, 2019), and the thematisation theory (Saperas, 1987; Luhmann, 1996; Pissarra Esteves, 2016) to explore the integration of international



elements in the Portuguese education discussions occurring in Portugal. In the next sub-sections I delve into presenting the complexity thinking approach and its usefulness in the analysis of policymaking processes; I then explain the contingent nature of the policymaking process, followed by a short presentation of the Luhmannian ideas and concepts, which, as part of his theory of social systems, inform my analysis. Finally, I describe the three main theories mentioned and used in this analysis, and how they contribute to the study reported in this dissertation.

### 3.1 Complexity thinking approach: introduction and applicability in policy analysis

In this Section I introduce the role of complexity thinking within the analysis of the policy process and further explain the difference between linear and non-linear theories of the policy process in Sub-section 3.1.1. In Sub-sections 3.1.2 and 3.1.3 I present the aspects of complexity thinking that are more directly considered in this study. Finally, in Sub-section 3.1.3 I describe Luhmann's social systems theory as an example of a theory accounting for complexity and present the elements of Luhmann's theory that have contributed to the analysis undertaken for this dissertation. The aim is to bring to light the relevance of complexity thinking as an aggregative onto-epistemological stance in the analysis of policy processes developing within social systems that are inherently complex in nature. As a theory accounting for complexity Luhmann's theory of social systems enriches the analysis by informing it in aspects related to the characteristics and functionality of these systems.

Complexity thinking<sup>6</sup> incorporates a vast array of theories and concepts from diverse research disciplines. It 'studies the behaviour of systems consisting of large numbers of interacting components that interact with and adapt to their environments, leading to emergent behaviours' (Erat & Luqmani, 2017, p. 2). It emerged within the natural sciences and developed largely with the computational sciences, expanding later to various fields of social science research (e.g. Medd, 2002; Morrison, 2006; Mason, 2008, 2014; Cairney et al., 2019). Complexity thinking offers a way that, although not new (Morrison, 2006; Cairney & Geyer, 2017), differs from the 'sciences of certainty' (Stacey, 2010, cited in Bates, 2016, pp. 22–25), enabling an examination of the interactions and dynamics between the elements of a system to

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<sup>6</sup> Also commonly known as complexity theory, complexity sciences, or sciences of uncertainty.

understand complexities that are manifested at the system level (Cilliers, 1998, pp. 2–3).

Thus, complexity examines systems with a focus on the whole that cannot be explained by the simple observations of its parts (or their sum) by observing instead the system's elements' network of interactions and its ability to adapt and self-organise. (Cairney et al., 2019; De Domenico et al., 2019). Complexity thinking therefore aims to surpass a 'flaw in the analytical method', in which systems are studied by focusing on the individual parts, which can be problematic when the system under analysis is complex and multifaceted (Cilliers, 1998, pp. 1–2). Morrison (2006, p. 1) states that complexity is 'a theory of change, evolution and adaptation'. However, more than a theory, complexity thinking constitutes a multidisciplinary approach, a broad way to examine complex phenomena, a congregation of disciplines that share a view of the world (Bates, 2016). In sum, complexity thinking is an approach that enables the development of a multifaceted analysis of a system that studies the connectedness of large numbers of elements whose interactions across levels and within each level transect diverse communities, leading to successive needs to adapt and self-organise (e.g. Morrison, 2006; Bates, 2016). In addition, the system's sensibility to changes in its environment leads to a constant internal adaptation of the system to accommodate the environment's new properties, at least to some extent (Morrison, 2006, p. 2).

Complexity thinking also leaves aside beliefs in the 'primacy of reason in discovering universal truths about an objectively knowable reality', taking into account the uncertainty and diversity of variables and their non-linear interactions (Bates, 2016, pp. 22–23). This does not translate into a total disbelief in rationality, but rather an understanding that due to the uncertain conditions resulting from the non-linearity of actors' interactions, rationality plays a limited role in attaining order (Goldspink, 2007).

Regarding the political system, a growing number of researchers in recent decades has been engaging with the development of frameworks that understand the policymaking processes within this system as multicentred and multileveled (Sabatier, 2007; Cairney et al., 2019), as is the case with the theories used in this study (the multiple streams approach, the epistemic governance framework, and thematisation theory – see Sub-sections 3.2, 3.2.1, and 3.2.2). These theories can be conceptualised as complexity thinking because of their emphasis on the analysis of the policy process as non-linear and developing within a complex – political – system but interrelated with other systems. These theories also take into account the uncertainty and ambiguity of the policy process, while focusing on the analysis of

the dynamics developed from the interactions between actors rather than simply examining isolated actors, or specific aspects or stages (this will be further explored in the next sub-section).

The contribution of complexity thinking to this study is that it works as an onto-epistemological point of departure for the analysis, a way of understanding and analysing the social world, science, and knowledge beyond simplistic views, developing through non-linear causalities (Hetherington, 2013), as constantly evolving, interdependent, and emergent (Bates, 2016). Its assumptions drive this research process and the choices made. It constitutes a vantage point for observing and describing society and its multiple systems, and therefore the processes developing within these systems, such as policymaking.

### 3.1.1 Linear versus complex views in the analysis of policymaking processes

Just as the policy process can be defined as linear or non-linear (see Section 2), so can the theoretical perspectives used by researchers and analysts to study these processes. Some analytical models depart from views of the policy process that seem to assume it as linear, such as Lasswell's seven stages of policy decision developed in the 1950s and later adapted to diverse typologies by other researchers. These theories simplify the policy process by understanding 'policy problems as involving stable hierarchies, well-understood causality and agreed policy goals' (Jones, 2011, p. 5). Models that see the policy process as such a predetermined and stable progress necessarily leave unaccounted aspects of the policy process that may become relevant in influencing a policymaking process later (Cilliers, 2001, p. 3; Capano, 2009, p. 11). Such aspects are the role of contextual historical paths, the dynamics of the political battles or the unpredictability of policy windows. In this sense, linear theories that simplify the policy process into predetermined steps or stages limit the study's scope, which in turn compromises the possibilities for analysis. Thus, when applied alone, these theories or models are often insufficient to fully understand the policy processes.

In contrast, in this study I take the stance of non-linear theories and assume political power to be located in diverse levels, communities, and organisations of the social world (from the local to the global). The interactions between social and political actors, their conflicts, and their processes of negotiation originate complexities within policymaking processes that cannot be ignored. Thus, to analyse such complex processes, there is a need for theoretical lenses that take into account

the intricacies of this diversity of actors, and the variability and instability of the interactions among them.

Non-linear policy theories have been in development since the 1970s. They emphasise the analysis of policy processes as constantly developing in conditions of uncertainty, ambiguity, chaotic interactivity, and unpredictability (Bates, 2016). Hence, non-linear theories see policy processes as ‘an extremely complex set of elements that interact over time’ (Sabatier, 2007, p. 3). They can thus be integrated in the vast multidisciplinary research perspective of complexity thinking. Good examples of these theories are punctuated equilibrium, polycentric governance, the advocacy coalition framework, the multiple streams approach, and others (Sabatier, 2007; Cairney et al., 2019).

In the fields of education, education policy, and the politics of education several researchers can be identified as successfully taking the stance of complexity thinking in their studies (e.g. Davis & Sumara, 2006; Morrison, 2006; Mason, 2008, 2014; Osberg & Biesta, 2010; Kauko, 2014; Geert & Steenbeek, 2014; Bates, 2016, among many others). For example, Ka In Shivonne Fong (2006) applies complexity thinking to analyse how school staff development influences school change and concludes that staff development becomes both a lever for and an obstacle to change. Although staff development offers tools that help these actors cope with change, new practices may still be resisted. Mark Mason (2008) investigates the varied factors that can cause inertia when change in education happens. He argues that instead of focusing on a single factor, education change occurs when new interactions originate from changing a vast number of factors ‘generating momentum in a new direction’ (2008, p. 44). Gert Biesta and Deborah Osberg (2010, p. 2) focus on the politics of education, arguing that education complexity thinking offers a new perspective on the ‘dynamic of education’, ‘focusing on the emergence of meaning, knowledge understanding of the world and the self in and through education’. Jaakko Kauko (2014) utilises complexity as a departure point to analyse higher education dynamics. More specifically, he argues that ‘the choices in higher education politics increase the complexity of the system’ (p. 1683). Agnieszka Bates (2016) analyses ‘education transformation’, challenging recent perspectives of centralised policymakers that directly connect education improvement with performativity. She applies complex responsive processes theory and concludes that no grand solutions or revolutionary tools can offer a definitive answer of what works in education. More important than a focus on the ends, what needs to be considered are the actors’ interactions within the process and the everyday practices – the

meanings that policies decided at the top level take at the local level, and how they are enacted.

The previously mentioned research highlights some of the aspects of the policy process as described by Palonen (2003, 2018), such as the contingent and uncertain character of policymaking, decentralised interactions and power struggles, and the policy process as a continuum of activities over time. These studies are interesting illustrations of research using complexity conceptualisations of education and education governance that have inspired and informed my work. The analysis these authors undertake in their work provides a relevant basis for the development of the study presented in this dissertation, such as the aspects highlighted above in this paragraph. Reciprocally, in this study I aim to contribute to the conversation initiated by these and other researchers by adding to unstudied areas of this body of research and analysis: the study of how interactions among actors within and across the system influence education policy processes, more specifically, by focusing on the global-local interconnectedness within the education policymaking process. This study will shed light on how actors or tools belonging to the international dimension infiltrate the local dimension and are utilised by actors belonging to different local communities.

Additionally, the work of some other academics is also valuable for the development of this study: for example, Howlett et al. (2016), who have effectively combined various policy process theories such as the policy cycle, the advocacy coalition framework, and the multiple streams approach, convincingly demonstrating that rather than being opposed, fundamentally different theories can be adapted to complement each other and produce interesting insights into the comprehension of policy processes. I follow their footprints by understanding policy processes as benefiting from an analysis that combines various theoretical angles.

In the study presented in this dissertation I utilise theories which, in line with what is described above, assume policy processes to be non-linear and complex. I adopt the complexity thinking perspective as a multidimensional and multidisciplinary background lens that interconnects not only the three main interpretative theories used in the analysis: multiple streams approach (Kingdon, 2003), epistemic governance (Alasuutari & Qadir, 2019) and thematisation theory (Saperas, 1987; Luhmann, 1996; Pissarra Esteves, 2016); but also, the theory that initiated this work, the externalisation to world situations thesis (Schriewer, 1990). All these theories assume the social world and phenomena developed within it to be multi-level and multifaceted, and can contribute to the analysis because of their focus on different levels and facets of the same phenomena. They thus complement each

other, enabling the development of an understanding of the overlaps and intertwinements between global, national, and local levels of education policymaking processes. More specifically, the different theories help understand the emergent need for external sources of validation of policy arguments and the function of the references to international elements within education policy discussions. The study departs from the premises that a) the systems and its elements tend to refer to the system itself (self-referentiality), and external references are an indicator that these self-references are no longer sufficient tools of authority, which leads actors to look for authority sources elsewhere; b) actors at multiple levels of society influence (or attempt to influence) each other's decisions and views of the world, which makes policy processes contingent on the interactions among these actors; and c) the historical background of the context and of policy paths matter. Thus, this study sees policy outcomes as the result of the consensus achieved by the management of power relations among a large number of actors in specific contexts (in this case a specific country) over time, which makes the policy processes highly ambiguous and uncertain, and their outcomes unpredictable.

### 3.1.2 The contingent nature of policymaking: the conditionality of the context's historical paths and policy threads, and the implications of actors' interactions

Policymaking entails processes of adaptation that occur within the political system but are strongly interrelated with other social systems. They are typically characterised by uncertainty and ambiguity (as described in Sub-sections 3.1 and 3.1.1). As already mentioned, uncertainty is related both to the unpredictability and non-linearity of the interactions among actors involved in these processes and the unpredictability of their outcomes. Ambiguity arises, because there are always several perspectives through which an issue can be understood (Zahariadis, 2003, p. 3; Zahariadis, 2007). In such conditions, choice is rarely a rational move. As the problem itself remains blurred, time is always a constraint, and the information actors can access and process is limited, choosing a policy path is more a process of making sense of the world than solving a problem *per se* (Zahariadis, 2003, p. 3). However, choices and selections are of great relevance, because any system is merely the result of a collection of choices over time (Cilliers, 2000, p. 29). This means that choice is historically contingent, as the policy choices available in the present depend on the policies put in place in the past. The contingent features of policymaking can

thus be related to the opportunities and possibilities left by the context's history and past policies, from which political and social actors can choose (Palonen, 2003; Kauko, 2014). Nevertheless, in complex phenomena such as policy processes in democratic nations 'one can make numerous selections, they are contingent for they could have been otherwise' (Medd, 2002, p. 79; see also, Palonen, 2003; Kauko, 2014; Kauko & Wermke, 2018). Although possible, they are not therefore necessary, and they constitute a bank of alternatives that are available but that are *a priori* ambiguous and that can often only be fully understood *a posteriori* after selections have already been made (Kauko & Wermke, 2018). Thus, any policy idea or proposal selected by any policy actor is only one of the of several policy proposals that could have been chosen after the conditionality of contextual history paths and policy threads have limited the available options.

These choices are also contingent on other contextual features such as the political mood (Kingdon, 2003) when a policy theme is debated, and the choices of other policy actors involved in the policy process, which are defined by their own ideology and interests. Thus, the policy process is also contingent on each actor's network of interactions inside and outside the political system. These interactions are dynamic, and they have a range of degrees of complexity and unpredictability. They can develop formally or informally, and take place without necessarily having a centralised power control (Johnson, 2007; De Domenico et al., 2019; Cairney et al., 2019). Interactions between actors in different social groups and across groups arise in networks of influence at close and distant range – the closer the interconnection between actors, the stronger the unilateral or bilateral influence they generate (Cilliers, 1998, p. 4).

This approach to the process of policymaking is translated to a research practice in which historical paths, and the interactions between the elements of a political system, are analysed alongside an analysis of the interactions between the elements of this system and its environment – here to a large extent limited to the media system and elements of the global realm. This means attention is paid to meaningful communications (verbal and non-verbal) among these actors (collective or individual), rather than necessarily to the actors themselves. This choice does not entail the abandoning of the communicators (the aforementioned actors) and their backgrounds; in this study my position is that these actors' integration in a diversity of political and social communities and organisations, and the ideologies shared within these groups, deeply influences the kind of interactions in which these actors engage, and the policy ideas for which they advocate. Hence, I concur with other researchers (e.g. Medd, 2002; Cilliers, 1998; Morrison, 2006; Bates, 2016) in their

views concerning the usefulness of concentrating on the interactions among individuals, groups, organisations, and their tools. This view departs from the assumption that the analysis of the interactions among elements of the system will enable the understanding of emergent behaviour at the system level, as Cilliers (1998, pp. 2–3) argues. This position allows the development of a multidimensional investigation of the policy process across space (by space I do not necessarily mean physical space but rather imaginary non-equivalent dimensions – the media, parliament, the nation state, and the global context) and time (while examining education policy discussions along the 17 years of the timeframe, the references to the past and to the future of proposed actions, and scrutinising historical aspects that influence the dynamics of the present policy discussions). For example, this strategy enables an understanding of the actors' emergent needs for legitimation, the origins of their assumptions about what other actors (the audiences – opposition parties and the general public) recognise, among all international elements possible, to be those that are authoritative sources of 'knowledge' and 'evidence' that can be successfully used to legitimise arguments in processes of policymaking in education, especially when they are struggling to earn the necessary support, or when they concern education themes in which public opinion is polarised.

### 3.1.3 The perspective of Luhmann's social systems theory as a theory of complex systems

Given what has been said thus far, it is almost impossible not to discuss Niklas Luhmann in the context of this study. Beyond the fact that his social systems theory is the theoretical basis for the externalisation thesis analysed here and of the thematisation theory used to analyse the media articles, Luhmann was one of the first social scientists to develop a theory to analyse modern society as a complex system. Luhmann (1995, p. 25) loosely describes complexity as 'being forced to select; being forced to select means contingency; and contingency means risk', and thus, '[e]very complex state of affairs is based on a selection of relations among its elements, which it used to constitute and maintain itself'. Thus, 'the selection positions and qualifies the elements, although other relations would have been possible' (Luhmann, 1995, p. 25). For Luhmann, complexity is the case when 'in a system, there are more possibilities than can be actualised' (Cilliers, 1998, p. 2).

As Luhmann's theory of the social systems is vast, I will only focus on the essential elements of his theory used in the analysis presented in this dissertation,



namely, the role of communications, differentiation, the complexity of the system, externalisation (already explained in Section 2.1), selection, and themes (explained in more detail in Section 3.2.2).

Luhmann's work is highly influenced by the previous work of other authors, such as Husserl's phenomenology, George Spencer-Brown's Boolean logic, or even Max Weber and Émile Durkheim, but not as much as by Talcott Parsons, with whom he worked at Harvard University in the early stages of his academic career (Arnoldi, 2001, p. 3; Vanderstraeten, 2002, p. 78). However, Luhmann began to dissociate himself from Parsons in several respects. For example, 'he makes a shift of emphasis from the conditions of stable systems to the dynamics of an emerging order' (Nassehi, 2005, p. 181). Furthermore, while Parsons sees social systems as systems of action, for Luhmann 'communication is the foundational element of social systems' (Stichweh, 2015, p. 385; Nassehi, 2005). The system only exists while communication – verbal and non-verbal – subsists (Luhmann, 1982, 2006).

Hence, in Luhmann's view world society is a social system that is constituted by diverse subsystems, functionally closed to its environment, and autopoietic (Luhmann, 1996, 2006) – 'social systems are self-referential systems based on meaningful communication' (Luhmann, 1982, p. 131). Luhmann considers three kinds of social system: functional systems; interaction systems; and organisation systems. First, functional systems, the most prominent, have their own code, identity, and rules, but although functionally closed, they are interdependent on other functional systems (Steiner-Khamsi, 2021, p. 3), e.g. the education system depends on the policies established in the political system. Second, interaction systems are the only social system that Luhmann describes as requiring the presence of people in synchronous place and time (Nassehi, 2005, p. 184; Baraldi et al., 2021, p. 111). For this system to emerge, individuals need to perceive each other and themselves, and that they are being perceived by others too (Baraldi et al., 2021, p. 111). Communication within such a system becomes unavoidable, because even acts of non-communication are themselves communication (Baraldi et al., 2021, p. 111). Third, organisation systems come to be through 'rules of admission' such as formal membership; they can be companies or institutions (Baraldi et al., 2021, p. 111) such as political parties. They continue their self-referentiality by continuing decision-making processes; they are 'decision machines' (Nassehi, 2005, p. 185).

Although systems are 'operatively closed', they are also 'cognitively open' (Steiner-Khamsi, 2021, p. 2) – 'these subsystems observe and differentiate themselves from other subsystems to generate information. All the subsystems of society communicate in their idiosyncratic ways with their own (subsystem-specific)

environment and thereby generate shared, societal meaning' (Steiner-Khamsi, 2021, p. 2). 'The environment of social systems includes other social systems' (Luhmann, 1982, p. 131), making this environment very complex. Differentiation is a way of reducing complexity, because it distinguishes what belongs to the system from what belongs to its environment (Pereira do Amaral & Erfurth, 2021). Furthermore, because social systems can be divided into subsystems, differentiation also occurs within the system itself. For example, a political subsystem distinguishes between itself and its environment, which is composed by the legal subsystem, the education subsystem, the economic subsystem, and so on; and together, these subsystems compose society (Baraldi et al., 2021, p. 62). Thus, 'the differentiation of society into a multitude of self-referential paradoxes gives a basis for analysing the complexity of society' (Arnoldi, 2001, p. 3). It is due to this differentiation between system and subsystem and its environment that the system builds its borders, and that externalisation, as a form of selection of outside events and themes, becomes helpful for the system's continuation of its autopoiesis, the continuation of its self-referentiality.

The cognitive openness of each system to its environment therefore enables the selection of themes from its environment whose incorporation is considered valuable by the system (Luhmann, 1996). Through acts of externalisation the system selects some of the themes from those available in its environment and makes sense of them through its own internal binary codes (e.g. legal/illegal, informative/non-informative) (Paterson, 1997; Albert, 2016). Furthermore, the system's environment is always more complex than the system itself. Although the systems are autonomous but also interdependent, 'the increase in complexity in a system triggers an increase in complexity in the systems observing it, because their environments become more complex' (Baraldi et al., 2021, p. 51). The function of the system itself is therefore contingent on its internal process of selecting certain themes from its environment, which locally interprets and converts them into information useful to the system itself. From a different angle the systems are constantly exposed to other systems in its environment which cause irritations in the system (Luhmann, 1996, 2006), which are caused by communications between the system and its environment and are interpreted within the system and reconstructed through its own codes of meaning (Luhmann, 1996). For example, the policy guidelines of international organisations such as the OECD or its PISA results – belonging to the environment of both, the education and the political system – become irritations to these systems, which interpret these guidelines and results, making them meaningful information within its own operations. In this sense, besides externalisation – the focus of my analysis

in this dissertation – Luhmann’s pivotal role in the selection of themes from outside the system is considered a concept that helps make sense of how international elements are interpreted locally and become meaningful within the system, and in this study more precisely, the political and media systems while focusing on education.

However, Luhmann’s work is not immune to criticism, especially with regard to its level of abstraction and a ‘complex set of terms and relationships’ (Hermes & Bakken, 2003, p. 1512; Paterson, 1997; Vanderstraeten, 2003). I align with such critiques and identify the difficulties in fully grasping Luhmann’s social systems theory. I also understand Humberto Maturana’s critique of Luhmann’s adoption of his and Manuela Varela’s concept of the autopoiesis of biological entities as producing and reproducing themselves in a theory of social systems, because unlike them, Luhmann largely ignores the role of the ‘communicators’ (people) in functional systems (e.g. Kihlström, 2011; Stichweh, 2015). For Luhmann people are part of the system’s environment and not of the system itself. As stated and justified in the previous sub-section, in this analysis I dare to agree with the critique of Luhmann’s undervaluing of communicators, and follow an approach more in line with Steiner-Khamsi (2004), Rappleye, (2012), and others, which, although valuing Luhmann’s social systems theory highly, also recognise the role actors play in the processes developed within a system and these authors’ interactions with their environment (e.g. Provost, 2007) and the importance of paying attention to ‘...actors, agendas and politics...’ (Rappleye, 2012, p. 123) when analysing policy processes. I consider the agentic role of political and social actors participating in the policymaking process, such as politicians, parties, international organisations, and their tools of assessment and guidance, and the diversity of their life histories, ideologies, and membership in different communities and organisations. I follow in the footsteps of previous research (e.g. Medd, 2002; Cilliers, 1998, 2000; Morrison, 2006; Bates, 2016) by considering the interactions between all the actors involved in the policy process to be influenced by their own characteristics and background with effects on their schemata of interpretation, and that analysing them is key to understanding policy processes in a specific context. These networks of relations among actors cannot be ignored, because they contribute to the justification of why policymaking processes are complex, unique, and unrepeatable, and characterised by specific causal chains that are non-linear and usually unpredictable. Only thus is it possible to utilise theories such as the multiple streams approach and the epistemic governance framework in this analysis; theories that pay much attention precisely to actors’ agency and the strategies they apply to achieve policy change (or continuity).

For example, this helps explain that even if PISA results are received with similar enthusiasm by all political parties, their translation or how they are used and publicly framed often diverges from party to party.

In this study I consider the global dimension, the education and media systems, public opinion, and others as part of the environment of the political system. The political system, which is the main locus in which the policymaking process develops, observes the events and themes of its environment (for example, the other systems mentioned above), from which it selects some to be taken into the system and interpreted in its own language, becoming in turn part of its main operation as well: making policy. In addition, the fact that the system is ‘cognitively open’ aligns well with the complexity thinking premise that systems adapt to their environment and self-organise in view of selected inputs from its exterior. Although interpreting the environment according to its own local and contextual logic, the system sees beyond its borders, and adapts to certain external pressures and influences such as global policy trends.

## 3.2 One phenomenon, different lenses: a diversity of theories in the analysis of policy processes

Research into complex systems has proved it is impossible in any one study to draw a full picture of a system or its functionality. I acknowledge this fact and understand that the analysis of these systems requires the use of diverse theories that recognise and focus on these complexities from different angles. My attempt is to contribute to the already existing literature which multifacetedly analyses the political system as a whole through the interactions of its parts. My contribution will help better understand education policymaking processes in Portugal within the considered timeframe (2001–2018). It focuses on the specific contexts of the Portuguese parliament and print media, which means that this study’s empirical findings will not necessarily be found in other contexts or realms. In doing so, the focus is on the investigation of the role of externalisations in international elements made by political and media actors within policymaking processes as environmental events and themes that are selected by the system, recoded internally, and contribute to the autopoietic process that is constantly underway in the political system. Theoretically, I aim to expand our understandings of the interactions between actors located in different dimensions of the social world (local, national, and global), and how these interactions influence education policymaking processes.

Zahariadis (1998, in reference to Allison, 1971) highlights the importance of combining theories that focus on the same object while ‘employ[ing] different concepts, stress[ing] the relevance of different factors and even ask[ing] different questions’ (Zahariadis, 1998, p. 435). In this study I aggregate such theories with the aim of shedding new light on education policymaking processes, more precisely concerning agenda-setting discussions. As will be explained in the following subsections, these theories were not chosen randomly. The application of different lenses only brings useful results when they work complementarily with each other instead of in competition (Zahariadis, 1998). These theories have in common the fact that they explicitly (multiple streams approach and thematisation theory) or implicitly (epistemic governance framework) assume the social world in general and policy processes more specifically to be non-linear, taking place in ambiguous, chaotic, and unstable contexts, with many actors fighting to earn their audiences’ attention and support to promote their agendas. These theories thus share the complexity thinking approach’s epistemic and ontological premises.

Finally, the application of these different theories in two different datasets – parliamentary debates and print media articles – allows a comparison of the debate on education policy in two different contexts, shedding light on how actors in two different systems come to communicate among themselves and with other systems in an environment characterised by functionality closure.

### **3.2.1 Multiple streams approach and epistemic governance framework: the focus on actors’ interactions within the policy process**

Two of the theories used in this study (the multiple streams approach by John Kingdon and the epistemic governance framework by Pertti Alasuutari and Ali Qadir) focus strongly on actor agency and can help understand the acts of externalisation to international elements made by different actors within policy processes, and comprehend why and how external references are beneficial to the actors by contributing as a source of authority to the validation of the arguments presented in education policy discussions. In addition to acknowledged actors’ agency, these theories also recognise the paradox of such an agency: while acting on behalf of their self-interest (individually or as members of specific communities), actors limit each other’s scope to be agentic (Cairney, 2012, p. 353). For example, when social or political actors support a specific policy idea, they simultaneously limit other social and political actors’ scope of action.

The multiple streams approach was developed by John Kingdon and his colleagues to analyse agenda setting in the United States Congress during the 1980s. His fundamental question seeks to identify the conditions in which a policy idea's time emerges (Moulton & Silverwood, 2018). Since the seminal work on the multiple stream approach, presented in the book *'Agendas, Alternatives and Public Policies'* (Kingdon, 2003 – originally published in 1984), this approach has been hugely used beyond the context it was originally designed to study: policymaking processes in federal states (Jones et al., 2016; Zahariadis, 2007; Herweg et al., 2015; Herweg et al., 2018; see also Steiner-Khamsi, 2021). In the last decade or two the approach has been adapted and used in various settings – for example, to analyse the internal arenas of political parties (Novotný & Polášek, 2016), the EU policy process (e.g. Herweg, 2016; Ackrill & Kay, 2011), and how Brexit will influence the UK's climate change action (Moulton & Silverwood, 2018). Now, in Article II of this dissertation my colleague and I expand the use of the multiple streams approach to an analysis of parliamentary debates within a semi-presidential political system (see Article II, Santos & Kauko, 2020).

The multiple streams approach describes policy processes as organised anarchies, departing from the garbage can perspective of Cohen, March, and Olsen (1972). Within these organised anarchies a vast array of policy actors from various communities battles to place their favourite policies on the political agenda. In these battles political and social actors face constraints caused by limited timeframes, pressures from each other, and their own abilities (e.g. the number of issues they can grab, and the amount of information they can process). There is also a variable number of participants. Kingdon (2003) lists five key elements in any policy process: three streams ('politics' – environment of the policy is debate; 'problems' – situations framed as problems in need of attention; and 'policies' – solutions waiting for their time to come); and policy entrepreneurs and policy windows. The political stream is defined as the context in which the policymaking process occurs. Four factors are at work within the political stream: the national mood (institutional and public opinion); organised political forces (the balance between support of and opposition to a policy by various interests and political groups); government (changes in the government itself); and consensus building (coalitions built through concession and bargaining) (Kingdon, 2003). In the problem stream situations are framed as problems through various strategies and events: indicators (e.g. the results of ILSAs); focusing events (e.g. sudden events and catastrophes); feedback (e.g. the assessment of pilot programmes); and load (the policymaker's workload) (Zahariadis, 2007). Finally, within the policy stream various policy actors throw their favourite policy

solutions into the ‘primeval soup’. These policy suggestions within the ‘soup’ undergo selection (softening-up), which leads to a situation in which only some are raised for further discussion (Kingdon, 2003; Zahariadis, 2007); policy windows (moments when policy change is enabled by the bridging of the three streams; these moments are rare and short-lived) and policy entrepreneurs (political and social actors who identify policy windows and present their favourite policies to policymakers). When successful, they will gain support for the policies they present – see Article II, Santos & Kauko, 2020, for more detail on the key elements of the multiple streams approach.

Kingdon’s approach constitutes a useful analytical model that helps understand how policymaking processes unfold within ambiguous contexts (Zahariadis, 2003, p. 3). The model manages the complexity of the policy process using organising features that enable a better understanding of certain dynamics within the policy process. In other words, while not reducing this process to simplistic deterministic aspects, the approach organises the process of agenda setting and policy formulation in individual terms that favour a clear path to explore political activities that would otherwise be difficult to grasp due to the endless, mutant, and unpredictable networking of actors and their actions. The multiple streams approach as employed by my colleague and I in Article II (Santos & Kauko, 2020) updates and innovates the approach’s applicability in two new ways that are thus far unexplored. First, the study demonstrates the usefulness of this approach for analysing political dynamics in the context of the national parliaments in semi-presidential political systems. Second, the use of the multiple streams approach in the analysis of externalisations introduces a new way of exploring the global-local nexus within policy processes, contributing to both fields: political science and comparative and international education.<sup>7</sup>

In addition, and when using the multiple streams approach, I identified a change in the external references used during the 2005–2009 period (Legislature X). The significant increase in the number of external references used was intriguing and required further explanation. It was in considering this emerging behaviour that the epistemic governance framework revealed itself as a useful lens. Its focus on the analysis of how policy actors attempt to change the audiences’ views and decisions (Alasuutari & Qadir, 2019) offers some interesting answers regarding the policy processes developing during this timeframe.

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<sup>7</sup> An exception is Baek (2019), who applies the approach to an analysis of the role of global indicators in the process of education policy reform in South Korea.

While the multiple streams approach sheds light on how the policy process progresses in conditions of ambiguity (Zahariadis, 2003, p. 3), the epistemic governance framework applied to the analysis of policy processes as proposed by Pertti Alasuutari and Ali Qadir (2019) clarifies the policymaking choices, assumptions, and rationales within dynamics in which policy actors attempt to convince others that their ideas are the most appropriate. The epistemic governance framework is a complex analytical perspective, strongly influenced by Foucault's concept of power, order, and governability (Alasuutari & Qadir, 2014, 2019). It analyses how power is managed through a focus on policy actors' efforts to influence audiences' thinking and decisions, with the goal of earning sufficient support for their policy proposals (Alasuutari & Qadir, 2019). In this sense, the epistemic governance framework investigates the strategies policy actors use in their epistemic work – in this case in parliamentary debates – to make the ideas and proposals they are advocating acceptable, leading to policy changes or continuities. One such strategy is the use of epistemic capital (Alasuutari, 2018), meaning the rhetorical use of specific references seen as recognised by the public as authoritative.

The framework is constituted by several interdependent concepts. These are the 'objects of epistemic work' (reality aspects that speakers try to act on simultaneously), which are the 'ontology of the environment' (what the world is), 'actor identifications' (who we are), and 'norms and ideals' (what is good or desirable) (Alasuutari & Qadir, 2019, p. 21). To influence these objects, political and social actors engaged in policy processes therefore need 'epistemic capital', a collection of resources used as knowledge and evidence that helps them construct imageries (pictures and illustrations that make the argument more comprehensible to audiences) (Alasuutari & Qadir, 2019). All this takes place in two dimensions: paradigmatic (broad ontological assumptions of reality) and practical (for example, the production of knowledge about specific paradigmatic assumptions) (Alasuutari & Qadir, 2019).

In addition to the above concepts, I identified three kinds of assumption directly related to the objects of epistemic work: 'ontological assumptions'; 'identification assumptions'; and 'normative and ideological assumptions'. I identified these assumptions by analysing the acts of externalisation to international elements, which work as a bank of epistemic capital (sources of authority) available to political and social actors who aim to influence the policymaking process. This bank of epistemic capital resembles the 'primeval soup' metaphor that Kingdon (2003, p. 116) introduced to his analysis from the field of biology, and in which the elements simply linger for a long time and go through a process of 'softening up' until someone



selects them because they are at that stage perceived as able to offer validation. It is by analysing policymakers' selections of certain external elements – instead of the others also available – that the speaker's assumptions concerning their audiences are clarified: they are chosen on the basis of what the speaker assumes the audiences' perceptions of reality are, what is perceived that the audiences accept as valid and authoritative entities, and the speaker's assumptions concerning what the audiences understand as positive, negative, acceptable, or unacceptable (for more details on this see Article III – Santos, 2021).

The epistemic governance framework leads to a deeper understanding of the intricate societal conditions (or socio-logic – Schriewer, 1990) that drive actors in a certain policy setting to interpret and adopt certain global ideas as their own, and certain international actors and tools as authoritative elements that can contribute to convincing others that a proposed path of action is the most adequate (when used for legitimation) or the most unsuitable (in the case of using international elements as a de-legitimation tool). While epistemic capital does not necessarily refer to international elements, because it can be anything perceived as possessing convincing power and that can benefit the speakers' arguments, the application of epistemic governance to analysing externalisations sheds light on the complexities of the relationships between local and global dimensions in the policy process, demonstrating a constant dialectic in which, if international influences are undeniable, they are still translated by local actors in ways that better feed their needs for the legitimation of their own agendas.

### 3.2.2 Thematisation theory: the media intervention in political agenda setting

One of the features of any complex system acknowledged here is that it can observe, selectively interact with, and be influenced by events of other systems constituting its environment, without losing its main function. The relationship of the media with the political system in general and policy processes in particular has been extensively studied (e.g. Levin, 2004; Cook, 2006; Takayama, 2008; Van Aelst, 2014; Corsi, 2017; Rautalin, 2018). The media has itself also been analysed as a complex social system (e.g. Luhmann, 1996; Artieri & Gemini, 2019). Indeed, among all the social systems that Luhmann (1996) (and in his vein, other researchers such as Artieri & Gemini, 2019) analyses, the mass media is an interesting case. Luhmann argues that the media system has a dual function: a) it interprets external information (constantly causing

irritations within the media system), making it more attainable to the public; and b) it creates a communication bridge between systems (Luhmann, 1997; Baraldi et al., 2021). These two functions are relevant, because everything citizens know about their world is in fact acquired through the media (Luhmann, 1996). The media therefore works as a mechanism of public opinion formation and agenda setting (Pissarra Esteves, 2016).

Although he never referred to it as thematisation theory in any of his many works, it belongs to the theory of social systems developed by Niklas Luhmann and developed by his students, especially in Germany and Italy (Saperas, 1987, p. 87). The first function of the media is to select certain external themes from its environment and other systems, and subsequently inject these themes into the public system. By doing so, the media system increases its own complexity. However, because this system is operationally closed and autopoietic like other social systems, information delivered to the public is previously internally interpreted and simplified by the media system itself. Moreover, these themes are not shared neutrally. Certain frames are applied to them, giving news productions a specific slant, depending on who the writer is, and their agenda. In this sense, the media decides not only what is of the public space; it also defines public problems and a sense that these problems are in urgent need of attention (Nery, 2004; Luhmann, 1996). Specific solutions to these problems are also sometimes presented.

A second function of the media system is to couple/bridge other systems – for example, when the themes selected concern public policy issues, the media enable communication between the political system and the public. This communication channel has a dual function: on the one hand, through the media policy actors can mediate the themes accessed by their citizens, on the other, political actors can identify public expectations and assess the reception of their decisions (Pissarra Esteves, 2016, pp. 414–420). An analogy can be made concerning this coupling function of the media system with the concept of policy entrepreneurs presented in the multiple streams approach (Kingdon, 2003). Like policy entrepreneurs, actors in the media system intensify discussion of certain themes at specific moments when a policy window is seen to be open. For example, when PISA results are made public to highlight certain education issues, PISA reports can be used as a ‘focusing event’ (Kingdon, 2003) that is used by media actors to promote their favourite themes and advocate for their pet policy solutions.

The media therefore functions as a mechanism for the double reduction of the social world’s complexity: first, the public is influenced to focus on some education

themes; second it is led to interpret them from only a few perspectives (see more in Article IV).

By analysing the externalisations to international elements in the Portuguese print media using the lens of thematisation theory, the study sheds light on how, in a social world that is increasingly complex, media actors need more powerful strategies to substantiate the arguments they present. When discussing education policymaking, political and social actors (such as journalists and academics – especially in opinion articles) often use references to ILSAs such as PISA, the OECD (this survey's creator and organiser – see Sub-section 1.1), and participant countries as sources of authority that help to highlight the deficiencies of the education system and share the need to urgently address these issues with the public, thus attempting to influence the themes in the agendas of public opinion and consequently of politics.

The analysis of actors' interactions within the media system, and between them and the public and the political system, is relevant to contributing to the understanding of social pressure. The study of the themes promoted in the public agenda by the media, and the tools they use to advocate for them for an extensive timeframe, enables the expansion of both: an understanding of the evolution of the themes that are seen as relevant, and when and why they become so, and the role international elements play in their definition as problems. With frame analysis, thematisation theory facilitates this analysis.

## 4 PORTUGAL: JUSTIFYING ITS SELECTION AND DESCRIBING THE HISTORIC BACKGROUND

The theories applied in this analysis require an understanding of the contexts in which these policy processes take place. Contexts are the societal and historical particularities that characterise the environment where the policy process develops (Cairney et al., 2019, p. 7). Understanding why and how certain external references are made and utilised in policy processes in Portugal therefore demands a basic understanding of the country's history and development. In this case, because the data analysed are parliamentary debates and media articles, it seems that an understanding of the history and functionality of these contexts is required. In what follows I succinctly present the Portuguese political and party systems, the evolution of its education system, and brief descriptions of parliament, the media, and their evolution.

Portugal affords an interesting context for the study of externalisations to international elements for several reasons. To begin with, no study of external references in its broadest scope (i.e. including all references to any international element found in a specific dataset) has yet been undertaken in the context of policy studies in this country. The study of external referencing occurring in the country is usually limited to the analysis of the reception and uses of PISA (e.g. Afonso & Costa, 2009ab; Carvalho & Costa, 2014a; Carvalho et al., 2017; Costa, 2011; Lemos & Serrão, 2015) and the OECD (e.g. Lemos, 2014, 2015; Teodoro, 2019).<sup>8</sup> Thus, this study attempts to plug this gap by identifying all the international elements mentioned in each dataset and analysing how they are used by the speakers in the parliament and by the media articles' writers.

It is also noteworthy that although Portugal had a right-wing authoritarian regime between 1926 and 1974, it maintained various external relations after the late 1940s (Barreto, 1994, 2002; Teixeira, 2012, p. 7). For example, in 1948 Portugal was one of the founder members of the OEEC – the Organisation for European Economic Co-operation. This organisation would become the OECD in 1961 with the accession

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<sup>8</sup> However, some studies in the context of history and comparative education exist concerning the flow and structuring of pedagogical knowledge. See, for example, Carvalho & Cordeiro, 2002; Cordeiro & Carvalho, 2005; and Madeira, 2007.

of the USA and Canada (MNE, in <https://www.ocde.missaoportugal.mne.pt>; Centeno, 2017, p. 27). The OECD has since influenced Portugal's economic and education policies, even during the dictatorship. For example, the Mediterranean Regional Project in the 1960s identified core issues in the Portuguese education system, including insufficient years of basic education, a high dropout rate, and low success rates; and offered solutions (Gomes, 1999; Barreto, 2002; Teixeira et al., 2003; Teodoro, 2019).

Another good example of the Portuguese interest in developing its international relationships is its enthusiastic accession to the EU. Portugal was already discreetly involved in some international dynamics that would lead to the establishment of the EEC – European Economic Community, which in 1993 would become the EU<sup>9</sup> – and having overcome the political and social instability of the post-revolutionary years (particularly the period between 1974 and 1976), during the first stable four-year legislature (1976–1980) the first constitutional government identified EU integration as essential to maintaining the country's recently established democracy, modernising the country's infrastructure, and boosting its economic development (Magone, 1995; Mateus, 1999; Teixeira, 2012). Portugal submitted its application to become a member in March 1977 with the support of all parties in the recently established parliament (except the Portuguese Communist Party – PCP). The application for the country's EU integration was well received by the European Commission, and in 1986 Portugal became a member state (Magone, 1995; Mateus, 1999; Fraga, 2001; Teixeira, 2012; Goes & Leston-Bandeira, 2019).

Despite the growing social search for formal education and the political attempts to reform the Portuguese education system since the late 1950s, its development is clearly demarcated by the change of the political regime in 1974 (Barroso, 2003, p. 65). Since then and until the twentieth century, successive Portuguese governments have attempted to reform the education system, often drawing on external advice and good examples from other countries (e.g. Barroso, 2003; Teodoro & Aníbal, 2007). Efforts to improve the education system have been successful, as evidenced by the improving results of ILSAs such as TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) and PISA. For example, Portugal's 2000 PISA results were 453 points in mathematics, 459 points in science, and 470 points in reading (OECD, 2001). Fifteen years later, in 2015, Portugal recorded its best scores ever, achieving 492 points in mathematics, 501 points in science, and 498 in reading, surpassing the OECD countries' average for the first time (OECD, 2018).

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<sup>9</sup> The EEC became the EU in 1993 with the entry into force of the Maastricht Treaty, signed in early 1992.

Portugal also makes an interesting context to study because despite its active participation in both the TIMSS and PISA surveys since their launch in the 1990s, they were mostly excluded from education policy arguments until much later. This led me to raise questions about what other references were being used. PISA was sporadically mentioned in the media until the 2009 results were made public (see Article IV, Santos et al., 2022) more to describe results than to engage in major discussion of education reforms. Furthermore, this survey was directly mentioned in passing in parliament for the first time only in 2005. TIMSS was completely absent from the discussions of education policy until 2013 in both contexts, when it became a reference, probably propelled by the significant student performance improvements in both surveys in recent years. In line with previous research (Afonso & Costa, 2009b; Costa, 2011; Carvalho et al., 2020) my view is that the change in PISA referencing in 2005 can be explained by a change in the logic of governance and legitimation by the XVII government (2005–2009), which focused more on using knowledge seen as scientific evidence than on traditional ideological political principles (Afonso & Costa, 2009b). Subsequently, when Portuguese students' performance in the 2009 PISA cycle approached the OECD average for the first time, the use of PISA as a reference in education discussions became a powerful tool of authority. An improvement in education results has been a Portuguese ambition since the early 1900s, when international statistics started to systematically show lower literacy levels in Portugal than in most European countries (Gomes, 1999; Antunes, 2004; Nóvoa, 2005). Approaching the OECD countries' average in PISA 2009 seems to have catalysed education discussions, because it raised hopes that the country might finally be leaving the dark ages of its education quality, efficiency, and performance behind (Santos & Kauko, 2020; Santos, 2021; Santos et al., 2022).

#### **4.1 The political system's development, and parliament as a place where different social systems interlace**

The Portuguese parliament is a privileged policymaking context and thus useful for the study of externalisations to international elements as an expression of local-global interconnectedness. From the complexity perspective it is an ideal place to observe the interactions between elements of a system in processes of change, adaptation, and self-organisation. From the Luhmannian social systems perspective, parliament may be illustrative of a location where the three kinds of social system described in Sub-section 3.1.3 can be observed (the organisation, functional, and

interaction systems). To continue its main operation of making policy, parliament needs these three systems to be closely interrelated. In the case of the organisation system this is because of its emergence from ‘rules of admission’ such as formal membership (Baraldi et al., 2021, p. 164). Parliament is a rich aggregation of such systems, as it is composed of several parties and councils, and its outcome (policy) consists of the management of expectations through decision making in which each decision is selected from the available possibilities, given that, as has been explained in Sub-section 3.1.3, they are contingent on past decisions, and the decisions of the present constitute a contingency for future decisions (Baraldi et al., 2021, p. 164). As Nassehi (2005, p. 185) clarifies, organisation systems are ‘decision machines’: examined from above, it can be said parliaments make decisions expressed by the shape of policies. Since the members of each party and council (and across parties and councils) constantly interact, they lead to the emergence of the interaction system. The interaction system requires – as does the parliamentary context – the presence of people in a shared space and time (Nassehi, 2005, p. 184). In these circumstances each person is aware of the presence of every other person and understands that the others are also aware of their presence (Baraldi et al., 2021, p. 111) in a sort of feedback loop. In the case of parliament, where the main operation depends on debate between diverse political forces, communication is the main tool for the system to function and maintain its main function of policymaking. Parliament can also be considered a functional system, because it operates in a closed autopoietic loop that leads to its self-reproduction. It is operationally closed, but also highly interdependent with other systems such as the education, economic, legal, and other systems (Steiner-Khamsi, 2021, p. 3), because its main operation is to make policies regarding these other systems.

The history of the current Portuguese political system, which led to the emergence of parliament as it is today, starts in 1974, after the revolution of 25 April, which ended ‘Europe’s lengthiest dictatorship of the right’ (Gallagher, 1979, p. 385), led first by António Salazar, and – when he fell ill in the late 1960s – Marcelo Caetano. The Portuguese ‘revolution of April’ initiated ‘the so-called “third wave” of world-wide democratization’ followed by other Mediterranean countries, more specifically, Spain and Greece (Freire, 2005, p. 21). However, it is noteworthy that the Portuguese parliament’s history, its dynamics, and the public’s perception of it is still influenced today by more than a century of attempts to implement a political system in which parliament played a significant political role (Leston-Bandeira & Tibúrcio, 2012). The Portuguese parliament came into existence in 1820 ‘under a monarchical system’ and following the liberal European trends of that time (Leston-

Bandeira & Tibúrcio, 2012, p. 385). Nevertheless, it was only in 1975, with the first democratic elections held in the country after the revolution (Maxwell, 1989; Leston-Bandeira & Tibúrcio, 2012, Teixeira, 2012) and the ‘election of the Constituent Assembly’ (Lobo et al., 2015, p. 14) that it became a democratic institution that was representative of the country’s citizens (Leston-Bandeira & Tibúrcio, 2012). Although elected only with the aim of making the new Portuguese constitution, the new parliament was seen as essential to the consolidation of democracy and the ‘symbol of the affirmation of a representative political system’ and would soon begin to be used by the deputies to influence the country’s politics (Leston-Bandeira & Freire, 2003, p. 57). The Portuguese parliament has undergone recurrent changes and adaptations, but it has followed a steady path, stabilising slowly over the years and attaining its position as the main policymaking arena and the central legislative organ of the Portuguese political system, as originally planned during the late 1970s (Leston-Bandeira 2001; Leston-Bandeira & Freire, 2003; Leston-Bandeira & Tibúrcio, 2012).

The new constitution of 1976, drafted by the Constituent Assembly – elected in 1975 – therefore established a semi-presidential political system. Powers are divided between the President of the Republic, parliament, the government, and the courts, which determine the constitutionality of legislative proposals and decisions (Leston-Bandeira, 2001, 2004). The president is democratically elected and has veto powers, as well as the right to dissolve parliament and the government. Parliament is also elected by universal suffrage and has strong legislative power, which preserves government accountability and has the right to dismiss it through a motion of censure or a failed confidence motion (Fraga, 2001; Leston-Bandeira, 2001, 2004; Freire, 2005; Leston-Bandeira & Tibúrcio, 2012; Goes & Leston-Bandeira, 2019). The prime minister of each government, appointed by the President of the Republic, is usually the leader of the party with the most votes in the legislative elections (Jalali et al., 2021). The courts are the only state institution that is not elected.

Minority Portuguese governments have occasionally been attempted. However, party leaders more frequently choose to form a coalition with another party to increase the number of deputies in parliament who support the government, making their policymaking processes more fruitful. Within this study’s timeframe (2001 and 2018) Portugal had two minority governments (XIV<sup>10</sup> government, 1999–2002; and XIII government, 2009–2011), both collapsed before the end of the legislature. There was one government with an absolute majority (XVII government, 2005–2009), three coalitions (XV government, 2002–2004; XVI government, 2004–2005;

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<sup>10</sup> In Portugal governments and legislatures are named consecutively using Roman numerals.



XIX government, 2011–2015), and one minority government which was able to stay in power for a regular four-year term through parliamentary agreements with all the parties on the left (XXI government, 2015–2019).

As Leston-Bandeira (2001, 2004) and Menitra (2011) explain, the Portuguese parliament’s structure and work organisation is laid down in its Rules of Procedure. It is a single chamber parliament with 230 deputies. The president of the parliament is chosen by the deputies during the first plenary session of each legislature (Rules of Procedure, 2018). The Rules of Procedure (2018) identify nine main types of debate occurring in the plenary (as shown in Table 2). They have several structures and names. They are mainly differentiated by whether they require the presence of the prime minister or another government representative, and whether the topic is treated as urgent or not (Leston-Bandeira 2004; Menitra 2011).

**Table 2.** Kinds of debate as described in parliament’s Rules of Procedure (as presented in Article II – Santos & Kauko, 2020)

	Kind of debate	Explanation
<b>Government representative must be present at the debate</b>	<i>Debates of interpellation to the government</i>	Requested by one of the PGs to discuss general or specific policy topics with the government.
	<i>Debates with ministers (in this case of education)</i>	Each minister must be present at the plenary session at least once each legislative session (1 year) to answer deputies’ questions on the topics related to their area. The president of the parliament sets the date of the debate after discussions with the government and the Conference of Representatives.
	<i>Debates with the prime minister</i>	The prime minister is required to attend plenary sessions twice a week to answer deputies’ questions concerning one or more topic usually chosen by the prime minister. The president of the parliament sets the dates of the debate after discussions with the government and the Conference of Representatives.
	<i>Urgent debates with the government</i>	Both the PGs and the government may request an urgent debate. The request and the reasons for it are analysed by the Conference of Representatives, which sets the date for the debate.
	<i>Debates on the state of the nation</i>	Regular debates happening at the end of each legislative session arranged by the president of the parliament on a date agreed with the government. During these debates general policy actions and the government’s activities are analysed.

<b>Debates do not require the presence of government representatives</b>	<i>Legislative initiatives (debates on reforms)</i>	Focusing on one or more bills (Law Project – presented by the PGs; Law Proposal – presented by the government or the government of the autonomous regions of Madeira and the Azores).
	<i>Actuality debates</i>	Requested by one or more PGs on a topic considered relevant. These debates may happen up to twice a month. The presence of a representative of the government is not mandatory.
	<i>Thematic debates</i>	The president of the parliament, the committees, the PGs, or the government can request a thematic debate. The requester must distribute a document beforehand to all the participants introducing the debate, with supporting documents.
	<i>Political declarations</i>	Used by PGs or individual deputies to express opinions on specific situations and events. Each PG has the right to one political declaration a week. Deputies not belonging to a PG may do this up to twice every legislative session, and single deputies belonging to a PG three times in a legislative session.
	<i>Other debates</i>	We created this category to include debates that did not fit other categories, but which concerned education, such as <i>subjects of relevant interest, congratulatory votes, report appreciations, and government declarations.</i>

Leston-Bandeira (2001, 2004) and Lobo, et al. (2015) describe Portugal as a multi-party system. Like most cultural, political, or social phenomena, the construction and development of the post-revolutionary party system in Portugal is complex and contingent on local history. Thus, as already enunciated, during the early post-1974 years the Portuguese party system was characterised by strong fragmentation and instability (Lobo et al., 2015, 2016). Such a political and social environment also resulted in unstable governments until the mid-1980s (Lobo, 2001, pp. 643–644; Freire, 2005; Lobo et al., 2016). However, due to a lack of innovation, public support, and funding, only a few of these political parties survived beyond the mid-1980s, with growing support for the two central parties (PS and PSD – see Table 3 below) (Lobo, 2001; Freire, 2005; Teixeira, 2012). The semi-presidential system – in which the presidential candidate needs to earn at least 50% of the votes – contributed to a dynamic in which a centralised left–right bloc tension solidified, with smaller extreme parties of each side of the political spectrum offering their strategic support to one of the two stronger centre parties (PS – centre-left and PSD – centre-right) (Lobo, 2001; Lisi, 2009). These dynamics were thus an important factor in the consolidation of democracy, because the growing strength of the political forces of the centre

during the first 20 years after the end of the dictatorship may have provided the necessary stability to finally enable elected governments to retain power during the four years of the regular term (Lobo, 2001, pp. 643–644; Freire, 2005).

During the analysed timeframe seven parties played a major role in the country's politics with parliamentary seats (three left-wing parties – PCP, BE, and PEV, one centre-left party – PS, one centre-right party – PSD, one right-wing party – CDS-PP, and one party of causes – PAN, see Table 3). Most of these parties emerged during the early 1970s and have no strong historical roots in Portugal, except for the PCP, which was established in 1921 and worked underground and abroad during the dictatorship (Freire, 2005).

**Table 3.** Portuguese political parties – table constructed with data extracted from Lewis & Williams (1984), Freire (2005), Lisi (2009), Pinto (2011), and the statutes of each party (accessed online)

Party	Political spectrum	Historical origins/influences
PS (Partido Socialista – Socialist Party)	Centre-left	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Founded in 1973 by political actors exiled in Germany</li> <li>- Originally supported by the Socialist International, the German SPD, and the Scandinavian Social Democratic parties</li> <li>- Social democratic</li> <li>- Member of the Socialist International Social Democracy</li> </ul>
PSD (Partido Social Democrata – Social Democrat Party)	Centre-right	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Founded in in May 1974 as the Popular Democratic Party (PPD –Partido Popular Democrático)</li> <li>- Originally supported by the European Liberal, Democratic and Reformist group (ELDR), until the 1990s.</li> <li>- In the European Parliament since the 1990s, aligned with the Conservative European People's Party (EPP)</li> <li>- Social democratic/liberal</li> </ul>
BE (Bloco de Esquerda – Left Bloc)	Left	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Founded in 1999</li> <li>- Originally a coalition of three entities: two old parties of the left (PSR – Socialist Revolutionary Party and UDP – Popular Democratic Union) and a political movement (Politics XXI)</li> <li>- Left-libertarian/socialist</li> <li>- In the European Parliament associated with the UEL/NGL (the Left in the European Parliament (ex-European United Left/Nordic Green Left)</li> </ul>
CDS-PP (Centro democrático Social-Partido Popular – Social Democrat Centre-Popular Party)	Right	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Founded in July 1974; supported by the Christian Democratic Union</li> <li>- Conservative/Christian democratic</li> <li>- Joined the Conservative European People's Party (EPP) in the European Parliament at the beginning of the 1990s, but</li> </ul>

		the party's anti-European attitude resulted in its expulsion in 1992, only for it to return in 2004 having slowly changed its stance regarding the EU.
PCP (Partido Comunista Português – Portuguese Communist Party)	Left	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Founded in 1921; supported by the Soviet Union and the Communist International (Comintern)</li> <li>- Member of Comintern in 1943</li> <li>- In the European Parliament UEL/NGL (ex-European United Left/Nordic Green Left, now renamed the Left in the European Parliament)</li> <li>- Marxist-Leninist (especially until the 1980s)</li> </ul>
PEV (Partido Ecologista 'Os Verde' – Ecologist Party "The Greens")	Left	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Founded in 1982 under the name Movimento Ecologista Português-Partido 'Os Verdes' (Portuguese Movement Ecologist-Party 'the Greens')</li> <li>- A micro-party/ecological movement</li> <li>- Exists due to the support of the PCP, with whom it has run in elections since 1987 in a coalition (CDU–Coligação Democrática Unitária)</li> <li>- Member of the European Greens</li> <li>- Eco-socialism</li> </ul>
PAN (Pessoas-Animais-Natureza)	----	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Founded in 2009 as a party of causes called Partido pelos Animais (PPA)</li> <li>- Its first deputy in the Portuguese parliament was elected in 2015</li> <li>- Eco-centric view of the world/animal welfare/environmentalist</li> </ul>

Compared with the other southern European countries (with Portugal, the new democracies, Spain and Greece, as well as Italy), the Portuguese party system has been quite stable since the late 1970s. Since 1976 the two centre parties (PS and PSD) have been able to maintain the status quo despite political and economic crises; unlike in other countries, they have not been replaced by newer parties. Since the late 1970s, along with the CDS, they have been the only government parties (Freire, 2012, 2017; Serra-Silva & Belchior, 2019). The PS usually forms a government alone, even if it is in a minority. Indeed, on the eight occasions between 1976 and 2019 that the PS formed a government, only two were coalitions (neither lasted the four-year term), five were minority governments (of which three did not last the four-year term), and only one was a majority government (the XVII Government, 2005–2009). The historical reasons for choosing to govern alone are related to the PS's strong desire to dissociate itself from its left-wing opponents, and especially the totalitarian stance of the PCP (Lobo, 2001; Freire, 2012, 2017). The elections of 2015 brought

some change to this PS attitude, as well as to the Portuguese political system in general, when the party with the most votes – the PSD – failed to propose a stable solution for government, and the PS (with the second highest vote count) succeeded in forming a minority government with the agreed parliamentary support of the PCP and the BE, an unprecedented left-wing alignment popularly known as the ‘Geringonça’ (‘Contraption’ in English) that saw the government lasting a four-year term (Serra-Silva & Belchior, 2019; Jalali et al., 2021). The PSD has formed single-party governments when they have achieved a majority but has also frequently formed coalitions with the CDS-PP – the only route that has enabled the latter to be involved in government (Serra-Silva & Belchior, 2019). Indeed, of the twelve PSD governments eight have been coalitions (six of which did not last the four-year term), and only four have seen the PSD governing alone (two of which did not last the four-year term).

The Portuguese constitution affords the parties with a central role in parliament instead of individual deputies (Leston-Bandeira, 2004; Leston-Bandeira & Tibúrcio, 2012). The deputies are selected internally by the parties and are democratically elected under the d’Hondt proportional representation system with a closed list system for a four-year term (Lobo, 1996; Leston-Bandeira, 2004; Leston-Bandeira & Tibúrcio, 2012). The choice of proportional representation can be seen as a clear response to the need to discontinue the single-party politics of the past, accompanied by the exclusion of any political actor somehow connected with the previous regime when the new parties were being formed during the 1970s (Magalhães, 2011, p. 227). Furthermore, when elected, deputies form parliamentary groups based on the parties’ divisions and are bound to strict party cohesion (Leston-Bandeira, 2004). The parties’ (or parliamentary groups’) power is evident in the rights given by the constitution, which include the presentation of bills, requesting the presence of the government in parliament, and proposing the analysis and reassessment of decrees and laws implemented by the government (Leston-Bandeira, 2004; Lobo et al., 2015).

Because parliament is the main legislative body in Portugal (Leston-Bandeira, 2001, 2004; Leston-Bandeira & Tibúrcio, 2012), parliamentary debates are relevant data sources when analysing policymaking. It is in this political space that a) the electorate is able (if it so wishes) to follow the dynamics of national policymaking, and b) it is the main stage for the ‘government-opposition game’ (Palonen, 2003), and as such plenary discussions constitute a rich space to observe the policy process and analyse interactions among a huge array of actors involved in the process and to

explore their assumptions about their audiences (the other parties and the public), and their political and legitimisation strategies.

## 4.2 The media: describing the process of earning freedom and increasing social participation

As in other social and cultural areas, the development of the Portuguese mass media was strongly influenced and compromised by the authoritarian regime (1926–1974). Two complementary factors (among others) were essential to the country's developmental delay: a) the strong censorship and propaganda applied by the dictatorship; and b) the high levels of poverty and illiteracy (Lima, 2013, p. 105). As Oliveira (1992), Figueiras, (2005), Garcia (2009), and Cádima (2010) explain, the decade after the end of the dictatorship was strongly marked by both change and the end of censorship, resulting in progress in freedom of speech and diversity in covering protests and demonstrations, which were now considered 'normal components of politics' (Fishman, 2011, p. 237). However, the media also went through a period of instability, with the nationalisation of industries and banking and consequently the media outlets, which were usually owned by the former, creating structural, financial, and management issues that led to rapid and many different layers of reform (Oliveira, 1992; Figueiras, 2005; Garcia, 2009; Cádima, 2010).

Oliveira (1992), Figueiras (2005), and Cádima (2010) argue that during the 1980s the Portuguese systems began to stabilise, and with Portugal's admission to the European Union in 1986 the media was finally denationalised (Oliveira, 1992; Figueiras, 2005; Cádima, 2010). Since the late 1980s the Portuguese media system has been steadily improving, for example, with more diversity, more outlets available, and more collaborators writing opinion pieces, (Pereira & Nina, 2016; see also Figueiras, 2005). Nevertheless, the media remains 'underdeveloped'. It demonstrates a 'high level of property concentration', with the same company owning several media outlets, the 'professionalism of journalists remains low', there is observable 'intervention of the state' and a significant 'parallelism between the media outlets and the party system' (Pereira & Nina, 2016; see also Figueiras 2005; Cádima, 2010). However, there appears to be a high level of freedom of speech according to the 2021 Freedom House assessment (<https://freedomhouse.org/country/portugal/freedom-world/2021>, accessed 20 August 2021).

Since the end of the dictatorship relations between the media and political systems have been tense and ambivalent (Pereira & Nina, 2016; Cádima, 2010; Figueiras, 2020). Until the 1990s the print media, which was then most prominent, consistently worked to ‘distance themselves from ideological conditioning’, with a turning point in the early 1990s (Álvares & Damásio, 2013, p. 138). However, media outlets do not openly admit their partisan slant, because ideological diversity is seen as having a positive impact on sales (Álvares & Damásio, 2013, p. 139). In this regard, the reports of the Entidade Reguladora para a Comunicação Social (Regulatory Entity for Social Communication), the entity that monitors and regulates the media and its social and political pluralism, states that during the 2015 elections the five main parties in Portugal occupied about 85 per cent of news articles covering the campaign (Garça, 2017, pp. 10–11). This confirms some party parallelism, even though it is much milder than in countries like Spain and Italy, where it is explicit (Álvares & Damásio, 2013). However, it is noteworthy that the European Media Systems Survey 2010 (Popescu et al., 2011) also demonstrates that the Portuguese media exerts strong pressure on political actors, and themes raised by the media are discussed by politicians in the political arena.

As a great amount of research has already demonstrated, the media is not only the primary means for people to inform themselves about events in the world around them, it also plays a relevant role in the formation of public opinion (Figueira, 2005; Pissarra Esteves, 2016). Furthermore, the media is a ‘political public space’ (Nery, 2004, p. 15), which means it constitutes a fundamental link between the actors within the political system and its audiences. Through the media political actors communicate with their public and understand the public’s expectations and how acceptable the public finds their proposals (Pissarra Esteves, 2016). The information about the Portuguese media system presented above demonstrates a clear connection between the media and political systems over the last 50 years and their political relationship as described in Sub-section 3.2.2 of this dissertation. Analysing these systems when investigating policymaking processes can unveil patterns and parallelisms between the interactions between the systems’ actors and between them and the global dimension, contributing to identifying and understanding the reasons and strategies behind their opening thus, the acts of externalisation to international elements in the discussion of education policies.

## 5 RESEARCH DESIGN: THE DETAILS AND OPERATIONALISATION OF A RESEARCH PROCESS'S JOURNEY

In this section I present the journey and details of the research process that led to this dissertation. The research process is attached to the researcher and influenced by their background and interpretative schemata, which are built through previously acquired knowledge, values, and beliefs (Collins & Stockton, 2018). My interest in the topic of externalisation to international elements began to take form well before my doctoral research programme started. It emerged progressively from my own life experiences and my many personal and work journeys. It originated from observations as I moved from place to place; it was awakened by my adaption to new networks of people and their dynamics; and it spiked when I moved to Finland, a country that I thought I knew a lot about through the descriptions I had seen here and there in media outlets and education publications. This process was slow and reflexive, it was constructed through observation and judgements about 'the other'. When teaching in Finland, one question intrigued me: 'Why is it that so much of what I've heard about Finland is to some extent inaccurate?'. 'Yes – kids have homework almost every day in Finland! Only a little, but they do.' And 'Hu-uh! Classroom tables in my kids' schools are arranged in rows, and they are individual too!' I felt I had been misinformed, and this led me to my first research questions: 'Why is it that what I "know" about Finland is not what happens in Finland?', 'Where does this information come from, and how was it disseminated worldwide?' These questions led me to read about the role international organisations played in national and regional policymaking processes (e.g. Lemos, 2014; Costa, 2011; Afonso & Costa, 2009ab; Grek, 2009; Takayama, 2008), the globalisation of education (e.g. Rizvi & Lingard, 2010), reference societies (e.g. Takayama, 2009; Ringarp & Rothland, 2010; Sellar & Lingard, 2013; Takayama et al., 2013), policy borrowing and lending (e.g. Steiner-Khamsi, 2002, 2004; Steiner-Khamsi & Waldow, 2012), and world culture and neo-institutionalism (e.g. Ramirez, 2012; Arnove, 2009). These literature reviews guided me to my first research plan, which focused on analysing the impacts of PISA in the construction of new reference societies in Portugal.



Thus, the scientific research process, not unlike the policy process, is often non-linear and contingent. It has bumps and bifurcations that require interpretation, a reflexive attitude, and some flexibility from researchers to accept unexpected changes in both the world being analysed and their own sensemaking of that world (Kauko & Wermke, 2018). In the following sub-sections I delve into these aspects of the research process, clarify my paradigmatic positionality, explain the research's progress, and present the moments when I was confronted with choice and then change, when my decisions led to adaptations of features of the research project as originally designed.

## 5.1 Reflexivity in research: a constant dynamic conditioned by the researcher's subjectivity

The researcher's reflexive attitude during the research process is fundamental. Researchers are a central part of the world they observe, and they make constructs of it (Hertherington, 2013) as they make sense of what they observe through their personal (yet socially and historically constructed) interpretive schemata. In other words, researchers must 'understand themselves as significant actors in the field of which they aim to make sense' (Kauko & Wermke, 2018). Their subjectivity (and that of the research participants/subjects) and reflexivity are therefore in constant tension, and a permanent meta-observation, or 'meta-examination', is required (Collins & Stockton, 2018, p. 3; Bott, 2010), because the interpretations, or sensemaking, of any observed phenomenon are contingent on the researchers themselves (Kauko & Wermke, 2018), their context, their past experiences, and their beliefs and values. Reflexiveness is thus required, because it 'turns attention "inwards" towards the person of the researcher' and the research contexts and society in general, and it consists of the act of critically interpreting one's own interpretations (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009, p. 9). Researchers therefore need to be aware of and acknowledge their own subjectivity as part of the research process and acknowledge that this subjectivity (built through the researchers' experiences, values, and assumptions) biases the research development to some extent (Mackieson et al., 2019). Researchers' awareness of and reflection on their subjectivity means that they recognise personal value assumptions, and this recognition in itself can already reduce their impact on the research process. Thus, reflexivity, as a permanent component of this process, can be a strategy that brings to qualitative research the

necessary rigour (Mackieson et al., 2019). The study presented in this dissertation focuses on education and its policies in Portugal, and as a Portuguese teacher who worked in the Portuguese education system for many years, I found developing an understanding beyond my own experiences and assumptions of Portuguese education, policymaking, and the intertwinements between levels of governance occasionally challenging. A constant self-observation and questioning of my own reasoning have been necessary for this research to acquire its scientific nature.

Moreover, a research process that follows the principles of complexity thinking must recognise the messiness, and occasional ambiguity, that characterises social research, which also requires a reflexive attitude from the researcher. As mentioned in Sub-section 1.2, this research project follows what Mats Alvesson & Kaj Sköldbberg (2009, pp. 3–4) call an abductive methodological approach. The abductive approach means that the deductive and inductive elements are partly combined, in addition to understanding (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009, p. 4). In practice, the empirical and theoretical aspects of the research process are successively improved and refined as the research proceeds. In other words, ‘the research process, therefore, alternates between (previous) theory and empirical facts whereby both are successively re-interpreted in the light of each other’ (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009, p. 4). During the study presented in this dissertation, an adaptation of some of the aspects of the initial research project was required – for example, regarding the theoretical lenses used and the methods applied. Rather than aiming for a linear and sequential process, I therefore attempted to keep an open mind in this study that involved a series of ‘back-and-forth’ movements, a multidimensional reflexive path close to Alvesson and Sköldbberg’s ‘reflexive interpretation’ (2009, pp. 271–274), a frequent reflection on the different elements of the analysis, data, theories and methods, and my own subjectivity. This is a repetitive and perhaps overlapping reflection through different levels of analytical complexity when interacting with data, identifying meanings, interpreting broader elements present in the data like ideology and power strategies, and finally, reflecting on my own knowledge and its communication (i.e. articles and presentations) (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009).

## 5.2 Paradigmatic positionality: the need for flexibility in research development

The balance between subjectivity and reflexivity is ultimately related to the development of the researcher's 'paradigmatic positionality' in research work, meaning the 'net that captures the combination of epistemology, ontology, and methodology' (Collins & Stockton, 2018, p. 2). Egon Guba and Yvonna Lincoln (1994) define paradigms as 'a worldview that defines, for its holder, the nature of the "world", the individual's place in it, and the range of possible relationships to that world and its parts' (p. 107). The authors maintain that paradigms are defined by three essential and interdependent questions about ontology ('What is the form and nature of reality and, therefore, what is there that can be known about it?'), epistemology ('What is the nature of the relationship between the knower or would-be knower and what can be known?'), and methodology ('How can the inquirer (would-be knower) go about finding out whatever he or she believes can be known?') (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 108). Ontology as 'a branch of philosophy is the science of what is, of the kinds and structures of objects, properties, events, processes, and relations in every area of reality', or more broadly, ontology is 'the study of what might exist' and is thus very closely related to the definition of metaphysics (Smith, 2004, p. 155). Ontological positionality is therefore the definition constructed by the researcher of the phenomenon being analysed and its context. As has been expressed at length thus far in this doctoral dissertation, I have taken a view of the social world as a complex system composed of smaller systems that are often also complex in nature. Phenomena within these systems develop non-linearly: they are uncertain, ambiguous, adaptative, self-organised, and produce more or less emergent behaviour in the face of internal or external novelties. The policymaking process occurring within the political system is understood here as also characterised by the aforementioned features, and they can be identified, studied, and understood. In this case I attempt to dissociate myself from the large volume of research that tends to take a reductionist view of the world in which it is understood that the analysis of certain parts of a system will lead to the comprehension of the whole system (i.e. Newtonian framework) (Kruger et al., 2019).

Departing from the above ontological positionality regarding complex social systems, I adopt an interpretivist and constructivist perspective on knowledge production, and their common points with complexity thinking. Constructivism is a paradigmatic view in which 'the subject matter of scientific research is wholly or

partially constructed by the background and theoretical assumptions of the scientific community and thus is not, as realists claim, largely independent of our thought and theoretical commitments' (Boyd et al., 1991, p. 775 in Phelan, 2001, p. 122). In line with Guba & Lincoln (1994) I understand my constructivist paradigmatic positionality in this research process as 'ontologically relative', 'epistemologically transactional and subjectivist', and 'methodologically hermeneutical and dialectical' (pp. 109–111). In this vein – although I do not see myself situated in a radical position within constructivism – I understand that the knowledge emerging from this research process is built through my interaction with the data and the contexts from which they were extracted, in the light of the successive refinements I make to the theoretical framework during the research process. Thus, as my background and interpretation schemata are key in this study, a substantial element of my contribution in this study can be seen as one interpretation among other constructions that can be made about the social world.

In this sense, the researcher's paradigmatic positionality influences the research practice (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 112). It is thus central in the research planning and development, the choice of data, theory, methods, and research questions, and the symbiotic relationship between these elements means that a change in any influences the others (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 112). Because I consider the research process as evolutionary, dynamic, and adaptative, the data, theories, and methods must be carefully chosen during the planning phase, but they should be constantly reflected on and applied flexibly during the process. As updates are allowed, any adaptations made to any one of these components require reflection on the possible implications these adaptations might have on the other components.

During the research process described here as abductive in design, my research idea changed and evolved as I considered the information extracted from the datasets. For example, the study's timeframe starts in December 2001 when the PISA results were first launched, because the original idea was to focus on how and why PISA influenced the choice of reference societies used in the Portuguese context when discussing education, and to understand if and how these reference societies changed as the variation in PISA's high achievers' performance changed their position in the ranking. When undertaking the first readings of parliamentary debates in early 2019, I realised that the individual countries participating in PISA were not the most used reference societies (as presented in Section 4), and even PISA was not directly referenced in the analysed parliamentary debates until 2005. Since the data had already been collected, and there were plenty of externalisations to international elements, I decided to keep to the original timetable and expand my focus beyond

PISA and its participants to a broader scope, identifying all external references identified in the texts read. Similarly, adaptations to the theoretical framework were also needed (see Section 3 and subsequent sub-sections). Thus, a flexible attitude was essential after the readings of the data. This permitted a research practice in which the theoretical framework, data, and methods were in constant dialogue. Fiercely maintaining the initial research strategy would have itself led to bias, because each theory or method focuses the data readings on specific aspects. A qualitative content analysis that is not strictly tied to any specific theory allows scope for a broader examination of what the content really reveals. Thus, although the initial focus on examining references to international elements in the light of Schriewer's (1990) externalisation thesis was maintained and guided the development of the initial qualitative content analysis, the focus only on PISA and its impacts on the use of reference societies was broadened to allow the identification of all the international elements present in the texts collected (parliamentary debates and media articles). In addition, three other theories and two analytical methods emerged from the data extracted with the content analysis, and these enriched the quality of the research work developed and presented in this dissertation. These aspects and details of the research structure and methodological choices will be further explained in the next sub-sections.

### 5.3 Research structure and research questions

Based on the previous research and as explained in Sub-section 2.1, externalisations exist in various contexts and in diverse discursive situations in which the speakers seek authoritative tools to validate their arguments. By analysing the interactions between elements of the political and media systems and between these and actors in the international policymaking dimension, this study focuses on analysing how international elements are chosen, and how they are used with the aim of plugging the previously identified (Sub-section 1.1) gaps in the fields of comparative education and policy studies. Although early research in the field of comparative education explores the global–national–local nexus in education policymaking, details of the policy process are often neglected. Moreover, analyses in the field of policy studies often lack explanations for why international elements are integrated into the policy discussions, and the benefits they can bring to the argument. In addition, I attempt to foreground the contributions that the aggregation of different theories offers for

an understanding of the phenomenon of externalisation to international elements. To do this, I focus on the Portuguese discussions of education occurring in the two contexts previously presented: the plenary parliamentary education debates; and print media articles discussing education in four well-circulated national media outlets. The study's design is summarised in Table 4 and further detailed in Tables 4, 5, 6, and 7.

**Table 4.** Complete research design

<p><b>Main research questions:</b>          Q1 – What factors influence the selection of international elements used in the discussion of education?          Q2 – How are international elements used in discussions of education in the Portuguese parliament and print media?          Q3 – How do multiple theoretical perspectives contribute to understanding the use of externalisations to international elements in education policy processes?</p>				
<p><b>Data:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Scientific articles (N=22)</li> <li>- Parliamentary debates (N=115)</li> <li>- Programme of the XVII government – secondary data</li> <li>- Print media articles (N=133)</li> </ul>	<p><b>Aims:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- To identify which international elements are used in acts of externalisations to international elements in Portugal.</li> <li>- To understand why these externalisations become necessary, and why specific elements are selected in the universe of available possibilities (which factors influence these selections).</li> <li>- To understand the functions of these references in the presented policy arguments.</li> <li>- To understand how the combination of diverse theoretical perspectives contributes to an understanding of the phenomenon of externalisation to international elements.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Theories:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Externalisation to world situations thesis (Schriewer, 1990)</li> <li>- Multiple streams approach (Kingdon, 2003)</li> <li>- Epistemic governance framework (Alasuutari &amp; Qadir, 2019)</li> <li>- Thematization theory (Luhmann, 1996; Saperas, 1987; Pissarra Esteves, 2016)</li> </ul>	<p><b>Methods:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Systematic literature review (Templier &amp; Paré, 2015; Xiao &amp; Watson, 2019; Newman &amp; Gough, 2020)</li> <li>- Qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2014)</li> <li>- Descriptive statistics (light use as complementary)</li> <li>- Rhetorical analysis (Edwards et al., 2004; Leach, 2011)</li> <li>- Frame analysis (Entman, 1993, 2003, 2010)</li> </ul>	<p><b>Research dissemination:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Peer-reviewed research articles</li> <li>- Conference presentations</li> <li>- Doctoral dissertation</li> </ul>
<p><u>Practical dimensions of the research process:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Reflexivity</li> <li>- Paradigmatic positionality</li> <li>- Ethical considerations</li> </ul>				

**Complexity and systems approaches – onto-epistemological background**

The original plan was for this study to comprise four articles. At the time of writing the four articles have been published in double-blind peer-reviewed scientific education or education policy journals. Article I consists of a systematic literature review of peer-reviewed articles published in scientific journals analysing the impacts of PISA in the reference societies used. Articles II and III analyse the use of external references in Portuguese parliamentary education debates. Article IV focuses on an analysis of external references identified in media articles (a comparison of news and opinion articles) discussing education themes after each launch of the PISA results. Table 5 concisely presents the main elements of each article's research design, including the research question, aims, theoretical framework, data, and analytical methods (the main conclusions of each of the articles are discussed in Section 6 and subsequent Sub-sections). In addition to the theories used in the articles, in the integrative chapter I foreground the main assumptions of complexity thinking and systems theory as the basic onto-epistemic lenses of this project as a whole. In this sense, the multiple streams approach (Kingdon, 2003), epistemic governance framework (Alasuutari & Qadir, 2019), and thematisation theory (Luhmann) were the specific theories that enabled the operationalisation of the research to unveil details of the phenomenon of externalisations from different perspectives. These individual analyses are presented in each of the articles, and their findings are combined and reanalysed in this text.



**Table 5.** Summary of the main elements of each article included in the dissertation

<i>Article I</i> <b>Systematic literature review</b>	<b>Research sub-question (SQ1):</b> How does PISA affect countries' choice of reference societies used in education policy?			
	<b>Aims:</b> To examine if and the extent to which PISA affects countries' choice of reference societies used in education policy.	<b>Theoretical Framework:</b> Reference societies as a form of externalisation to world situations (Schriewer, 1990; Steiner-Khamsi, 2002, 2004; Waldow, 2017, 2019)	<b>Data:</b> Peer-reviewed scientific articles analysing the effects of PISA on the choice of reference societies (N=22).	<b>Analytical methods:</b> Systematic literature review (Templier & Paré, 2015; Xiao & Watson, 2019; Newman & Gough, 2020)
<i>Article II</i> <b>Empirical analysis</b>	<b>Research sub-question (SQ2):</b> What, why and how are external references used in the Portuguese parliamentary discussions on education?			
	<b>Aims:</b> To understand what the international elements used in the Portuguese parliamentary debates on education are, and how they are used in the agenda-setting process.	<b>Theoretical Framework:</b> Multiple streams approach (Kingdon, 2003; Zahariadis, 2007; Jones et al., 2016; Herweg et al., 2018, etc.)	<b>Data:</b> Parliamentary education debates developed in the plenary chamber of the Portuguese parliament (N=115)	<b>Analytical methods:</b> Qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2014)  Descriptive statistics
<i>Article III</i> <b>Empirical analysis</b>	<b>Research sub-question (SQ3):</b> How are references to world situations used as epistemic capital in the Portuguese parliamentary education debates (2001–2018)?			
	<b>Aims:</b> To explore the strategies through which epistemic work develops in Portuguese parliamentary education debates, and how externalisation is used to influence others' decisions by acting on their views of the debated issues.	<b>Theoretical Framework:</b> Epistemic Governance Framework (Alasuutari & Qadir, 2019)	<b>Data:</b> Parliamentary education debates developed in the plenary chamber of the Portuguese parliament (N=115) Programme of the XVII government – secondary data	<b>Analytical methods:</b> Qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2014)  Rhetorical analysis (Edwards et al., 2004; Leach, 2011)
<i>Article IV</i> <b>Empirical analysis</b>	<b>Research sub-question (SQ4):</b> How does the media in Portugal utilise external references in the thematisation and framing of education after each PISA cycle's results are published?			
	<b>Aims:</b> To study how externalisations to world situations contribute to the thematisation and framing of education in the print media.	<b>Theoretical Framework:</b> Thematisation theory (Saperas, 1987; Luhmann, 1996; Pissarra Esteves, 2016)	<b>Data:</b> Print media articles (N=133)	<b>Analytical methods:</b> Qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2014)  Frame analysis (Entman, 1993, 2003, 2010)

## 5.4 Data and data collection process

The data used in this study comprise 22 peer-reviewed scientific journal articles, 115 parliamentary debates, and 133 print media articles. In addition, the relevant education sections of the XVII Government programme were also analysed as secondary data. All data were collected between October 2018 and January 2019. The first draft of the research project also included interviews with policymakers, with the aim of identifying their own perspectives on what good international references were, and why they were beneficial to the arguments presented. However, the good results of the Portuguese students in both PISA 2015 and TIMSS 2015, both launched in 2016, seemed to some extent to have shifted the public discourse in general, as well as that of policymakers, more to internal than external references, while focusing more on highlighting the good or bad decisions of present and past governments. Because the data at this stage already comprised almost 3,000 pages of parliamentary debates and more than 130 media articles, I decided these data were enough for the analysis and abandoned the option of using interviews as a data source.

The first dataset was explored in Article I, a systematic literature review. The articles were collected using the Andor search engine at Tampere University library, and the search was confined to scientific articles written in English. For validity and reliability reasons, I also performed searches on Google Scholar, EBSCO, SciELO, and RCAAP, Portugal's Open Access Repositories, which did not change the initial results provided by the initial search in Andor. Several keyword combinations were applied: 'PISA' AND 'reference society' OR 'reference societies' AND 'media' OR 'policy debate' OR 'policy borrowing' OR 'policy transfer'. From the initial 79 articles set aside for deeper analysis 22 were selected as presenting the inclusion criterion: a focus on or a significant approach to the analysis of the impacts of PISA in the choice of reference societies in specific countries.

The second dataset was analysed in Articles II and III. The data were collected from the *Diários da Assembleia da República* (DAR) [Diaries of the Parliament] online at [www.parlamento.pt](http://www.parlamento.pt), where Series I consists of a full transcription of the debates occurring in plenary session. The first attempt to collect this data was an unsuccessful search using only the keyword '*educação*', which resulted in less than 30 debates found. In the meanwhile I learned that the debates were organised by title, not theme, as I had initially assumed. I then performed a new search using several new keywords likely to be present in the debates' titles: '*educação*' [education]; '*ensino*' [teaching]; '*aluno*' [student]; '*escola*' [school]; '*educador*' [meaning in Portuguese educator and early

childhood education teacher]; and *‘professor’* and *‘docente’* [both meaning teacher in Portuguese]. This resulted in more than 150 debates, of which only some were available online. Finally, 115 debates (81 general education debates and 34 debates on education bills – corresponding to the first reading and discussion of reform proposals) were downloaded and saved for analysis.

A technological accident meant the article collection had to be repeated. Although initially dramatic, as I lacked backup copies outside the computer that had crashed (permanently!), resulting in the loss of all the data and the initial qualitative content analysis performed, this proved unexpectedly positive for the analysis. It was while undertaking the second search of parliamentary debates that I understood that they were not organised by theme – *‘educação’* – which led me to conduct a second search using other education-related words that produced a larger and more complete dataset. Furthermore, given that I was undertaking the content analysis for the second time, my greater experience resulted in a more systematic and accurate consideration of the research questions and a narrowing down of the almost 3,000 pages of parliamentary debates into codes that helped understand the phenomena being observed and answer these questions – a good example of when adaptations need to be made because of unexpected events leading to unpredictable outcomes.

The third dataset, the media articles (61 news articles and 72 opinion articles), was analysed for Article IV. The articles were collected from four print media outlets in Portugal with a high circulation and relevance in public policy debate. The search was performed in the archives of the Portuguese National Library in Lisbon, which stores paper copies of all print media publications in Portugal. This decision was taken because some of the publications from the early 2000s were not yet available online. The selection criteria for the articles were that they should discuss education, and that they mentioned PISA (named or clearly described) at least once. The timeframe of the search was two months after each PISA cycle’s results were published, when the survey was prominently discussed (Rawolle & Lingard, 2014).

I also analysed the education-related sections of the XVII Portuguese Government Programme to expand the background of the analysis of Legislature X, and to triangulate and reduce bias in my findings (Mackieson et al., 2019) by cross-checking the arguments of the government and its party deputies in parliamentary debates with the statements of intended actions regarding education in the XVII Government programme (in Article III).

Several factors explain my decision to use public documents, namely parliamentary debates and print media articles, as data sources. First, since the research focus was an analysis of education policy discussions, these two data sources

seemed appropriate. One allows the observation of policymakers' discussions in parliament, the central legislative body in Portugal; the other, the media, supports an analysis of the education discussion in the public arena. Second, with the advances of information and communication technologies the amount of freely accessible information available has been increasing substantially. The data sources used were publicly available and did not require the participants' consent to develop the study (Mackieson et al., 2019). Third, as the parliamentary debates and the XVII Government programme are official documents, they have 'high quality content', and are seen as 'valid' and 'trustful' (Mackieson et al., 2019, p. 970). In addition, because the data sources are public, participants did not have to give their consent to be included in the study, nevertheless, I was careful to pay attention to ethical issues such as adhering to the principle of preventing harm or injustice by avoiding any unfounded judgements that could cause damage to any of the debates or media articles' participants. I have also followed the guidelines of the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity, made explicit in the *Responsible Conduct of Research and Procedures for Handling Allegations of Misconduct in Finland*.

## 5.5 Research methods

The data were analysed using three complementary research methods: qualitative content analysis (Schrier, 2014), performed on the three datasets; rhetorical analysis (Edwards et al., 2004; Leach, 2011), used to analyse parliamentary debates, specifically the debates of Legislature X, for the study presented in Article III; and frame analysis (Entman, 1993, 2003), applied to the media articles and presented in Article IV. The justification for using varied research methods is related to the previous explanation (see Sub-section 5.2) of the need to articulate the data, the theoretical framework, and the research methods to adequately fit with each other.

Qualitative content analysis of documents is a common research method (Rapley & Rees, 2018). It was used in all the analyses presented in each of the four articles. I used it to familiarise myself with the data and to reduce them to the necessary 'aspects of meaning, namely those aspects that relate to the overall research question' (Schrier, 2014). The qualitative content analysis followed the same strategy for all datasets, consisting of a sequential combination of deductive and inductive coding systems. Deductively, I created a set of categories beforehand that I thought were fundamental to answering the research questions, considering the phenomenon being analysed, as well as the theory behind it: externalisations to world situations.

These broader categories were then complemented by information extracted from the data while reading the texts. As qualitative content analysis can be applied quite freely as an exploratory research method, it allows a systematic investigation of the data without strict predefined boundaries, enabling the creation of a descriptive identification and categorisation of the useful content of the data concerning the aims of the research. The use of the ATLAS.ti software also afforded the possibility to register all useful quotations and later retrieve them easily by searching for specific codes. Qualitative content analysis, as a flexible research method, can thus be applied diversely, and it can easily be adapted to the needs of the research process as the study develops, and changes in other areas are applied. In this study, which analysed large amounts of data, this method served as a helpful organiser of the entire data into meaningful units that were then further used in the secondary analysis developed by the other research methods. Table 6 shows all the deductively created codes and some examples of the complementary information added to them (inductive codes).

**Table 6.** Code system applied through qualitative content analysis

<b>Dataset</b>	<b>Deductive codes (complete list)</b>	<b>Inductive codes (examples)</b>
<i>Scientific articles</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Author (s)</li> <li>- Journal</li> <li>- Article aims</li> <li>- Data</li> <li>- Timeframe</li> <li>- Country of focus</li> <li>- Theoretical framework</li> <li>- Method(s)</li> <li>- Main conclusions</li> <li>- Reference to countries/regions</li> <li>- Reference to international actors or tools</li> <li>- Function of the reference</li> <li>- Tone of the reference</li> <li>- Findings/conclusions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Theoretical framework: policy borrowing and lending</li> <li>- Method: critical discourse analysis</li> <li>- Reference to countries/regions: Finland</li> <li>- Function of the reference: legitimation</li> <li>- Tone of the reference: positive</li> </ul>
<i>Parliamentary debates</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Kind of debate</li> <li>- Speaker</li> <li>- Problem/topic</li> <li>- Reference to countries/regions</li> <li>- Reference to international actors</li> <li>- Reference to international tools</li> <li>- Reference to international events</li> <li>- Function of the reference</li> <li>- Tone of the reference</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Kind of debate: interpellation to the government</li> <li>- Speaker: PS government</li> <li>- Problem/topic: education funding</li> <li>- Reference to countries/regions: 'EU countries'</li> <li>- Reference to international tools: PISA</li> <li>- Reference to international events: World Economic Forum</li> </ul>
<i>Media articles</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Author</li> <li>- Journalistic genre</li> <li>- Article main arguments/ideas</li> <li>- General tone of the article</li> <li>- Theme/problem</li> <li>- Reference to countries/regions</li> <li>- Reference to international actors and tools</li> <li>- Function of the reference</li> <li>- Tone of the reference</li> <li>- PISA centrality</li> <li>- Factors influencing students' results</li> <li>- Solutions to identified problems</li> <li>- Figures and images</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Journalistic genre: opinion articles</li> <li>- Theme/problem: student performance</li> <li>- PISA centrality: main theme</li> <li>- Factors influencing students' results: socioeconomic and cultural background of the students</li> <li>- Solutions to identified problems: reduce the number of students per class</li> </ul>

When performing the content analysis of parliamentary debates, it became clear that two theories could lead to an interesting analysis of the education policymaking process in the Portuguese parliament: the multiple streams approach (Kingdon, 2003) – used in Article II; and the epistemic governance framework (Alasuutari & Qadir, 2019) – used in Article III. This is a good example of where the theory stands

out from the data, leading to some adaptations to maintain harmony among the research's different components, in this case concerning the research methods.

The analysis in Article II developed efficiently with a combination of qualitative content analysis, as explained above, and descriptive statistics. This quantitative method contributed to the better applicability of the theoretical lens of the multiple streams approach by helping to identify which external elements were used in each of the streams (problem, political, and policy), how these references helped combine the three streams, opening policy windows, and in attempts to reach consensus among the different political forces and initiate political change.

Article III, in which I delved more deeply into the strategies developed by policymakers when attempting to convince others that their ideas were better than their opponents', can be described as a continuation of Article II. The analysis presented in this article appeared incomplete when only content analysis was used, even if I also used the descriptive statistics used in Article II. As the epistemic governance framework analyses how policymakers attempt to influence the audience's perception of reality and the issues under debate (Alasuutari & Qadir, 2019), rhetorical analysis emerged as a logical solution. I applied rhetorical analysis to part of the data (Legislature X) used in the study presented in Article III. My focus when applying rhetorical analysis was to identify the speakers' arguments that appealed to their credibility (*ethos*), logic (*logos*), and emotions (*pathos*) (see Table 7 below). This second level of analysis helped in identifying not only the appeals policy actors made to their audiences, but also the speakers' assumptions about their audiences, namely the audiences' understandings of reality, what the audiences identified as authoritative and valid international entities, and what they assumed their audiences considered relevant and acceptable.

**Table 7.** The three appeals and examples illustrating them

Appeals	Examples of arguments
<i>Ethos</i>	<p>'The government knew how to perceive the needs of the Portuguese in a timely manner and put forward a programme that is now pioneering in the European Union' (2008-01-11).</p> <p>'The PS, the Socialist party government, is fulfilling an agenda of change and an agenda of confidence – an agenda of change in Portugal and an agenda of confidence among the Portuguese' (2008-01-11).</p> <p>'In the last three years we have prepared and executed a deep, modernising, and demanding reform of the Portuguese higher education system' (2008-06-11).</p>
<i>Logos</i>	<p>'The OECD recently published a study showing that if all countries increased their average education level by one year, this would have an effect of a 1.2% to 1.7% increase in employability' (2005-09-21).</p> <p>'Now you can see why you, ladies and gentlemen, who claim to be committed to the qualifications of the Portuguese, made a brutal average cut of 10% in funds for higher education for next year, 2007. You were thinking about increasing the fees that students should pay through bank loans, in the name of the already spent justification that this is the solution to guarantee public support to the neediest, which, by the way, if they get there, they will have to stop at the first training cycle, which the Bologna Process has irreparably devalued' (2006-12-21).</p> <p>'I repeat that the data I have provided are published in the <i>Jornal de Negócios</i>, which I have with me. I don't know what the minister's data are, but according to those published in the aforementioned periodical the percentage of GDP allocated to higher education is in fact falling – in 2006 it was 0.82%; in 2007 it was 0.72%; and in 2008 it should be 0.70%' (2008-06-11).</p>
<i>Pathos</i>	<p>'In this new journey all the education system's actors should be involved, with the ultimate objective of improving school efficiency and student results, so that Portugal in the short term does not have to be ashamed when its position in the international rankings in several disciplines is well known' (2009-01-08).</p> <p>'A government, above all a government that pretends to be of the left, which has conducted almost all its reforms by harassing teachers, attacking them, reducing them, disrespecting them, blaming them, and threatening them, making the negotiation processes, namely regarding the Teaching Career Statute and the Evaluation of Teaching Performance, a tragic farce, motivated in its action only for economic reasons, to cut jobs, as it does with this new national recruitment competition, to cut the salaries and rights of teachers, drowning them in legislation and bureaucracy, diverting them from the task of teaching, relegating pedagogical concerns and the real quality of teaching to a second plan, is a government condemned to fail' (2009-04-02).</p>

A similar situation somehow occurred with the media data analysis presented in Article IV. I originally planned to apply the qualitative content analysis of parliamentary debates as my main analytical tool, followed by frame analysis, leaving decisions open regarding the theory that would be used in further analysis of the data after they were coded. After the first reading of the articles and during the qualitative content analysis I considered several theoretical perspectives, and during a discussion



with my co-writers thematisation theory (Luhmann, 1996; Saperas, 1987; Pissarra Esteves, 2016) emerged as the most interesting. I was then able to identify all the themes discussed in the media, the different frames applied to them, and how references to international elements became useful in bringing specific themes and frames to the fore in accordance with the writers' ideologies and agenda. The analysis made clear that there was a thematic consistency along the timeframe, with a variety of frames applied to each of the themes. In Table 8 I provide examples of this complementarity between themes and frames.

I recognise that this study has its limitations. The biggest is probably that as the analysis focuses on the Portuguese context, it cannot be assumed that in other contexts policy processes and externalisations will occur in the same manner, for these are highly contextualised processes influenced by the dynamics developing within each context and regarding each policy. Although the research strategy presented in Section 5 could be used to analyse different contexts and diverse policy fields other than education, it cannot be assumed that the results would be replicated.

In this section I have described the whole research project's operationalisation, including the constant need for reflection on the research process and my action within it, my paradigmatic positionality, the choice and application of theoretical lenses and methods, and how the various phases of the research process developed, leading to the dissertation this document presents. In the next section I summarise each of the articles constituting this dissertation and their main findings.

**Table 8.** Examples of themes and frames identified (retrieved from Article IV)

Themes		Frames
<i>Student performance</i>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Portuguese students improve in PISA 2009</li> <li>- Deeper analysis is required to understand the Portuguese improvements in PISA 2009</li> <li>- Portuguese perform better in maths, reading literacy, and sciences</li> </ul>
<i>Comparisons</i>	<i>International</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Portuguese PISA performance worse than other countries/regions:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 'OECD countries'</li> <li>- 'Several/other countries' (unspecified)</li> <li>- Specific countries, especially Finland</li> <li>- 'EU countries'</li> </ul> </li> <li>- There is more funding for education in Portugal than in 'other countries'</li> </ul>
	<i>National</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Differences among genders:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Boys are better at maths (or enjoy it more)</li> <li>- Girls are better at reading literacy (or enjoy it more)</li> </ul> </li> <li>- Comparison of results among the Portuguese regions</li> </ul>
<i>Political praise and blame</i>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Criticism of the minister of education for taking credit for students' performance in 2015 (PISA and TIMSS)</li> <li>- Government thinks Portugal is on a good path, and government measures have significantly helped this improvement</li> <li>- International organisation confirms the benefits of the policy measures taken by the XVII government</li> </ul>
<i>Teachers</i>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The teachers, their good work, and adequate qualifications explain why the Portuguese students improved in PISA 2009</li> <li>- Teachers unhappy with government policies and go/went on strike</li> <li>- Criticism of the government (and prime minister) for exaggerating his appreciation for teachers as the reason for the improvement in the PISA 2009 results for political reasons</li> </ul>
<i>Socioeconomic and cultural background of students</i>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Children of single parents perform worse than their peers</li> <li>- Children with an immigrant background perform well despite the language barrier</li> <li>- Parents' academic capital has improved, and this positively influences students' performance</li> <li>- The Portuguese education system has improved social equity</li> </ul>
<i>Retentions and dropouts</i>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Retentions have social and financial consequences</li> <li>- Levels of retention in Portugal are much higher than in the 'OECD countries'</li> <li>- Portugal has improved levels of retention and reduced early dropouts</li> <li>- Other countries have higher retention than Portugal: Spain and Belgium</li> </ul>

## 6 SYNTHESIS OF THE RESEARCH PUBLICATIONS

In this section I present the four interdependent articles composing the dissertation by synthesising their main findings and explaining the role of each as relevant parts of the research presented here. The articles' interconnection is their consistent focus on the broad acts of externalisation to a diversity of international elements in local policymaking processes.

### 6.1 Article I – Inspirations from abroad: the impact of PISA on countries' choice of reference societies in education (Santos & Centeno, 2021)

Article I, written with Vera G. Centeno, and published in *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, was the first piece produced for the dissertation. It involved the use of qualitative content analysis and consisted of a systematic literature review of existing peer-reviewed research articles about, or largely exploring, the impact of PISA on the choice of countries or regions that other countries or regions used as reference societies in education policy discussions published within the 2000–2018 timeframe. The article explores the concept of reference societies, the functions these have in arguments about education, the impact PISA scores have (or do not) on the construction or demotion of reference societies, and other factors that might influence these choices. The findings show that the selection of reference countries or region is dynamic and fluid, frequently changing depending on the speaker, the argument presented, and the need for legitimacy. The analysis reveals that in some contexts PISA results may contribute to the ascension of the survey's best performers to the position of reference societies, but in most situations they do not appear to be the main factor influencing these selections. Through the review presented in the article the process of selecting reference societies appears more complex and multifactorial than we initially expected. First, even if PISA's top performers become reference societies, they are not necessarily positive references. For example, Finland, viewed as the prime example of equality in education and described as having a highly successful

education system that does not cause its students high levels of stress, is systematically used as a positive reference society. In contrast, the equally high-performing countries of East Asia are seen as having education systems that are highly demanding of their students, and they are therefore mostly used as negative reference societies. Behind these positive or negative judgements historically constructed images and stereotypes can often be identified, constructed from the economic, political, and cultural relations of cooperation, or competition between the country or region referencing and the country or region referenced. These same reasons help justify why, despite presenting poor results, some countries continue to be referenced in countries where they have historically been reference societies, as is the case in the use of the USA as a reference society in South Korea. Alternatively, it may be that PISA helps demote countries from their status as reference societies – for example, when Sweden’s PISA results were shown to be poor and continued to deteriorate during the survey’s first five cycles (2000–2012), countries like Germany, which had always historically looked to its northern neighbour as a model, ceased to reference it.

Moreover, more than other countries’ actual practices and policies, what seems to determine the selection of which countries or regions to use in education discussions is the possibilities they offer for the projection of one’s own proposals. Even if the referenced practices and policies of other countries and regions are real and actual, they rarely constitute the whole picture. Usually, only selected parts of other countries’ and regions’ practices and policies – those that can help legitimise the arguments presented – are mentioned. This justifies why in the same context different actors refer to different (and sometimes even opposed) aspects that are said to be the practice in a reference society. It is thus the aggregation of different specific factors emergent from the context in which the education discussions take place that leads to the use (or not) of certain reference societies, of which the PISA results may be one of these factors. This article contributes to the body of research exploring how PISA influences or is used in local education policymaking processes. Within this dissertation this article can be seen as an introduction to part of this body of research, an analysis that enables an understanding of what has been explored and concluded about the use of reference societies as an act of externalisation to world situations, and the factors that are indicated as influencing these forms of externalisation, also raising the question of whether the same or different factors can influence the selection of other international elements used (such as references to international organisations, and their assessment and guidance tools).

## 6.2 Article II – Externalisations in the Portuguese parliament: analysing power struggles and (de-)legitimation with the multiple streams approach (Santos & Kauko, 2020)

The second article, jointly produced with Jaakko Kauko and published in the *Journal of Education Policy*, is the first of two articles of this dissertation that explore plenary parliamentary education debates between 2001 and 2018. The analysis was developed by applying qualitative content analysis and descriptive statistics to the data. The article identifies which international elements are most used in these debates, with what tone and function, and by whom. The analysis reveals that the most used reference societies overall are the ‘EU countries’ (present in 229 quotations), distantly followed by the ‘OECD countries’ (in 63 quotations), both used as a whole, as regions defined by integration in these organisations. The main international organisations referenced are the ‘EU’ (present in 112 quotations), closely followed by the ‘OECD’ (identified in 109 quotations), and the most referenced international tools are the ‘Bologna Declaration/process’ (in 106 quotations), followed at some distance by PISA (present in 73 quotations). The article then explores how these and other external elements are used in each of the three streams proposed by John Kingdon (2003) in his multiple streams approach, by policy actors while discussing policy ideas and proposals struggling to earn the necessary consensual support. The article demonstrates that references to international elements are mostly used in a positive tone by all parliamentary actors, and they largely function as a tool of legitimation by government representatives and their parties’ parliamentary deputies, and for delegitimation by opposition parties. This is no surprise, because the government and its party deputies aim to fulfil the promises stated in the government programme, while opposition parties often attempt to dismiss the same proposals, often leading to the development of a controversial dynamic in the political stream that is filled with blame games and strongly fed by party cohesion, creating difficulties in balancing the different political forces and difficulties in achieving political consensus. International elements in the problem stream are used to frame certain themes as problematic and in need of intervention. International organisations and their tools are used as ‘indicators’, ‘focusing events’, or ‘feedback’ (Kingdon, 2003), which helps raise awareness and then supports arguments highlighting these problems. Concerning the policy stream, external elements are often evoked to legitimise and delegitimise policy proposals in ‘softening-up’ processes in the ‘primeval soup’. In the Portuguese parliament this process seems to happen at two moments: proposals are first discussed, and accepted

or rejected within each of the parties, and then each parties' proposals are discussed in the plenary.

As the analysis presented in Article I demonstrated, historically constructed images and stereotypes emerging from political, economic, and cultural relations with other countries and regions seem to be important factors that influence the choice of reference societies, and how they are used. However, this does not seem to be specific to the selection of reference societies but to all the references to international elements. In the Portuguese context the EU and the OECD seem to be major references, constructed by long-term cooperation relationships and fed by the ambition to reach the perceived development levels of the 'EU countries'. Although the longitudinal analysis presented in the article enabled changes and fluctuations in the frequency and tone of the use of these external elements to be identified, they are never absent as major targets of externalisation. The interpretations of external outputs are volatile and bring to light the non-linear and complex character of policy processes. Externalisation to world situations serves as a mechanism for managing contingency and attempting to decrease uncertainty and ambiguity, with the aim of initiating policy change.

The study empirically tested the multiple streams approach's applicability to a new policy setting – a parliament in a semi-presidential system. The parliamentary system can therefore also be viewed as organised anarchy, characterised by chaotic dynamics, complex interactions, time constraints, and problematic preferences. The analysis also revealed the multiple streams approach's suitability for analysing externalisation to international elements. It fosters an understanding of how the different parties utilise externalisation as mechanisms used to influence the policy process, opening policy windows, and combining the three streams.

Besides leading to an understanding of how international elements are used in the three different streams, this article describes the data in detail, revealing the international elements identified along the entire dataset, which contributed to cementing the ground for the third article.

### 6.3 Article III – Epistemic work in Portuguese parliamentary education debates: externalisation to world situations as a source of epistemic capital (Santos, 2021)

Article III was my first independent scientific production and is published in the *European Educational Research Journal*. The research idea for Article III emerged from the analysis developed for Article II, where it was observed that during Legislature X (2005-2009) there was a clear peak in the use of international elements. Although Article III used data from the entire 2001–2018 timeframe, most of the data are used as background information. Thus, the analysis was made using a combination of qualitative content analysis and rhetorical analysis. This second method helped identify the actors' appeals to their audiences' logics (*logos*) and emotions (*pathos*), and how they attempted to settle their own credibility (*ethos*) during Legislature X. The education sections of the XVII Government programme were also analysed as complementary data that facilitated the analysis.

Through the epistemic governance framework (Pertti Alasuutari and Ali Qadir, 2019) the article more concretely investigates the epistemic work developed by policy actors in the Portuguese parliamentary education debates and international elements' use as a source of epistemic capital. It demonstrates that during Legislature X, in addition to ideological arguments, references to the international dimension were seen as powerful tools of (de-)legitimation. Nevertheless, although globally shared themes such as the education system's equality, quality, and efficiency are commonly used, they are transversal goals or justifications for policy reform proposals in themes that have long been specific to each party's agenda. These global ideas and themes are strategically selected, locally interpreted, and rhetorically used as sources of authority precisely in support of these enduring reform proposals. Hence, due to the complexity of the political interactions in parliament, knowledge and evidence become mouldable: the same external elements are used to construct different realities. External references are used as sources of authority (epistemic capital) that can be claimed to be distant from ideological party arguments in attempts to convince the audiences of the value of one's own policy ideas or the inappropriateness of the opponent's proposals.

Furthermore, the identification of the policymakers' 'ontological', 'identification', and 'normative and ideological' assumptions reveals that neither the imageries used to illustrate the arguments nor the external elements used to create these imageries is chosen randomly. These are conditioned by the speaker's assumptions of how the audiences understand the themes discussed, their perceptions of which international

organisations and tools are considered reliable, and the practices and policies of other countries the audiences consider worth pursuing. The assumptions are therefore the foundational guide for the speaker's understanding of which references will help support the policy ideas they advocate. In the Portuguese parliamentary debates the analysis demonstrates, in line with the conclusions of Articles I and II, the importance of economic, political, and cultural international relations in the construction of representations of other countries, regions, international organisations, and their tools. In the case of the Portuguese policy actors involved in the analysed parliamentary debates, the EU, the OECD, their member countries, and the tools of assessment and guidance understood as associated with these organisations, namely the Bologna Declaration and PISA, are seen as major sources of epistemic capital. Their use enables the construction of imageries that help appeal to the audiences' logic and emotions, fed by the locally constructed perception that these organisations are relevant propellers of the country's continuing educational development. Additionally, the identification of nuances in the use of external elements informs the strategic intertwinements of the imageries constructed by each policymaker with their party's ideology (e.g.: the OECD is used by the right to advocate the importance of the quality of people's qualifications in generating economic growth; the OECD is used to advocate the improvement of quantification quality as a path leading to more social equality by the left).

The use of the epistemic governance framework in the study of the use of international elements as a source of epistemic capital demonstrates that the two frameworks can be combined successfully. The epistemic governance framework helps advance the understanding of the 'socio-logic', which in the Portuguese parliamentary context leads to the choice of certain elements from the international realm as symbolic elements of (de-)legitimation in the epistemic work developed by the policy actors in parliament, especially concerning controversial topics.

#### **6.4 Article IV – The media's role in shaping public opinion on education: a thematic and frame analysis of externalisation to world situations in the Portuguese media (Santos et al., 2022)**

Article IV of this dissertation presents an analysis of media articles published between 2001 and 2017. It was written with Luís Miguel Carvalho and Benedita Portugal e Melo, and it is published in *Research in Comparative and International Education*. The analysis is developed through a combination of qualitative content



analysis and frame analysis and investigates if and how are the education themes discussed in the print media, and how they are framed, varies as the performance of the Portuguese students in PISA oscillates, and how references to international elements help media actors frame education themes in specific ways.

Similar to Article II regarding parliamentary debates, Article IV identifies all the international elements used in media articles. The main reference societies are the ‘OECD countries’ as a regional reference society (present in 172 quotations), followed at a distance by a reference to ‘several/other countries’ without further details (in 80 quotations). The most referenced international organisation is the ‘OECD’ (identified in 155 quotations). The EU is the next international organisation referenced, but it is much less relevant, being present in only 11 quotations. Concerning international tools, PISA (present in 449 quotations) is the leader, which is no surprise, as the article search criteria established that to be included in the dataset, the articles should contain at least one reference to the survey. In addition, the timeframe of the articles collected was within two months of the launch of each PISA cycle’s results, when the survey’s results were more prominently discussed in the media. After PISA the most referenced tool is TIMSS, but it is present in many fewer quotations than PISA (only identified in 37 quotations), and only after 2013.

Using thematisation theory (Saperas, 1987; Luhmann, 1996; Pissarra Esteves, 2016), the analysis demonstrates that externalisations to international elements help highlight specific themes in education and contribute to the legitimisation of a multiplicity of discourses constructing these education themes from different perspectives. In the studied articles education was mostly discussed through a small number of themes that gained more importance at specific moments, closely following the themes in the OECD agenda and discussed in PISA reports, leading to a very reduced representation of the education system’s reality. These themes were further simplified through a range of frames, depending on who the observer was, and what their ideological position and political agenda were. Portuguese students’ performance in PISA thus appeared to have a significant influence on the themes identified in the media agenda, and the frames that were applied to them. The analysis identified three overall tones in the discourses that dominated the majority of arguments presented by media actors: a) discourses of failure (after PISA 2000–2006, when Portuguese students performed poorly in the survey); b) discourses of achievement (after PISA 2009 and 2015, when Portuguese students’ results improved in the survey); and c) discourses of crisis (after the PISA 2012 stagnation of Portuguese students’ performance).

Furthermore, the analysis shows that references to international elements become authoritative tools of legitimation used in arguments that combine the thematisation and framing of education. The media system performs its two main duties as follows: a) it functions as a mechanism for the double reduction of complexity (the public is influenced to focus on some education themes and interpret them from only a few perspectives; and b) it couples with its environment and other social systems – for example, political and public opinion systems. Additionally, in the news articles writers tend to implicitly adopt OECD/PISA categories within the field of the possibilities and expectations the results (including their assumptions and analytical tables) set, while it seems that especially in opinion articles PISA has a chain of moments of depoliticisation/repoliticisation, in which depoliticisation relies on the universalism of expert knowledge, with the aim of legitimising governance by numbers and comparison, and repoliticisation concerns the use of international elements with the aim of legitimising distinct understandings of education.

## 7 DISCUSSION: OBSERVING THE STRATEGIES AND COMPLEXITIES OF POLICYMAKING PROCESSES THROUGH AN ANALYSIS OF EXTERNALISATION TO INTERNATIONAL ELEMENTS

In this section I depart from the results of the individual publications presented above and articulate them considering the literature described in the text's previous sections. The intention is to develop a transversal interpretation of the publications' findings. In addition, some of the assumptions of the complexity thinking approach regarding the features of complex systems and their processes are key for the discussion – the most relevant being non-linear interactions of collective or singular actors belonging to different communities, organisations, and levels inside the political system and its environment. Complementarily, the concepts of ambiguity (generated by different interpretations of the same information and events) and uncertainty (caused by the non-linearity of actors' interactions and their own selections and decisions) are relevant in developing the analysis presented here. Finally, the contingency of complex processes (connected with the historical paths and intertwinements of networks of actors' interactions and decision making) is also a relevant complexity concept in this analysis. Policy processes are complex because of the number of actors involved, and the diversity of the interconnections they have in different spaces and along extensive timespans. The growing interaction with elements of the global realm – whether initiated from inside the system or through pressures from the exterior applied and then translated to it in useful information within the system, such as the launch of ILSAs rankings – makes policy processes even more complex. Through this strategy I expect to form a comprehensive picture of the complexity of the dynamics characterising education policy processes in Portugal and their intertwinements with global elements through observations of the acts of externalisation. While research questions **Q1** – 'What factors influence the selection of international elements used in the discussion of education?' and **Q2** – 'How are international elements used in discussions of education in the Portuguese parliament and print media?' were to a large extent answered in the four research

articles constituting this dissertation, the overall analysis presented along with the next sub-sections and summarised in Sub-section 7.5 contribute to answering question **Q3** – ‘How do multiple theoretical perspectives contribute to understanding the use of externalisations to international elements in education policy processes?’. This final question will be further resolved in the conclusion (Section 8).

## 7.1 Acts of externalisation across systems: describing the media and the political system’s use of international elements

A thorough comparison of the findings in the media and parliament datasets is not entirely possible, because these were not systematically analysed following the same analytical strategy. The differences in the analysis strategy exist due to changes made in the theoretical frameworks and methods used during the research process (described in Section 5). Nevertheless, in this section I identify and describe references to international elements in each context (parliament and the media). An analysis of both datasets brings to the fore some differences and similarities in the references to the international dimension that seem noteworthy, and that contribute to answering research question: **Q2** – ‘How are international elements used in discussions of education in the Portuguese parliament and print media?’

Thus, the comparison between the references to PISA cannot be made, because the inclusion criteria for the collection of the media articles stated that these articles must include at least one mention of PISA, while the parliamentary dataset includes all available debates on education topics (not necessarily referencing PISA). Other interesting descriptions of the international elements used can be made of the two analysed contexts. For example, while the ‘EU countries’, the OECD, and the ‘OECD countries’ are on the list of most used international elements in both contexts – parliament and the media – the importance given to the EU and ‘EU countries’ in parliament differs significantly from their use in the media. In parliament these are the most used external elements, while in the media they were mentioned much less. The EU is not even in the top ten list of the most used international elements in the media. In contrast, the OECD and the ‘OECD countries’ are the main international elements used in the media, and while references to the OECD are used almost as much in parliament as in the media, the ‘OECD countries’ are significantly less referenced in parliament (present in only in 8% of the quotations with international elements) than in the media (identified in

21% of the quotations). In addition, it is also relevant that references made in the media tend to be more specific. In the list of the media's ten most used external elements mention is made of several individual countries, with Finland the most used, and South Korea, Germany, the UK, and Greece. Conversely, references to the international elements identified in parliament are much broader, more regional, and more blurred. Besides the non-appearance of individual countries in the top ten list of most used international elements in parliament, the most used reference societies are 'EU countries', 'OECD countries', 'several/other countries', and 'countries of the world/the world', leaving aside further specifications. This way of referencing continues beyond reference societies – for example, with references to unspecified 'international comparisons/rankings/statistics' and 'international reports/recommendations/ experts' (see Table 9).

It is also interesting that while the Bologna Declaration/process was a major reference in parliamentary debates, it was unmentioned in the media articles. Even during Legislature X (2005–2009), the period when there were intense debates in parliament about the reforms and adjustments needed to Portuguese higher education to accommodate the declaration's measures, these discussions appear not to have spilled into the media system, or if they did, they did not constitute a major concern to the media actors within the periods after the PISA results were launched. Neither the Bologna Declaration/process nor any of the reforms implemented in higher education during the 2001–2018 timeframe is debated in any of the 133 analysed media articles.

Another noteworthy aspect is that while in parliamentary discussions the tone and function of the external references varied considerably between tones that were identified through the content analysis performed as positive, negative, or neutral, and functioning as a tool for both legitimation and de-legitimation, the references to international elements were almost always used in a positive or neutral tone, and most frequently as a tool for the legitimation of arguments. A negative tone or the use of external references as tools of de-legitimation was thus very rare.

**Table 9.** Top ten most used international elements in parliamentary debates and media articles

Parliament			Media		
International element	Total quotations*	Total quotations (%)	International element	Total quotations**	Total quotations (%)
EU countries	229	28%	PISA	449	55%
EU	112	13%	OECD countries	172	21%
OECD	109	13%	OECD	155	19%
Bologna Declaration	106	13%	Several/other countries	80	10%
PISA	73	9%	Finland	56	7%
OECD countries	63	8%	TIMSS	37	5%
Several/other countries	47	6%	EU countries	32	4%
International comparisons/ rankings/statistics	31	4%	South Korea	26	3%
International reports/recommendations/experts	31	4%	Germany	23	3%
Troika	31	4%	UK	21	3%
International practices	27	3%	Greece	21	3%
Countries of the world/the world	27	3%			

\* Total number of quotations identified with international elements in the Parliamentary debates: 830.

\*\*Total number of quotations identified with international elements in the media articles: 815.

I recognise that there may be a variety of reasons for such differences in the reception and use of international elements in these two contexts. I will discuss two that became evident during the analysis. First, most of the news articles describe and compare results of the different participants in the PISA survey, as well as discussing

other education themes mentioned in the PISA reports or OECD public statements, and even though the writers' opinions are expressed in the opinion articles, there is less need for de-legitimation tools. Furthermore, in the news articles the writers tend to compare two groups of participants more often: a) the top performers; and b) the countries close to the Portuguese performance, or whose results have been surpassed by Portugal. In the case of Germany, not only were its results in several PISA cycles close to those of Portugal, but this was a source of great surprise in Portugal, so there are also news articles in the dataset exclusively discussing what has happened to the education system of the country of the 'poets and intellectuals', and what the reactions of German politicians and people have been.

Second, as discussed by the multiple streams approach (Kingdon, 2003), parliamentary actors are busy, face tight time constraints, are constantly under pressure, and can only process small amounts of information. In addition, the plenary debates are highly ambiguous and uncertain ground, in which unexpected arguments may be used by political opponents. There is thus less space for thinking of specifications, and broad, unspecific external references such as 'several/other countries', or 'EU countries' or 'OECD countries' might be more useful for the speaker. While still working as authoritative tools in validating arguments, they leave less space for crucial inaccuracies that could give leverage for accusations and blaming games by opposition actors.

The analysis presented in this sub-section inform 'Q2 – How are international elements used in discussions of education in the Portuguese parliament and print media?'. By contrasting the external elements used in both contexts it is possible to identify nuances and similarities in the acts of externalisation that lead to the understanding that international elements are a) used as a strategy to respond to the emergent needs of (de-)legitimation of the actors involved in the discussions, and b) are selected based on what is immediately available. Alternatively, in Luhmann's language (1996), they are 'floating' in the system's environment and causing irritation within the system, and when they are selected by it, they are recoded into the system's language to cope with its needs to continue its operations; or further, in Kingdon's view (2003), the international elements used are those that survive the 'primeval soup' and are seen as able to contribute to the coupling of the three streams (political, problem, and policy).

## 7.2 The selection of the external elements used in Portuguese education discussions: the contingencies of historical paths and the elements' acceptability to audiences

Departing from the literature previously presented in this text, externalisations to the international dimension are understood as a phenomenon that emerges within the systems. To understand these externalisations in a specific context, it is therefore fundamental to identify the local factors that lead to the choice of certain external elements in the first place. This endeavour contributes to answering research question **Q1** – ‘What factors influence the selection of international elements used in the discussion of education’

In Article I (Santos & Centeno, 2021), my colleague Vera G. Centeno and I concluded, in line with the revised research, that long-term economic, political, and cultural cooperation or competition relationships between the country or region referencing and the country or region used as a reference society were more important than PISA results. Historical relationships lead to the construction of stereotypical images and preconceptions about the countries or regions used as a reference, and with time become ingrained in the referencing country's local interpretative schemata. Furthermore, this mechanism seems to influence not only the selection of which countries or regions become references, but also how they are referenced, whether positively or negatively (e.g. Carvalho & Costa, 2014b; Waldow et al., 2014; Waldow, 2017; Adamson et al., 2017; Baroutsis & Lingard, 2017; Sung & Lee, 2017; Takayama, 2018). The content analysis developed for the analyses presented in Articles II, III, and IV led to the same kind of conclusion. Not only did PISA – or any other ILSA – have no presence in parliamentary debates until 2005 – and only a very reduced presence in the media articles until 2009 – the survey's influence in the individual countries used in parliamentary debates seems continuously minimal (although in the media it had some influence, as Sub-section 7.1 explains). The data show that none of PISA's or other ILSAs' top performers has a strong or consistent presence in the discussions of education in the Portuguese parliament, and they are not the major reference societies in the media articles. The selection of reference societies seems intricate and intertwined with historical relationships and specific needs of legitimation at certain moments. Thus, the major reference societies are the broad regions of the ‘EU countries’ and the ‘OECD countries’, clearly connected to two organisations with which, as was previously explained (for example, in Section 4), Portugal has had a cooperative relationship for many decades. Furthermore, the mechanisms influencing the choice of reference

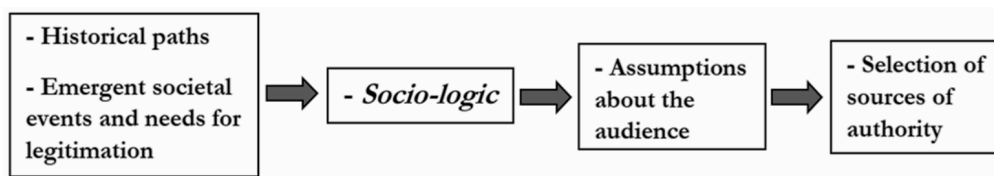


societies used also seem to drive the selection of any other international element – such as international organisations and tools of assessment and guidance – used in Portuguese education policy discussions.

Yet if externalisations are to bring some (de-)legitimation authority to the argument, it is necessary that the international element used be recognised by the audiences as authoritative (Alasuutari, 2018; see also Article III). These elements' authority also emerges from the historically constructed images local actors and communities share about certain international elements. These images, with each actor's schemata of interpretation – which in turn also develops through past experiences and historically constructed cultural and ideological values – guide the construction of the assumptions political and social actors develop about their audiences. These assumptions thus work as a filter that helps social and political actors select the international elements used to support their arguments. For example, this justifies that while some international organisations' recommendations seem to be considered in some contexts, they are apparently completely ignored in others, or that in the same location different actors belonging to diverse communities (smaller sub-systems existing inside the system) use the same international element in support of opposing arguments. Article III's analysis, which used an epistemic governance framework (Alasuutari & Qadir, 2019), revealed precisely the role political and social actors' assumptions play in the selection of the international elements used in education discussions. Indeed, in Portugal they seem related to historically constructed understandings of the country as underdeveloped in comparison to other European countries (Gomes, 1999; Antunes, 2004; Nóvoa, 2005), and with the perception of the OECD and the EU as instrumental organisations in the overcoming of this underdevelopment (Gomes, 1999; Moreira et al., 2010; Lemos, 2014; Teodoro, 2019). These major 'ontological' and 'identification' assumptions seem then to be redesigned by group-specific principles such as each party's political ideologies ('normative and ideological' assumptions) and departing from what they assume their audiences find ideal, necessary, positive, or negative.

The analysis of the two datasets, while recognising foreign influences and pressures from the system's environment, brings to the fore the local context's historical paths as a major influence on the context's *socio-logic* (Schriewer, 1990). The *socio-logic* is constructed through historical aspects, with more emergent societal conditions when sources of authority are needed to grant legitimation to arguments – for example, the controversial reception of ILSA's rankings or international organisation's recommendations. Hence, the local *socio-logic* is the basis of the actors'

assumptions that they make to identify the international elements seen as accepted as authoritative by the audiences (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Chain of consecutive factors influencing the selection of sources of authority

However, the analyses demonstrate that the *socio-logic* is not static; it changes slowly over time and is conditioned by emerging contingencies. Thus, as it is constructed and reconstructed as a society evolves, new problems are identified, and new policies are discussed, implemented, and eventually updated, leading to new needs for legitimation, changed assumptions, and possibly different international elements being used as sources of authority. For example, in the analysed data this is the case with the Bologna Declaration, which was the second most used international element in the parliamentary discussions analysed during Legislature X, when higher education reforms were being discussed more intensively, and completely disappearing when these discussions ended at the end of this legislature. Nevertheless, due to the already mentioned relevance of certain historical aspects of the local context, some external elements appear to maintain their authoritative status for an extensive period, as seems to happen with the OECD and EU in the Portuguese contexts analysed in this study.

The contribution of the discussion presented in this sub-section to **Q1** – ‘What factors influence the selection of international elements used in the discussion of education?’ is related to the contingencies created by the intricacies of historical paths and their influence on audiences’ willingness to accept international elements as sources of authority. Accordingly, on the one hand, one of the main factors influencing the choice of international elements used in education policy discussions is the historical aspects of the context and the selection possibilities they make available to the current actors. This concerns both the selections of international elements used and the policy proposals presented, as they are always embedded in the country’s broader history and its past policy threads, as Palonen (2003) describes when discussing ‘policy-as-activity’. On the other, these historical paths have

implications for both, the policy options currently available and the international elements accepted by the audiences as authoritative. In other words, in line with Kingdon (2003), Luhmann (1996), and Alasuutari and Qadir (2019), the progression of every policy proposal or idea is contingent on the ‘national mood’ (multiple streams approach, Kingdon, 2003) or the acceptability to the audiences’ (epistemic governance framework, Alasuutari & Qadir; and thematisation theory, Luhmann, 1996; Saperas, 1987), the analysis presented here appears to demonstrate that the same thing happens with the selection of the international elements used. Thus, the contingencies created by historical paths seem to lead to a situation in which, although relatively sudden social changes may occur, incremental proposals, ideas, themes, and international points of reference anchored to a location’s historical threads are more likely to survive the filter of public acceptance than radically new ones unsubstantiated by historical paths and policy threads.

### 7.3 The contingencies of actors’ selections and interactions within and across systems and dimensions

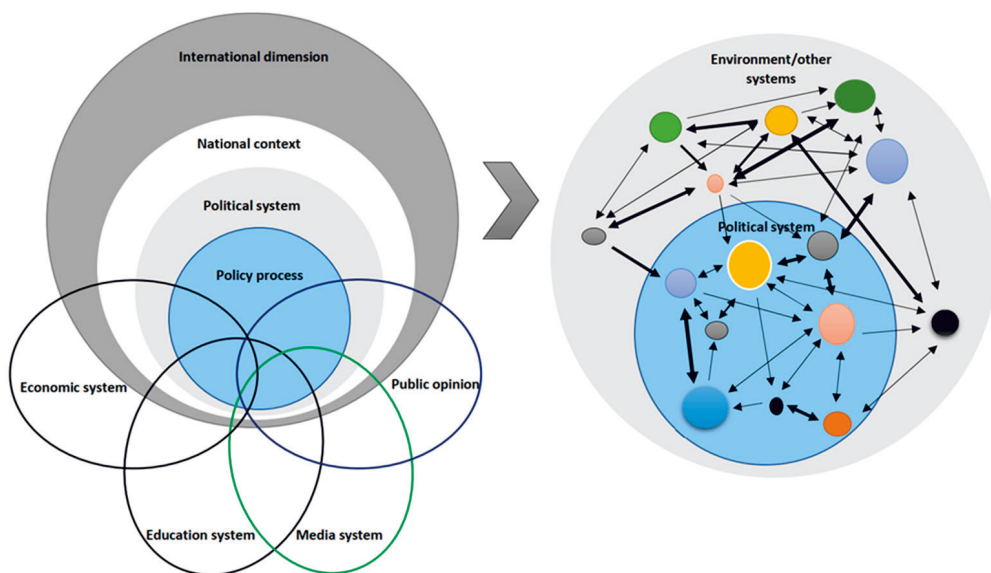
In this section I focus on exploring the complexities and contingencies created by political and social actors’ interactions and selections during policy processes, as well as on how international elements are used by these actors to manage the interpretations made available to both their opponents and the broad national audience. By doing so, this section also contributes to answering research questions **Q1** – ‘What factors influence the selection of international elements used in the discussion of education?’ and **Q2** – ‘How are international elements used in discussions of education in the Portuguese parliament and print media?’

Policy processes in modern societies are increasingly complex due largely to the growing number and variety of actors belonging to the different dimensions and systems (for an illustration see the left-hand side of Figure 2) involved in these processes, and the diversity of the interactions developing among them (see the right-hand side of Figure 2). Interactions between actors in their dimension or system and among actors from different dimensions or systems can be considered any contact between two elements of the system, or among these and the elements in the systems environment; they can go in one direction or be reciprocal (see Figure 2). Hence, events located outside the political system can also be considered interactions, and as such they can be received and translated by the systems’ actors, or they can be ignored. To comprehensively analyse and understand the policy

process at the system level, the analytical focus needs to be shifted from specific actors and facts isolated in themselves to the dynamics emerging from the intricate interactions among political and social actors involved in policy processes. These interactions can be sporadic or permanent, formal or informal, more or less complex, and have different degrees of impact on the policy process. The international events or themes taken into the system are interpreted differently by different actors within diverse communities and organisations at different levels of the system, leading at least to some extent to the system's adaptation and self-organisation, and therefore to emergent and possibly unpredictable behaviour. An example of such a situation is when a teacher strike causes the government to abandon a policy proposal, or when ILSA's reports are released, and media commentators start pressuring the government to act on the education system's identified weaknesses, as was seen in the analysed data. The external elements (actors, themes, and events) used locally are selected in a partly rational way according to the historical paths of the context and the interpretations of the different actors, as well as to emergent legitimisation needs of the various actors at that moment. Figure 2 below attempts to represent the main levels, different systems (e.g. economic, media, etc.), and several dimensions (global, national, local) involved in Portuguese education policy discussions between 2001 and 2018 (on the left-hand side of the figure). The right-hand side illustrates the network of interactions between actors, communities, and events inside and outside the political system, and the diversity of interactions that can be developed.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> On the right-hand side of Figure 2 the small, coloured circles represent the actors (singular or collective) and events inside and outside the political system, and the arrows are the intensity and directionality of interactions among actors inside and outside the system.



**Figure 2.** Description of multidimensional, multileveled, multi-system view of the policy process (left-hand side), and of the actors' interactions within and outside the political system.

The theories applied in this study – the multiple streams approach, epistemic governance framework, thematisation theory, and the background lenses of complexity thinking and social systems theory – assume policymaking to be complex, non-linear processes, uncertain and ambiguous, contingent on many contextual factors, including the diversity of interactions developed by the different actors involved and the selections of each of these actors from the available options for both policy options and international points of reference. Thus, these theories highlight the struggles and power games among actors within the political systems, and between these and other systems' actors. By observing the interactions among these actors (illustrated in Figure 2) from different theoretical angles, a deeper understanding of these processes can be gained, because this brings to the fore characteristics of the dynamics developing within policy processes, and possibly leading to an understanding of the system as a whole.

In Article II (Santos & Kauko, 2020) my colleague Jaakko Kauko and I concluded that the tight cohesion among the individual actors inside each party, along with the strict party discipline characterising the Portuguese party system, led to significant controversy and conflicting interactions among the different political forces. In turn, these dynamics resulted in the strong presence of praise and blame games, especially

evident in the context of parliamentary debates, but also in the media articles. Although controversy and conflict are natural features of political interactions in any political system, it seemed here to lead to slow policymaking processes, with consensus difficult to attain. In practice this translated, for example, to a lack of broad policy reforms regarding basic education during the entire period under analysis (2001–2018), and the dominance of incremental changes and adaptations in education policies as governments came and went. For example, the analysis in Articles III and IV shows that students' national large-scale assessments and the diverse themes of teacher assessment, recruitment, and profession have been debated in parliament and discussed in the media for many years, and at certain moments have been a strong point of disagreement between the diverse parliamentary parties and social actors involved in education policy discussions. However, instead of working to reach consensus regarding the policy details of proposals on these themes, the discussions were particularly turbulent, and seemed more focused on the attribution of blame. For example, this was evident during Legislature X (2005–2009), when the prime minister and the minister of education were accused of disrespecting teachers, undervaluing their work, and causing chaos in schools. The opposition parties, unions, and diverse social actors identified in media articles (mostly academics, politicians, and professional journalists) engaged in using political blame games to highlight the details of the poor relationship the government had maintained with teachers, their ignoring of teachers' real issues, and their deafness to their appeals and discontent. Meanwhile, government members focused on claiming the benefits of their own proposals and discarding the blame attributed to them (see more in Article IV). The controversy led to the replacement of the minister of education after the 2009 election (even though the same prime minister secured a new minority term), and to part of the debated proposals being dropped or changed, or only partly approved and implemented.

During controversial situations such as in the above example, external elements are frequently politicised<sup>12</sup> by the government to legitimise policy proposals and ideas, but also by political opposition groups to criticise policy proposals as unsuitable, or to praise or blame present and past governments for their already implemented education policy measures. Paradoxically, the politicisation of international elements strengthens arguments by depoliticising the presented policy

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<sup>12</sup> Politicisation is defined here as in Palonen (2003, pp. 182–183): 'detecting the political potential of some existing changes, shifts, or processes, politicisation either introduces new items to it [the polity – the physical and temporal context in which politics develops], which alters the relationships between the existing ones, or dismisses existing items.'

ideas and proposals, and by focusing audiences' attention on a mode of interpretation associated with an external form of authority – again, by projecting ideas, proposals, and critiques onto the international dimension (as also presented in Sub-sections 7.2 and 7.3). For example, the Bologna Declaration/process was highly politicised by left-wing policy actors in parliament when criticising the XVII Government for proposing and implementing higher education policies that would lead to increasing inequality. However, the government and its centre-left party used the EU and the declaration to depoliticise the proposed measures by projecting them onto the international dimension when highlighting the progress such measures in higher education could bring, and how those would bring a major development of the country by improving people's qualifications, leading to an improvement in the quality of life and better integration in the common ground of best practices among EU countries (see more on this discussion in Article III). The selection of education themes and international elements made by political and social actors causes contingencies, because although other possibilities are available – regarding both the external elements used and the policy proposals made – some are selected, and others are not. These selections influence or limit the selections of other actors and ultimately the outcomes of policymaking processes. In other words, the political dynamics developed in policy processes often lead policymakers to a constant quest for rhetorical strategies aimed at convincing their opponents that their own policy selection is best for addressing a specific issue. Through the use of carefully selected international elements policy actors aim to convince other policymakers to make the same policy selections they have made, and for which they advocate. The success of each policy actor involved in this process and its proposals is thus contingent on other policymakers' selections.

Thus, when an event outside the system occurs that in the right historical and societal conditions may cause the emergence of a new potential source of authority, policy actors are keen to self-organise their behaviour and bring these emergent sources of authority to the political system, utilising them to legitimise their arguments or delegitimise others' in attempts to reduce policy processes' complexity. Paradoxically, complexity seems to increase again when diverse political and social actors systematically select the same international element to legitimise arguments that are opposed, again raising the contingency existing within the process and the number of possibilities with which audiences must cope. This is certainly the case in the use of the OECD in Portuguese parliamentary education debates: while every party representative often references this organisation, the arguments for which they advocate are often contradictory, as are the examples given in Articles II and III.

Infiltrations of the international dimension into national policymaking processes therefore lead to a complexity in which, rather than helping improve policies, their controversial use by local social and political actors may lead to the emergence of conflictual behaviour within the system, which then increases the difficulties of achieving consensus among various social and political actors.

The arguments presented in this sub-section contribute to answering both research questions: **Q1** – ‘What factors influence the selection of international elements used in the discussion of education?’; and **Q2** – ‘How are international elements used in discussions of education in the Portuguese parliament and print media?’, because it informs us about the contingencies of actors’ interactions and each other’s selections during policy processes. In these contingent dynamics among actors belonging to different dimensions, levels, and communities, political and social actors strategically select international elements considering how authoritative they assume the audiences see them, with the aim of gathering the necessary consensus to achieve policy change through their favourite policy proposals. Thus, actors involved in the policymaking process need to manage contingency and reduce complexity not only regarding the policy selections they make, but also regarding the international elements they choose and how their audiences can interpret these references.

## 7.4 Externalisations as strategic tools of legitimisation in education policy: the usefulness of projection screens

In this sub-section I discuss the emergent needs for and uses of externalisations to international elements. By doing so, this sub-section also contributes to answering research questions **Q1** – ‘What factors influence the selection of international elements used in the discussion of education?’ and **Q2** – ‘How are international elements used in discussions of education in the Portuguese parliament and print media?’.

As has been discussed (e.g. Steiner-Khamsi, 2002; Waldow, 2012), acts of externalisation are useful tools of legitimisation that tend to occur when policy ideas and proposals are controversial and cannot obtain the necessary support to progress. These policy ideas are often discussed after certain situations are framed as problems in need of fixing. As Kingdon (2003) argues in his multiple streams approach (explored in Article II), diverse events can work as indicators, feedback, or focusing events that can be deployed as tools of knowledge and evidence to highlight policy

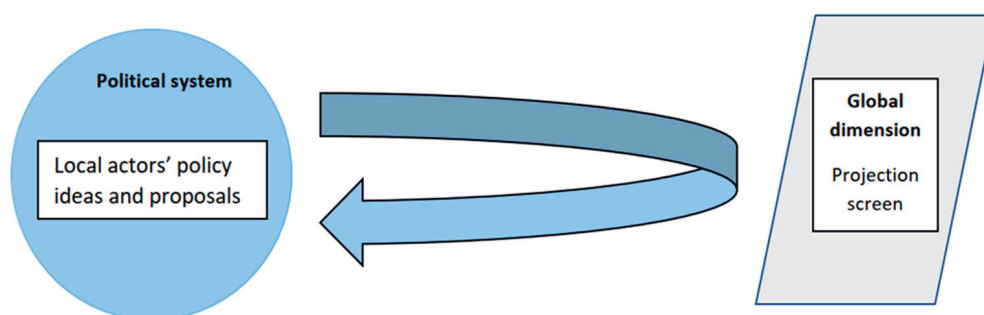


problems and legitimise policy proposals that are often already on the agenda and awaiting the right time or reason to emerge. This emerges in both analysed datasets. The launch of PISA or other ILSAs results, as well as international organisation's reports' publications and events like the financial crisis, cause irritations (Luhmann, 2006) within the general national context and in other more specific social systems like the political and media systems analysed here. These irritations seem to work as opportunities where it is more likely the three streams (political, problem, and policy) will couple and open policy windows (Kingdon, 2003). Hence, political and social actors use these international elements as anchors from which to launch their arguments, framing themes as problematic, and advocate for their favourite policy ideas or proposals. In line with the analysis made with the epistemic governance framework (Alasuutari & Qadir, 2019, presented in Article III) this epistemic work develops when political and social actors use carefully selected sources of authority in attempts to influence their audiences' (other parties, interest groups, and citizens in general) behaviour and decisions. Thus, actors involved in policymaking processes identify emerging policy windows (sometimes caused by international events) and when successful, can initiate policy change.

The analyses presented in Articles II–IV foregrounded the local use of external elements as volatile and mouldable. In practice, it demonstrated that local political and social actors not only selected a few international elements from those that could be used, but also that not all the aspects of the selected international elements were used. Once selected, some aspects of the international elements are instrumentalised, not necessarily transparently – in diverse and often opposite ways – as sources of authority, using frames that serve the legitimation needs of the speaker or writer, following their own ideologies and agenda. This is the case in the use of the 2015 PISA report, which highlights that Portugal has managed to reduce the effects of students' socioeconomic background on their learning process, but that improvement is still required. Some actors referred to this statement to highlight how well the country (and the government) had been doing; others focused on the part of the argument saying that not enough had been done yet.

It therefore seems that this analysis leads to an understanding that the possibility identified in an international element to serve as a projection screen for the presented ideas and proposals plays a major role in the selection not only of reference societies used, as presented, for example, by Waldow (2017) but of any international element used. International organisations and their tools of assessment and guidance also offer the opportunity to project a policy idea or proposal onto the international dimension. The analysis of parliamentary debates and the print media in Portugal

between 2001 and 2018 thus reveals a complex picture of the acts of externalisation to international elements which requires considerably more than a single, linear cause-effect rationale for why external elements are needed, and how they become useful to the actor using them. The projection of policy ideas onto international elements is used as a legitimisation strategy to strengthen the presented arguments by facilitating the claim that without a certain course of action (said to be suggested by an external entity or practised in the international dimension) education cannot improve (see Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Illustration of externalisation to world situations as a tool of projection of education policy ideas and proposals.

Therefore, while contributing to answering research questions, **Q1** – ‘What factors influence the selection of international elements used in the discussion of education?’ and **Q2** – ‘How are international elements used in discussions of education in the Portuguese parliament and print media?’, the analysis demonstrates that whether the reference is to a country or region, to an international organisation or to a tool of assessment or guidance, the logic followed by the speaker when selecting any of these external elements is their perceived ability to help channel the possibilities of interpretation of the relevant issue by their audiences. The analyses made seem to show that in line with previous research (e.g. Waldow, 2017; Steiner-Khamsi & Waldow, 2018) projection is seen as a useful legitimisation strategy. As such, projection permits the depoliticisation and decontextualisation of the presented policy ideas and proposals.

## 7.5 Summarising the findings

Through the different layers of analysis (presented in Articles I–IV) I reached several intertwined conclusions that directly answered the two first main research questions (Q1–Q2). These are summarised in Table 10 below. The answer to research question Q3 – ‘How do multiple theoretical perspectives contribute to understanding the use of externalisations to international elements in education policy processes?’ will be finalised in Sub-section 8.1 of this integrative chapter.

**Table 10.** Research questions Q1-Q2 and findings

Research questions	Findings
<p><b>Q1</b> – <i>What factors influence the selection of international elements used in the discussion of education?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Being promptly available</li> <li>- Allowing a broad, blurred use, less likely to be questioned by opposition actors</li> <li>- Historical paths and international relations built over time</li> <li>- Emerging needs of (de-)legitimation</li> <li>- Assumptions of political and social actors about their audiences</li> <li>- Interactions among actors inside and outside the systems</li> <li>- International elements and policy ideas selected by other actors</li> </ul>
<p><b>Q2</b> – <i>How are international elements used in discussions of education in the Portuguese parliament and print media?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- As strategies to respond to emergent needs of (de-)legitimation: sources of authority that validate arguments</li> <li>- As a projection screen that helps decontextualise and depoliticise policy ideas and proposals</li> <li>- Tools that are perceived as helping reduce the policymaking process’s complexity</li> </ul> <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p> <p>Manage contingency by attempting to lead audiences to think about only a limited number of education problems and policy solutions</p>

Several factors influence the selection of the international elements used in education policy discussions (see Table 10). These factors are mostly context-related, as initially suggested by Schriewer (1990) in line with Luhmann, emerging from the local *socio-logic*. Thus, the first conclusion is that the study presented here largely demonstrates that the externalisations made within Portuguese education discussions are contingent on local historical paths, and the interactions and selections of local

actors. These are the two main factors conditioning policy processes, because a) policy ideas that follow previous local policy threads and historical paths seem better accepted by audiences than radical new ones, and the same happens with the international elements used to legitimise these policies; and b) selections of any given actor influence the remaining selection possibilities for other actors. In the analysed Portuguese contexts the major international elements used were the OECD and EU, their member countries, and the tools of assessment and guidance seen as related to these organisations (even if they are not, as is the case with the Bologna Declaration), which again highlights the importance of historical paths and international relationships for the selections made when social and political actors discuss education policy.

Second, as it is often difficult to achieve consensus, and political controversy is common in policy processes, political and social actors are left needing rhetorical strategies that can help validate their own arguments or discredit others'. This epistemic work (Alasuutari & Qadir, 2019) leads to emergent needs of authoritative elements that strengthen the arguments and help sustain appeals to audiences' reasoning and emotions, which may change their understandings and decisions, leading them to support speakers' proposals. Externalisations to international elements are thus useful in introducing such authoritative elements to the discussions, because these elements can be used as knowledge and evidence claims, allowing the depoliticisation and decontextualisation of the themes being discussed.

Third, I argue that international elements constitute useful projection screens onto which political and social actors can project their ideas and proposals. This conclusion expands the previous literature, which identified other countries as projection screens (e.g. Waldow, 2017, 2019) by considering that any international element could thus be used. The OECD and EU are organisations with which Portugal has maintained enduring cooperation. They work as a common ground to which the country proudly belongs, and which is considered fundamental to promoting the continuity of the country's development. Referencing broad and blurred international elements such as these organisations is helpful not only because of their historical authority, but also because they seem to allow the projection of a large diversity of policy ideas and proposals, without allowing great scope for contestation.

Fourth, if they are to be useful, the international elements used must be considered authoritative by the audiences the speaker is addressing. Political and social actors therefore need to constantly observe their audiences and make assumptions about what they think are major issues needing to be fixed, which

identities or institutions can help address the relevant issue, and what audiences understand as desired outcomes. Furthermore, the selection of the external elements used is therefore also contingent on the local socio-logic, because what is accepted as authority at the system level tends to follow the shared understandings of local communities or organisations like political parties, and how they are interpreted by these communities can differ substantially from community to community, depending on ideological principles and agendas. Externalisations to international elements introduce authoritative elements to the arguments that are thus used by political and social actors involved in managing contingency within the policymaking process and therefore to reduce this process's complexity by reducing the number of available possibilities, and thus influence decision-making processes and enable the initiation of social change.

## 8 FINAL REFLECTIONS

In the study presented in this dissertation I sought to analyse the uses of externalisations to international elements in education policy discussions in the Portuguese context. I developed the analysis by identifying the international elements used in Portuguese discussions of education and exploring the reasons they become necessary, how they are selected, and how they are deployed by political and social actors in the contexts of parliamentary debates and the print media. I adopted an ontological and epistemological complexity perspective and aggregated theories of the policy process, social systems, and comparative education to explore the phenomenon of externalisation to international elements from diverse angles. I operationalised the analysis using three different methods: qualitative content analysis, rhetorical analysis, and frame analysis, and presented the results in four independent peer-reviewed scientific publications, which were then aggregated and reanalysed in this integrative chapter.

My main argument in this study is that international elements constitute useful sources of authority that are used by social and political actors as strategic tools for the (de-)legitimation of policy ideas and proposals that are struggling to achieve the necessary consensus for the initiation of social change. This exercise's ultimate goal is to manage the policy process's contingency and reduce its complexity. However, in the Portuguese context it seems that the frequent use of the same international elements by different actors, often advocating contradictory ideas and proposals, has sustained the complexity of the policymaking process, leading to the failure of several attempts to advance comprehensive reform plans – as was the case with proposals related to teachers' assessment instruments by both the XVII Government (2005–2009) and the XIX Government (2011–2015). This study therefore contributes to the understanding that processes of education policymaking are more complex than is often assumed, and that contrary to the original policymakers' intentions, attempts to reduce this complexity can actually increase it.

## 8.1 Theoretical reflections: the benefits of the aggregation of different lenses

I quite frequently read scientific productions in which there is a clear presence of complexity thinking or complexity concepts in the analysis. However, these are not often explicitly acknowledged. This was also the case in the publications that constitute this dissertation, which only implicitly acknowledged the complexity thinking it was already using in the analysis. This was because my understanding of the social world developed during the research process from a more uncritical and linear view of social systems and the development of processes within them to a view that assumes social systems as complex, and that processes within and across them develop non-linearly and unpredictably.

In response to research question **Q3** – ‘How do multiple theoretical perspectives contribute to understanding the use of externalisations to international elements in education policy processes?’, I argue that the theories and concepts applied in the analysis presented in this dissertation allow a fruitful exploration of the complexity assumed to characterise the social world and the processes developing within its diverse systems and subsystems. They can be defined as ‘theories of change’ (Capano, 2009) or non-linear theories, because they assume policymaking processes are uncertain and ambiguous activities involving a large number of actors interacting unpredictably. Exploring the externalisations to international elements through these theoretical perspectives enables an understanding of the nuanced use of these elements in policy arguments, and helps clarify the societal conditions in which they become necessary and are chosen from all the available external elements. The multiple streams approach and epistemic governance framework permitted a focus on the analysis of actors’ agency and their interactions. Using these lenses, actors’ emergent needs of legitimation and the assumptions they make about their audiences can be identified. These theories guided an analysis that revealed details of the policy process that departed from the interactions between the actors located in different dimensions and levels of the social world, and helped in understanding the power dynamics among these policy actors. These theories also helped bring to light how international elements were used in the different streams of the policy process with the aim of opening policy windows, and how they were utilised by local policy actors as authoritative tools in attempts to manage power struggles in ways that could earn their audiences’ support, and afforded the survival of their own ideas and proposals. Thematisation theory informs the process whereby specific education themes are highlighted while others are left aside, and the role

international organisations and their tools play in influencing the education themes discussed in the Portuguese print media. The use of this theory led to the conclusion that although the education themes discussed were rather constant during the analysed timeframe, they gained increased prominence when they were directly raised by international actors like the OECD or PISA reports. At these moments media actors also attempted to insert these themes in the public discussion by addressing them and framing them in diverse ways according to their own agenda. This process aimed to lead the public to discuss education through only a few themes and reduce it to a limited number of perspectives, and it was intended to work as a double reduction of the social world's complexity. In doing so, international elements were used, as in parliament, to validate arguments.

Moreover, complexity thinking is a background ontological and epistemological stance in which the general view of the processes within systems promotes the link between the theories utilised in this study. Although some authors question the usefulness of complexity thinking as a reference point for the accumulation of knowledge of social phenomena because of its lack of a concrete framework (see Cairney & Geyer, 2017, pp. 5–7), I see this as one of complexity thinking's strengths. It is a broad way of seeing the world and how it can be studied that can work as a premise for the empirical application of more specific theories. In this sense, the combination of complexity thinking with externalisation to the world situations thesis, multiple streams approach, epistemic governance framework, thematisation theories, and some insights from Luhmann's theory of social systems sheds light on the policy process from various complementary perspectives, leading to a better-informed understanding of policy processes, and the interactions between global and local actors within them.

## 8.2 Research contributions and future possibilities

This dissertation offers theoretical and empirical contributions to advance knowledge in the fields of comparative education and the field of policy studies. While theories of the policy process focus mostly on how processes develop within specific contexts, largely leaving aside the impacts of the international dimension on local processes, the theories of comparative education tend to focus on analysing the intertwinements between the local and the global, but leave aside the details of the development of local policy processes. More specifically, the theoretical and methodological approach developed in this study brings patterns of externalisation



to international elements to light that can unveil the complexities of both the policy process and the flows of global-local interconnectedness by investigating multiple facets of policymakers' unpredictable interactions beyond 'facts, figures and stable (causal) relations' (Teisman & Klijn, 2008, p. 288). Thus, this study foregrounds the benefits of combining diverse theories from two fields that complement each other's analytical focus and expand our understandings of these processes, going beyond the local to admit the integration of the global as an additional level for the involved actors.

The theoretical and methodological pluralism I adopt in this study also contributes to ongoing research (e.g. Zahariadis, 1998; Howlett et al., 2016) by attempting to demonstrate that methods and theories from different research fields can efficiently contribute to each other's progress. Furthermore, the background of complexity thinking guarantees that the application of each theory and its findings' final aggregation orients the focus of analysis from the individual parts to the system as a whole.

In future, this study could be expanded by analysing different policy contexts and combining other theories that could be equally fruitful to developing new understandings of policy processes, and the use of international elements as authoritative tools within them. I am especially interested in political and social actors' perspectives on their own use of international elements. What are their views of and justifications for the selection of certain external elements, but not others? Has the use of externalisations changed in recent decades, with the continuous intensification of the intertwinements between the local and global policymaking dimensions?



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# PUBLICATION

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## **Inspirations from Abroad: The Impact of PISA on the choice of Reference Societies in Education**

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# Inspirations from abroad: the impact of PISA on countries' choice of reference societies in education

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## ABSTRACT

The Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA) has instigated domestic policy debate aimed at improving education systems' quality and efficiency. Its high performers are often described as knowledge-based legitimisation tools that have become reference societies. This article analyses if and the extent to which PISA affects the choice of reference societies used in education policy. We conducted a systematic literature review of scholarly peer-reviewed journal articles. We identify two ways in which PISA affects the reference societies chosen: it builds but also triggers the collapse of the reference societies used in domestic education policy. However, there are also cases in which PISA has little influence on which countries or regions are used as references. The domestic processes of choosing the reference societies used in education policy emerge as more nuanced than first expected. This article provides a firm basis for a much-needed understanding of the topic.



## KEYWORDS

PISA; reference societies; projection; legitimacy; education reform

## Introduction

In recent decades international organisations have ceaselessly built performance-based international large-scale assessments (ILSAs) aimed at comparing countries' pupils' scores at certain grade levels and in certain subjects. They identify best practices and define the quality standards expected to serve as a reference for further domestic policy adjustments. They set the rules for 'governing by comparison' (Martens and Niemann 2013, 317), and as such establish new modes of education governance (Novoa and Yariv-Mashal 2003).

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) heads this global drive. It has built an expert status in education policy and has therefore become an impactful actor in steering and legitimising education reforms in numerous countries (Grek 2009; see also Centeno 2017). The OECD has achieved this status mostly because of its Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which specifically aims to produce data and knowledge about education systems (Carvalho 2012). Since 2000 PISA has surveyed the reading, mathematics, and scientific literacy skills of fifteen-year-olds and their ability to

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use this knowledge in solving daily problems. Through PISA the OECD underlines the relationship between the global and local, and advocates for the improvement of education quality and efficacy to ultimately improve performance (Baroutsis and Lingard 2017).

From the launch of the first results in December 2001 PISA has fuelled public, political, and scholarly debate on education (e.g. Berényi et al. 2009; Bonal and Tarabini 2013; Rautalin 2013). On one hand, the survey raises ‘public awareness’ by supposedly exposing the strengths and weaknesses of each participant country’s education system (Carvalho, Costa, and Gonçalves 2017, 155). On the other, by creating standards based on PISA high-performing countries’ practices and policies, the OECD openly but ‘softly’ – since there are no binding decisions on this matter (Niemann and Martens 2018) – redirects PISA’s lower performers to look to and learn from the best. It encourages borrowing processes from the education systems deemed successful. High-performing countries become providers of empirical knowledge that can be used to legitimise or de-legitimise reforms aiming to improve other school systems (Takayama, Waldow, and Sung 2013). Although the actual borrowing of practices or policies from one country or region only rarely reaches the implementation phase (Phillips and Ochs 2003, in Winstanley 2012; Steiner-Khamsi 2014; You and Morris 2016), references to PISA’s high performers have become a commonplace in education policy. These countries are now used as reference societies (e.g. Takayama 2009; Sahlberg 2011; Tucker 2011; Sellar and Lingard 2013; Waldow, Takayama, and Sung 2014; Forestier et al. 2016; Adamson et al. 2017). In promoting changes in the education system or in fighting against them, they have become resourceful knowledge-based tools used in attempts to clarify the arguments and make them more persuasive for the audience.

As Waldow (2019, 2) mentions, the concept of ‘reference societies’ was originally introduced by Bendix and is frequently used ‘in the sense of a model nation from which to borrow elements’. However, Waldow (2017, 648) explains that Bendix develops the concept further to refer to ‘whenever intellectual leaders and an educated public react [positively or negatively] to the values and institutions of another country with ideas and actions that pertain to their own country’. Today, in the context of intensified globalisation, the country-centric concept of reference societies certainly also needs to include reactions to both sub- and supra-national regions (Waldow 2019). With this definition in mind we analysed scholarly peer-reviewed journal articles published between December 2001 and December 2018, examining if and the extent to which PISA affected countries’ choice of reference societies used in education policy.

This article is structured as follows. In the next section, we present the data and methods used. This is followed by a section that outlines how scholars have analysed the influence of PISA on the choice of reference societies, and the conditions that appear to be necessary for this influence to take place. We then analyse the impact of PISA – and lack thereof – on the (re)construction of reference societies. The main findings are discussed in the conclusion.

## **Data and methods**

The study is a systematic literature review of scholarly peer-reviewed articles focusing on (or to a significant extent approaching) the analysis of the domestic use of PISA’s participating countries/regions as reference societies in specific countries.

A systematic literature review is a comprehensive secondary analysis of primary research which through a series of explicit and methodical steps aims to extensively collect and analyse information on a specific topic (Templier and Paré 2015; Newman and Gough 2020). As an independent research method, it aims to progress theory (Webster and Watson 2002) by critically assessing, aggregating, synthesising, and analysing the existing literature with the intention of creating a ‘key source of knowledge’ in a research field (Templier and Paré 2015).

The systematic literature review underpinning this study followed the common standard processes of identifying a problem/formulating a research question, constructing a protocol for the review (inclusion/exclusion criteria, a search strategy, a data extraction process, etc.), searching for the literature in scientific databases, selecting the literature for review, a quality assessment, data extraction, analysis, and synthesis, and data reporting (e.g. Templier and Paré 2015; Xiao and Watson 2019; Newman and Gough 2020).

The search focused on peer-reviewed articles published in scientific education journals published between December 2001 (when the first PISA results were published) and December 2018. The articles were collected in November 2017 and June 2019. We used the Andor search engine, confining our selection to scientific articles written in English. To check the validity of the selection, we also performed searches on Google Scholar and EBSCO. Additionally, to probe the search results using less used languages and research engines, we performed the same search in a regional engine from the Global South (SciELO, the largest search engine in Latin America) and a less well-known European national engine (RCAAP, Portugal’s Open Access Repositories). These did not change the results of the first search. We applied several combinations of keywords relevant to the study, namely, ‘PISA’ AND ‘reference society’ OR ‘reference societies’ AND ‘media’ OR ‘policy debate’ OR ‘policy borrowing’ OR ‘policy transfer’. After a review of the abstracts and conclusions, seventy-nine articles were set aside for deeper analysis. Finally, twenty-two were selected and are analysed in this article (Table 1).

Interestingly, the first article on this topic is from 2009 – much later than the announcement of the first PISA results. However, every subsequent year had at least one publication on the topic, and the number of publications increased every year until 2018. We believe the decline in 2018 may be due to the preparation of the edited book on the topic, ‘Understanding PISA’s Attractiveness Critical Analyses in Comparative Policy Studies’ (Waldow and Steiner-Khamsi 2019), which explores the use of PISA and its participant countries or regions as references in policymaking. The latter publication is not included in this analysis, because it was published after our data collection and lies beyond our corpus of analysis both in terms of format and timeframe. However, it informed our reflections, and its analysis is referenced in the article’s following sections (Figure 1).

We used computer-assisted (Atlas.ti) qualitative content analysis to select ‘aspects of meaning, namely those aspects that relate to the overall research question’ (Schreier 2014, 171). Several concept-driven categories were used initially. These were broad and set beforehand, departing from our research question: ‘reference society’; ‘reference

**Table 1.** List of the 22 analysed articles.

Authors	Year	Title	Journal
Rook, Roberto Santiago and Darlene Machell Espeña	2018	Constructing underachievement: the discursive life of Singapore in US federal education policy	Asia Pacific Journal of Education
Takayama, Keita	2018	The constitution of East Asia as a counter reference society through PISA: a postcolonial/de-colonial intervention	Globalisation, Societies and Education
Adamson, Bob, Katherine Forestier, Paul Morris, and Christine Han	2017	PISA, policymaking and political pantomime: education policy referencing between England and Hong Kong	Comparative Education
Baroutsis, Aspa and Bob Lingard	2017	Counting and comparing school performance: an analysis of media coverage of PISA in Australia, 2000–2014	Journal of Education Policy
Sung, Youl-Kwan. and Yoonmi Lee	2017	Is the United States losing its status as a reference point for educational policy in the age of global comparison? The case of South Korea	Oxford Review of Education
Waldow, Florian	2017	Projecting images of the 'good' and the 'bad school': top scorers in educational large-scale assessments as reference societies	Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education
You, Yun	2017	Comparing school accountability in England and its East Asian sources of 'borrowing'	Comparative Education
Forestier, Katherine, Bob Adamson, Christine Han, and Paul Morris	2016	Referencing and borrowing from other systems: the Hong Kong education reforms	Educational Research
Lingard, Bob	2016	Rationales for and the reception of the OECD's PISA	Educação e Sociedade
Ringarp, Johanna	2016	PISA lends legitimacy: a study of education policy changes in Germany and Sweden after 2000	European Educational Research Journal
Ringarp, Johanna and Florian Waldow	2016	From 'silent borrowing' to the international argument – legitimating Swedish educational policy from 1945 to the present day	Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy
You, Yun and Paul Morris	2016	Imagining school autonomy in high-performing education systems: East Asia as a source of policy referencing in England	Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education
Rönnerberg, Linda	2015	Marketisation on export: representations of the Swedish free school model in English media	European Educational Research Journal
Forestier, Katherine and Michael Crossley	2015	International education policy transfer – borrowing both ways: the Hong Kong and England experience	Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education
Waldow, Florian, Keita Takayama, and Youl-Kwan Sung	2014	Rethinking the pattern of external policy referencing: media discourses over the 'Asian Tigers' PISA success in Australia, Germany and South Korea	Comparative Education
Carvalho, Luís Miguel, and Estela Costa	2014	Seeing education with one's own eyes and through PISA lenses: considerations of the reception of PISA in European countries	Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education
Takayama, Keita, Florian Waldow, and Youl-Kwan Sung	2013	Finland has it all? Examining the media accentuation of 'Finnish Education' in Australia, Germany and South Korea	Research in Comparative and International Education
Sellar, Sam and Bob Lingard	2013	Looking East: Shanghai, PISA 2009 and the reconstitution of reference societies in the global education policy field	Comparative Education
Morris, Paul	2012	Pick 'n' mix, select and project; policy borrowing and the quest for 'world class' schooling: an analysis of the 2010 schools White Paper	Journal of Education Policy
Dobbins, Michael and Kerstin Martens	2011	Towards an education approach à la finlandaise? French education policy after PISA	Journal of Education Policy
Ringarp, Johanna and Martin Rothland	2010	Is the grass always greener? The effect of the PISA results on the education debates in Sweden and Germany	European Educational Research Journal
Takayama, Keita	2009	Politics of externalisation in reflexive times: Reinventing Japanese education reform discourses through 'Finnish PISA success'	Comparative Education Review



**Figure 1.** Number of publications per journal.

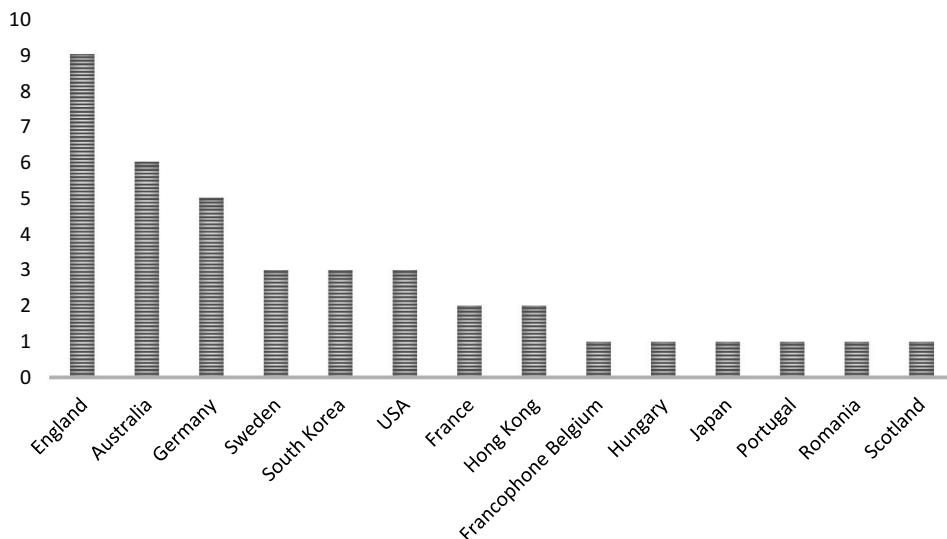
functions’; and ‘country analysed’. Afterwards, the coding was largely data-driven. The data-driven (sub-)categories consisted of more specific information that emerged from the readings. For example, the category ‘reference society’ was further detailed according to the countries mentioned in the articles (e.g. ‘reference society: Finland’).

The findings are presented in the next two sections. First, we describe the articles further, providing an overview of their main arguments, analytical approaches, and research designs. Second, we present the analysis of their empirical results and address the question of PISA’s impact on the (re)construction of reference societies in education policy.

### **Reference societies: an analysis of a phenomenon in transformation**

The first striking finding of our analysis is that the countries/regions analysed in the abovementioned articles (Table 1) are very narrow and recurring. They are limited to Australia, a very ‘small’ Europe (Germany, England, Sweden, Francophone Belgium, France, Portugal, Hungary, Romania, and Scotland), the USA, and a few Asian countries/economies (mostly Japan, Hong Kong, and South Korea) (Figure 2). Despite PISA’s worldwide coverage and the OECD’s global range of action, only fourteen countries/regions have been studied as of December 2018. This demonstrates the topic’s freshness and its relatively unexamined status, and our initial assumption that notwithstanding frequent studies about the reception of PISA’s results in domestic arenas (e.g. Berényi et al. 2009; Bonal and Tarabini 2013; Rautalin 2013; Afonso and Costa 2009; Pons 2012), the impact of PISA on the (re)construction of reference societies is still an under-studied phenomenon.

Concerning their conceptual frameworks, most of the studies used theories of policy borrowing (e.g. Steiner-Khamsi 2002, 2004, 2014; Phillips and Ochs 2003, 2004; Waldow



**Figure 2.** Countries/regions analysed in the articles.

2012) and/or externalisation theory (e.g. Schriewer 1990; Steiner-Khamsi 2002, 2004; Waldow 2012).

Scholars argue that references to other countries are used mainly as a discursive strategic tool to (de-)legitimise new education reforms (e.g. Takayama 2009; Waldow, Takayama, and Sung 2014; You and Morris 2016). This finding follows earlier studies' suggestions that (a) 'references to other educational systems tend to occur more frequently for those domestic reforms that are politically highly contested (...)' (Steiner-Khamsi 2002, 68); and (b) references to external situations or systems do not necessarily entail a real transference of practices and/or policies (Waldow 2012). These external situations are perceived realities, which are used as a rhetorical instrument providing additional meaning and authority to the policy argument (Schriewer and Martinez 2004; Steiner-Khamsi 2002, 2014).

It is in this vein that some of the analysed articles describe the use of reference societies as a 'projection screen' of education practices (e.g. Takayama 2009; Morris 2012; Takayama, Waldow, and Sung 2013; Waldow 2017). Waldow (2017, 2019) relates the concept of a projection screen to Bendix's concept of reference societies. Countries project their own education characteristics or education ideals onto other countries or regions either to promote or contest pre-set policy agendas. Furthermore, these projections are largely selective and strongly strategic, feeding the need for extra support for the presented arguments (e.g. Waldow and Steiner-Khamsi 2019). Policymakers develop, as Breakspear (2014) metaphorically describes, a 'cherry-picking' of specific policies or practices from PISA's high achievers. The characteristics of the context from which these policies originate are often disregarded or even unknown in detail and depth by the person making the reference (Morris 2012), and even more frequently by the audience listening to or involved in the debate. This limited knowledge of the original context of a policy is, as Waldow (2010) argues, very beneficial, because it allows a broader variety of national policies to be projected onto that context.

Researchers elaborate further on these references to other countries or regions by using Schriewer's (1990, 28–83) thesis of externalisation to world situations. Schriewer developed the externalisation thesis on the basis of the Luhmannian theory of self-referential systems, focusing on the shift from self-reference to external reference in modern societies' discourses and emphasising the imperative of studying the local context in understanding how and why 'external' policies became a reference. Contexts have their own 'socio-logic' that leads to the use of specific world situations as a tool to strengthen or weaken arguments about the introduction or annulment of certain reforms (Schriewer 1990). Hence, despite similar results, different countries/regions react differently to PISA's results. An interesting example is the opposing cases of Germany and the USA. Although both countries were at or just below the OECD PISA average in 2000, Germany reacted quickly to its poor results, engaging in policy debates and reforms (Ertl 2006), while the USA seemed to care little, putting no policy debates or reforms in place until later rounds of the survey (Breakspear 2012).

This line of conceptual idea brings to the fore Martens and Niemann (2013, 314) earlier reflection on the impact of ILSAs like PISA on national contexts. They argue that strong public policy debates, and eventually the introduction of reforms, occur 'when two conditions are simultaneously fulfilled'. First, education needs to be seen as an essential topic in the country in question. Second, a large gap needs to exist between a country's expectations and beliefs, and the concrete assessment's results. In our data some researchers (e.g. Ringarp and Rothland 2010; Ringarp 2016; Baroutsis and Lingard 2017) also follow this argumentation by referring to these two conditions as important local features in contexts in which an accentuated debate focusing on reforming agendas has occurred. It is against a backdrop of 'shock', the authors argue, that references to successful countries/regions have been used to supply additional meaning to domestic arguments. In other words, when the results of ILSAs are received as a scandal (Steiner-Khamsi 2003), policymakers tend to become involved in intense discussions about the state of the education system and engage (or are pressured to engage) in policy reform. This increases policy referencing to societies perceived as successful. However, as we will show, it does not necessarily change the reference societies historically used in each context.

Indeed, in some cases the reaction to the first PISA results was sufficiently strong to be called a 'PISA shock'. In some countries this 'PISA shock' was a result of a better than expected performance (as in Finland), while in others it was because performance was worse than expected (as in Germany). In still others (as in Japan), although the mean results matched expectations, the comparison provoked lively discussion, both publicly (in the media, for example) and among policymakers and politicians over the aspects of the education system that could be improved.

The studies reviewed in this analysis show that the reactions to the PISA rankings varied not only according to a country's scores but more often according to its social and political situation at the time of the results' publication. Germany (Ertl 2006; Breakspear 2014), Denmark (Breakspear 2014), Norway, and Switzerland (Baird et al. 2016) are examples of countries that were quick to initiate discussions on the perceived critical state of their education systems. Yet this was also apparent in countries internationally perceived as high performers. Good PISA results intensified the policy debate, and they were used to support arguments concerning policy reform agendas that were frequently

set before results were published. This applies to Japan, South Korea, and more recently, Australia (Takayama 2008, 2009; Tasaki 2017; Takayama, Waldow, and Sung 2013; Baroutsis and Lingard 2017). Of relevance for our analysis is that these education debates were developed with comparisons between countries/regions' performances and the use of reference societies as a tool for the legitimation or de-legitimation of education reforms.

### **The impact of PISA on the choice of reference societies**

The analysis revealed that PISA's influence on the choice of the reference societies used in education policy discussions cannot be assumed *a priori*. The findings suggest three general situations. On the one hand, when PISA seems to play a role in the choice of reference societies, two situations most often occur: PISA either influences the construction of new reference societies or contributes to the collapse of existing ones. On the other, a third situation may occur in which PISA seems to have little or no influence on the choice of reference societies used. This latter situation can be observed when countries or regions remain reference societies despite their poor results in the PISA rankings. We elaborate on these findings in the next sub-sections.

#### ***PISA and the construction of reference societies***

PISA's high performers saw their success in the survey thrown under the spotlight of education debates, with increased attention directed at their policies (Waldow 2017); it constructed reference countries and regions. Finland and the East Asian region, to name two prominent examples, became sources of additional support for policy reform after their outstanding PISA performances: they became reference societies for countries looking to improve their performance.

Countries showing significant improvement in their PISA rankings over the years were equally promoted on the *wall of fame* of the survey's best examples (Carvalho and Costa 2014) and are increasingly used as reference societies in education policy. Like the high performers, these countries are now becoming projection screens for education ideas (e.g. Waldow 2010; Takayama 2009; Takayama, Waldow, and Sung 2013). Examples of such countries are Germany, Poland, Portugal, and Vietnam. After the 2012 PISA results were published (Klemenčič and Mirazchiyski 2017) the British media and government highlighted German, Polish, and Vietnamese score improvements and policies. Portugal also became a projection screen for other countries' ideas after the 2012 survey (Rutkowski 2015), and increasingly after the good results presented in 2015 survey. For example, although Spain has rarely looked at its smaller western neighbour in the past, newspaper articles have elaborated on the quality improvements of the Portuguese education system. An article from 'El País Online' (8 December 2016), entitled 'Is Portugal the "new Finland" in education?', illustrates this perfectly. Portugal has also received unprecedented international attention since the OECD's statements about the country's progress in the ranking – 'Portugal is the best PISA success story in Europe' (Schleicher, Diário de Notícias, 10 February 2017). Probably because of such statements Portugal has recently also become an occasional reference in Chinese media debates (Lu Zi 2018).

A reference society can be used positively or negatively. While PISA clearly has an impact on the (re)construction of some reference societies, the reason for their status lies elsewhere. As Waldow (2017) aptly points out, the characteristics of the education system used as a reference, and the preconceptions and perspectives historically constructed in the country that references it, influence the domestic status of the reference society. Let us consider the clear and contrasting cases of Finland and the East Asian region and countries. Finland occupies one side of the education values spectrum. It is the strongest example of a country used systematically and almost universally as a positive reference society. Finland epitomises an idealised egalitarian and tranquil education system that has achieved great results in the PISA survey. Most countries, whether eastern or western, aspire to share its education practices and policies. Finland has become a positive reference society in arguments concerning quality, efficiency, and improvement in education (Takayama 2009; Dobbins and Martens 2011; Takayama, Waldow, and Sung 2013; Ringarp and Waldow 2016; Waldow 2017). Seeking to learn from Finnish education, several nations have engaged in fieldtrips to this Nordic country, with the goal of understanding and learning from the practices leading to such high scores (Takayama 2009; Ringarp and Rothland 2010; Takayama, Waldow, and Sung 2013; Ringarp 2016; Ringarp and Waldow 2016).

On the other side of the education values spectrum, and despite their equally high PISA results, are the East Asian region, countries, and economies, which have not received unanimous acclaim. Despite being used as positive reference societies in countries such as England, Australia, and the USA, as well as among themselves (e.g. Sellar and Lingard 2013; Forestier and Crossley 2015; Lingard 2016; You and Morris 2016; You 2017; Roock and Espeña 2018), they are most frequently regarded as negative reference societies in these and other countries, as for example in Germany (Waldow, Takayama, and Sung 2014; Waldow 2017). The education practices of the East Asian region are criticised for their highly demanding school routines, focus on memorisation, rote learning, lack of creative development, and highly competitive culture (Tan 2017; Takayama 2018). In Germany, for example, the East Asian countries have become a reference tool in the education reform debate to illustrate the arguments against reforms that might bring more competition and demanding practices, thereby increasing pupils' stress levels (Waldow 2017).

The strategic use of these models and anti-models in the legitimisation or delegitimation of certain education reform agendas makes the discourses more visual and easier for the audience to grasp, and therefore more persuasive and convincing. This study supports previous research conclusions that countries or regions become models and anti-models largely because of historically constructed perceptions and stereotypes (Waldow, Takayama, and Sung 2014; Waldow 2017). They function as 'discursive backups' that are used to support policy arguments, because they are recognised by the audience as valid and to some extent relevant. This status seems to develop from the past or present economic, political, and cultural relationships between the country referencing and the country/region referenced, which appear to strongly influence what is referenced, how, and why. It seems these perceptions and stereotypes are therefore the device that prompts countries like Germany to assess Finland as a model of good education practice (Ringarp and Rothland 2010; Ringarp 2016; Waldow 2017; Waldow



and Steiner-Khamsi 2019) while negatively viewing the East Asian region and its countries as examples of what to avoid (Waldow 2017; Tan 2017; Takayama 2018).

### ***PISA and the collapse of reference societies***

However, PISA also plays an entirely different role in the choice of reference societies used. This is related to the collapse or decline of historically used reference societies due to poor PISA results and applies, for example, to Sweden in England, and to some extent in Germany. There was little reaction in England and Germany to the Swedish position in the PISA rankings in the survey's first cycle. However, the Swedish results fell in the following cycles (2003, 2006, 2009, and 2012), and this decline progressively influenced its reference society status in these two countries, particularly in England. Especially after the publication of the PISA 2009 results, references to Sweden in the English education debates progressively fell silent or became controversial, to the extent that it has even become a negative reference society. After years of unanimously referring to the great qualities of Swedish education and its free schools as a model (Rönnerberg 2015) some key members of Britain's main political parties have ceased to cite Sweden as a reference society for education reform or have problematised its education performance.

The same shift in reference societies is also identifiable in some circles of the German education debate. After World War II German policymakers and the general public sought to emulate Sweden (Takayama, Waldow, and Sung 2013). However, after the results of the first PISA survey the rhetoric concerning the wonders of this Nordic country slowly changed. Initially, after the second round of PISA, references switched to the 'Scandinavian countries', in which Finland, the top performer, was included. Yet as the Swedish results continuously declined (until 2015), Finland has often become the main reference society for the legitimisation of policy reform agendas in Germany (Takayama, Waldow, and Sung 2013; Ringarp 2016).

A further example along these lines concerns the role of PISA in the shifting status of the UK and the USA in Australia and Japan (Takayama 2009; Waldow, Takayama, and Sung 2014). Despite a long history of political, economic, and cultural relationships that led to policy referencing and active borrowing from the UK and the USA, Australia and – to some extent – Japan have reduced their referencing to these countries in the education policy debate. Instead, references to Finland have emerged, and it has become a strong reference society for the legitimisation of education reforms.

Finland is still a major reference society in education policy in a significant number of countries. However, it is noteworthy that after the 2012 PISA results confirmed the good scores of the Asian region, countries, and economies (Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Singapore, among others) these countries joined Finland as reference societies in countries like Australia. Despite continuing to use Finnish education as a positive reference in policymakers' and media discourses, Australia has increasingly used its closer neighbours as education systems from which to learn (Takayama 2018). The reasons lie in their outstanding performance in the survey and in Australia's fear of losing the 'education race' (Lingard 2016; Baroutsis and Lingard 2017). It therefore cannot be ignored that even Finland partly lost its status as an important reference society because of its decline in the PISA rankings, which was probably facilitated by the East Asian countries' and

economies' outstanding – and in many cases, surprising – performance (Waldow, Takayama, and Sung 2014; Sellar and Lingard 2013; Baroutsis and Lingard 2017).

### ***Reference societies despite PISA***

Some countries remain strong reference societies regardless of what the PISA rankings show. This is the case for the UK and USA in Australia, and the USA in the East Asian region and countries, especially in South Korea and Japan (Takayama 2009; Morris 2012; Takayama, Waldow, and Sung 2013; Sung and Lee 2017). The USA and the UK have never completely lost their status as reference societies in the countries where they were the main historical reference in education policy and policy borrowing. Their influence and use as reference societies have only partly been affected by PISA's top-performing countries.

In the 1950s, against the backdrop of Cold War tension, the USA strategically developed strong political, security, and economic relationships with countries in the East Asian region. It aimed to contain the expansion of Soviet power while developing the region's military capacity and economy (Ikenberry 2004, 353–355). These political and economic relationships are in part still active today, and still heavily influence the reference choice concerning the legitimising or even borrowing of education policies (Takayama 2009; Sung and Lee 2017). In this respect Sung and Lee (2017) demonstrate that in contrast with previous research, which points to PISA's influence in establishing new patterns of reference societies in education reform, the USA has remained the main reference in the East Asian region (especially in South Korea and Japan). Interestingly, there are no comments on the USA's low PISA scores. Yet the authors argue that PISA results have fuelled discussions about education reform, and references to Finland's performance have introduced controversy to the debate. Conservatives, the authors explain, still use the USA as the main reference society in education, while progressives largely appeal to the stress-free, test-free Finnish education system as a model. In the latter case the USA is used as the anti-model for education reforms, and Finland is referred to as a model, though none of the Finnish education policies has ever been borrowed and implemented in South Korea.

Similarly, in Australia, the USA and especially the UK remain reference societies in education reform discourses. Historically, Australia is culturally and economically connected with the UK through the Commonwealth, which was established in 1931 towards the end of the British colonial era. The UK still has close relationships with these countries today, enabling it to remain a strong reference society for education reforms (Sellar and Lingard 2013; Takayama, Waldow, and Sung 2013; Waldow, Takayama, and Sung 2014). As in other countries, the publication of PISA rankings brought examples of Finnish education practice, and more recently from the East Asian region, countries, and economies, into the Australian discussion. However, this has only reinforced the clashes between left- and right-wing policymakers, and among the public in general. Indeed, references to Finland only started after the PISA 2006 results were made public. Australia saw its results slipping from the top of the ranking, which accentuated the debate about the country's need to improve its education quality and efficiency. Reference to countries from the East Asian region began later, when PISA 2009's results showed a further decline in Australia's scores, in contrast with the

continuing high performance of this region's countries and economies in the survey (Takayama, Waldow, and Sung 2013; Waldow, Takayama, and Sung 2014). Thus, while it is observable that PISA provokes the use of argumentative points of reference in some contexts, its results were not sufficiently influential to displace the USA and the UK as reference societies: they either remained positive reference societies or became negative ones.

In the same vein, and still concerning reference societies' use based on countries' bilateral relations, Carvalho and Costa (2014) explain that in addition to historical and cultural relations the kind of relationship – cooperation and competition – as well as processes of identification (for example when a country or region identifies and uses another for its similar issues) may influence the reference societies used. Indeed, it is unclear in some cases whether a certain reference society's status is enhanced by PISA or other aspects. For example, competitive bilateral relationships can be identified in some European cases, as is the case in references to Germany in France and Hungary, or to England in Scotland (Carvalho and Costa 2014). Similarly, other authors (Sellar and Lingard 2013; Lingard 2016; Baroutsis and Lingard 2017; Rook and Espeña 2018) describe how the USA and Australia are tied to the East Asian region, countries, and economies through competing relationships embedded in the shock and resentment of being surpassed by their historic Asian rivals.

## Conclusions

In this article we have analysed the impact of the OECD's PISA survey on the choice of reference societies used in national education policy. Our analysis of the scientific peer-reviewed journal articles on the topic shows that PISA is interpreted as a knowledge-based tool and can have a strong impact on the dynamic flow of policy referencing and the (re)construction of reference societies. Nevertheless, it has also been highlighted that, as reported in our data and beyond (e.g. Waldow and Steiner-Khamsi 2019), more important than PISA results, countries' longstanding relationships and historically constructed perceptions of each of the survey's participants greatly contribute to the decision concerning which countries become reference societies in education policy, and the functions they serve. Nevertheless, contradictions were found, and although a shared conclusion of the great majority of most articles analysed here is that PISA somehow affects the reference societies used in policy debates, some studies point to different situations: in some national contexts PISA results do not or only partly influence the choice of reference societies.

To summarise, we identified three relations between PISA and the reference societies used in education policymaking (Table 2). In the first situation PISA's role in the construction of positive and negative reference societies is complemented by an historically developed local image of the country/region used as a reference society. This image is built through longstanding relationships, triggering positive or negative views of the country/region used as a reference. These views play out according to the specific needs of supplementary support for certain arguments at the time of reference. The combination of local interpretations of the 'other' and (de)legitimation needs emerges as a blueprint to explain discrepancies in the countries'/regions' status as positive or negative reference societies.

**Table 2.** Typology of the impacts of PISA on the choice of reference societies.

PISA impact	Main reasons	Examples
<i>Construction of reference societies</i>	Countries are high performers + local positive perceptions	- Finland in Germany, France, Australia, Japan, etc. - 'East Asian' countries (especially Hong Kong) in England
	Countries improved significantly in the rankings + local positive perceptions	- Poland, Germany, and Vietnam in the UK - Portugal in Spain
	Countries are high performers + local negative perceptions	- 'East Asian' region and countries in Germany
<i>Collapse of reference societies</i>	Countries perform poorly in PISA	- Sweden in England and in Germany
<i>Reference societies despite PISA</i>	Cultural, historical, or economic relationships	- USA in South Korea - UK in Australia

In the second situation PISA contributes to the collapse of the status of reference societies that have previously been used positively. When poor results are presented by the survey, countries/regions no longer retain their status as the main positive reference societies and are no longer used as an external reference, or at most become a negative reference in education policy. This is the case for Sweden in England, for example (Rönnerberg 2015). Based on our analysis, we consider that this happens when the reference society is no longer seen as a valid source of authorisation for policy reform arguments.

The third situation corresponds to the cases in which PISA's influence on the reference societies used seems minor or non-existent. A country/region may remain a reference society despite its low performance in PISA, as is the case for the USA in South Korea (Sung and Lee 2017). In this case reference society status is directly connected with unchanged historically constructed political, economic, and cultural relationships between the referenced and referencing countries/regions.

Through our analysis we conclude that as policymaking develops into a more complex process involving a growing number of actors located at increased levels of governance (global, national, and local), policy actors need to find tools that are seen by their audiences as valid and reliable providers of knowledge and evidence to make their arguments more persuasive and consequently achieve policy change or continuation. Thus, reference societies, whether or not they are influenced by PISA results, are not necessarily used as models of practice intended to be imported, but as convenient rhetorical tools of (de-)legitimation stored in what Alasuutari (2018) calls a bank of epistemic capital. They are available to be used in situations where consensus is not easily achieved, and arguments need to be supported by external authoritative elements. It is therefore our view that the use of reference societies in education policymaking does not differ from the use of any other external references (such as references to international individual or collective actors such as the OECD or European Union). They are used at moments of political turbulence with the goal of convincing others of the benefits (or uselessness) of a policy idea or proposal. What ultimately makes a reference society useful for the speaker is therefore not necessarily its characteristics or performance, but instead

the way it is seen by that speaker's audience at that moment. We believe this explains the controversies and opposing results between some of the analysed studies.

The analysis shows that it seems that what happens in the referenced country/region is ultimately of little importance for the referencing country, as Steiner-Khamsi (2012) and Waldow (2012) have already argued. Frequently, the referenced policy has already been reformed in its original context or never existed, as is the case for German references to Swedish education policies (Ringarp and Rothland 2010) or English references to Hong Kong (Forestier and Crossley 2015; Forestier et al. 2016; Adamson et al. 2017). It also happens that the policies of the referenced countries/regions are hidden when they are not of relevance or even contradict the argument used, as with the policy aspects of Singapore's education used in USA education policy (Rook and Espeña 2018), for example. The analysis corroborates that: (a) only certain features (real or imaginary) of the reference societies are used in domestic education policy; (b) the features of the reference society used vary considerably, depending on the argument being constructed, the reform being debated, and the support they may gather. In this vein we understand reference societies as discursive tools that help to simplify policy ideas and arguments in policymaking processes that are complex and labyrinthine by nature.

However, several caveats must be made concerning the generalisation of this study's findings. Although the analysed articles provide relevant studies and interesting findings from which pertinent conclusions may be drawn, they focus only on a small number of countries. This constitutes a limitation to the understanding of the nuances of PISA's impact on the choice of reference societies, because it does not allow the generalisation of our findings to other contexts. Thus, although our analysis brings to the fore the inconsistency seen in the survey's impact on the reference societies used in education policy debates, it does not allow us to assume that the identified typology can be applied to the large number of contexts yet to be studied. Furthermore, the studies analysed here focus only on how PISA affects the choice of reference societies at the national scale. From our perspective the impacts of PISA on the choice of reference societies used in specific contexts within the national arena have yet to be explored. We will continue to investigate this question by comparing parliamentary debates and media articles, as well as by examining references across extended periods in different countries, to understand transformations in the use of reference societies.

It is also important to stress the caveat that there is a fuzzy frontier between the literature that comprises our theoretical framework and the articles that constitute our corpus of analysis. Because the scholarly community that specifically analyses how PISA affects the choice of reference societies remains quite small, the authors who propose relevant theoretical frameworks are frequently those who have conducted empirical studies of the subject.

Notwithstanding these caveats, we believe that the analytical synthesis presented in this article can be used as a starting point for other studies, thereby probing and expanding the conclusions of this analysis, especially because this article has outlined a typology that also considers idiosyncrasies. The impact of PISA on the use of reference societies in education policymaking is neither universal nor unlimited. Each country's 'socio-logic' leads to different situations in openness to external inputs and to different ways in which these external inputs are interpreted, selected, and used.


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# PUBLICATION

## II

**Externalisations in the Portuguese parliament: analysing power struggles  
and (de-)legitimation with multiple streams approach**

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# Externalisations in the Portuguese parliament: analysing power struggles and (de-)legitimation with Multiple Streams Approach

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## ABSTRACT

International organisations' importance in education policy has been growing in recent years. They have been able to promote their role by providing data and interpreting it through international assessments and guidance, and by highlighting some countries or regions as benchmarks for global improvement, performance, and efficiency. International organisations' output feeds policy reform arguments in national and regional contexts. We analyse debates on education policy in the Portuguese parliament with the aim of understanding the roles of external references to international organisations, their instruments, and associated countries. We understand the agenda-setting process through political, problem, and policy streams as described by the Multiple Streams Approach. Our analysis shows that external references play a key role in the three streams as extra sources of authority used by policymakers in the attempt to open new policy windows and couple the three streams, resulting in policy change.

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## Introduction

The European Union (EU) and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) have increasingly fed and supported discourses in favour of and opposed to policy reforms in national and regional contexts in the last fifty years. While these organisations only indirectly influence education legislation, they are increasingly influential through data production, and comparative and guidance instruments. The use of the Open Method of Coordination has strengthened the EU's and European Commission's role in the intergovernmental Bologna Process, which aims to harmonise European education also outside the EU (Krejsler, Olsson, and Petersson 2014). The OECD has developed international large-scale learning assessments (ILSAs) like PISA (Programme of International Student Assessment), now widely acknowledged by education policymakers. Using such instruments, these organisations highlight the practices and policies of 'high-performing' countries or regions. These have become benchmarks

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for countries seeking to improve their policies' effectiveness (e.g. Grek 2009; Bulle 2011; Carvalho 2009, 2012; Carvalho and Costa 2014a).

In this article we examine references to international organisations, their instruments, and the countries or regions described as successful, aiming to understand the roles these external references play in the agenda-setting process in the Portuguese parliament. Our study focuses on the externalisations to world situations<sup>1</sup> (Schriewer 1990) occurring in the context of the Portuguese parliament's debates on education. Jürgen Schriewer (1990) identifies the reference to world situations as a commonly used form of externalisation. He defines it as the act of opening the system to what lies beyond its borders, arguing that there is a 'socio-logic', based on cultural values or societal conditions and events, that leads to the use of certain world situations as an authority tool for (de-)legitimation of policy ideas struggling to find a consensus (Schriewer 1990; Steiner-Khamsi 2003; Waldow 2012).

The study focuses on Portugal, where research on the use of external references in the specific context of the Portuguese parliament's plenary debates on education remains non-existent. A limited number of studies on the discursive uses of external inputs in the country's education debates exist. They mainly study the influences and uses of PISA (e.g. Afonso and Costa 2009; Costa 2011; Lemos and Serrão 2015; Carvalho, Costa, and Gonçalves 2017) or the OECD (e.g. Lemos 2014; Teodoro 2019).

Research repeatedly describes PISA influencing policymaking in several national and regional arenas (e.g. Afonso and Costa 2009; Carvalho and Costa 2009, 2014b; Breakspear 2012; Morgan 2015; Niemann, Martens, and Teltemann 2017; Morgan and Ibrahim 2019) and its impact on the (re)construction of the reference societies<sup>2</sup> used as a tool to strengthen arguments (de-)legitimising policy change (e.g. Takayama 2009; Sellar and Lingard 2013; Carvalho and Costa 2014a; Takayama, Waldow, and Sung 2013; Rook and Espeña 2018; Waldow and Steiner-Khamsi 2019). However, the results also indicate that PISA does not significantly influence the target (Sung and Lee 2017) or number (Rautalin, Alasuutari, and Vento 2018) of reference societies used in national policy debates. Recent research argues that it is the combination of PISA results, long-standing relationships, and historically constructed images of the top scorers that makes a country or region a positive or negative reference society (e.g. Waldow, Takayama, and Sung 2014; Waldow 2017; Takayama 2018; Waldow and Steiner-Khamsi 2019).

Because much of the international and Portuguese research on external references has focused on PISA,<sup>3</sup> PISA's low impact in Portugal during the survey's first two cycles is interesting. Following Martens and Niemann (2013, 314) reflection on the impact of ILSAs on national contexts, strong public policy debates emerge when perceiving education as an important topic is combined with a large gap between the country's expectations and the ILSA's actual results. It has long been accepted in Portugal that its education system is poor in European comparison (e.g. Gomes 1999; Nóvoa 2005; Lemos 2015; Mendes 2015). Poor PISA results therefore caused no national 'scandalisation' (Steiner-Khamsi 2003). We analyse the full spectrum of external references and broaden the perspective beyond PISA.

It is important to analyse the external elements used, and why and how they are used in the Portuguese parliamentary discussions on education. We join others in arguing that to understand the policymaking process and the uses of external references within this process, the local context in which this process occurs must be understood (e.g. Schriewer

1990; Steiner-Khamsi 2004). Our premise is that to understand the logic of national policymaking, we must draw on both comparative education and policy process theories. We utilise the analytical lenses of the multiple streams approach (MSA) to policymaking (Kingdon 2003), which allows an analysis of the dynamic process of policymaking and reveals how external references are used during political struggles. The basic idea of the MSA is the individual analysis of the problem, policy, and political streams, and an understanding of how their combination opens policy windows and enables change.

## Data and methods

The study's data comprises parliamentary debates between December 2001 and December 2018 (Legislatures IX to XIII<sup>4</sup>), the period between the release of the first PISA results and the first data collection. The data includes all 81 general or specific education debates, and 34 debates on education-related bills (first reading and discussion of reform proposals) in a total of 115 debates, all occurring in plenary session and selected for their extensive discussion of education. The first education debate during the period occurred in June 2002. The data was collected from the *Diários da Assembleia da República (DAR)*<sup>5</sup> online (<https://www.parlamento.pt/>) using a keyword search,<sup>6</sup> which identified more than 150 debates on education topics, some of which were listed but unavailable online.

The parliamentary Rules of Procedure identify nine main debate types, described in Appendix 1. They differ in who requests them (e.g. ministers or deputies), their urgency, function (e.g. general discussion or debate on concrete bills), and more importantly, whether they demand the attendance of a government representative. Interestingly, education was not extensively discussed in any debates on the state of the nation. Alongside the debate types, we created a category of 'other debates'. Apart from the state of the nation and thematic debates, education featured relatively evenly in all types (see Appendix 1).

The study focuses on the plenary sessions, because they are the primary public mode of communication between deputies and their electorate (Ilie 2017; Paulo and Cunha 2013; Marcinkiewicz and Stegmaier 2019). Deputies deliberately seek to convince policy actors and citizens in general of the relevance of their ideas and proposals, or the insignificance of opponents', thus propelling their agenda. The plenary is therefore an arena in which policy actors perform to a national audience. Marcinkiewicz and Stegmaier (2019) and Green-Pedersen (2010) identify different strategies the deputies and their parties use in public debates to attract attention: party competition; claiming and disclaiming credit; and position taking and questioning to raise favourite issues and solutions and hold the government accountable. In developing our analysis, we consider these elements and the idea that the plenary session constitutes a major performance stage for deputies and parties.

A combination of qualitative and quantitative methods was used. First, we conducted a qualitative content analysis (Schreier 2014) with the support of the Atlas.ti8 software, developing an inductive and deductive coding system. Deductively, we created eight main categories crucial for answering the research questions, such as 'function of the reference'. These were complemented by sub-categories inductively interpreted by reading the debates. The result was a coding system that informed us, for example, of whether



a reference's function was legitimisation or de-legitimisation. We then used the coding to form descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage) to understand who the main speakers were, the main external references used, and how they were used. Data analysis was organised by Legislature.

### **The analysis of the policy process as a river with multiple streams**

The policy process is often seen as chaotic, involving different actors at various levels of governance with multiple interests and frequently opposing aims, interacting both cooperatively and competitively (Sabatier 2007; Cairney, Heikkila, and Wood 2019). Since the 1980's a growing number of approaches has analysed policymaking and governance processes through lenses considering them complicated and non-linear: polycentric governance; punctuated equilibrium theory; the advocacy coalition framework; complexity theory; and the multiple streams approach – to name only some (Cairney, Heikkila, and Wood 2019).

We understand politics as the process of reorganising contingency: an attempt to grasp complexity (Kauko 2014; see Edwards 2010). The policymaking process itself is complex and dynamic, and we apply the multiple streams approach (MSA), which adopts this premise, to analyse how policy problems emerge in the Portuguese parliament policies' formulation, and the role references to world situations play.

In the 1980's John Kingdon and his research group developed the MSA to understand US federal policymaking. It understands the policymaking process as involving actors in different governance and policy communities. Policymakers, inserted in contexts characterised as organised anarchies (following Cohen, March, and Olsen 1972), are described as possessing a bounded rational ability: they can only attend to a limited number of issues, face high levels of ambiguity and uncertainty, and have tight time constraints, unclear work processes, and frequent changes in participants. This leads to problematic policy preferences (Zahariadis 2007; Jones et al. 2016; Herweg, Zahariadis, and Zohlnhöfer 2018).

The MSA presents the policy process as involving five key elements, three independent streams (politics, problems, and policies), policy windows, and policy entrepreneurs. The political stream concerns the policy process's context (Kingdon 2003). The problem stream relates to issues emerging from a situation perceived as a problem. The policy stream consists of the different solutions advocated by the various policy actors and thrown into the 'policy primeval soup' (Kingdon 2003).

Policy windows are moments when different policy advocates are more likely to succeed in gaining attention for their proposals. They are rare, remain open briefly, and can be very predictable (e.g. the approval of government programmes) or unexpected (e.g. a natural disaster) (Zahariadis 2007, 73–74). As policymakers are constantly bombarded with problems of which they can attend only to a few, policy entrepreneurs identify policy windows and attempt to combine the three streams by strategically and convincingly presenting their pet solutions to busy policymakers and earning their support (Zahariadis 2007, 74; Herweg, Zahariadis, and Zohlnhöfer 2018, 28–29).

The MSA has been expanded and adapted to allow its use in stages of the policy process besides agenda setting in contexts other than the federal level in presidential systems, and for a comparison among countries or regions (Jones et al. 2016; Zahariadis

2007; Herweg, Zahariadis, and Zohlnhöfer 2018). For example, Novotný and Polásek (2016) use the MSA to analyse change within political parties; and Herweg, Zahariadis, and Zohlnhöfer (2018) suggest the MSA is suitable for studying parliamentary systems. To enable this analysis Herweg, Huß, and Zohlnhöfer (2015) propose adaptations to the original approach to include the role of political parties, noting that different party members incorporate complementary roles in different streams. Whereas party experts belong to policy communities, identify problems, and advocate alternative policy proposals in the problem and policy streams, the party leader works on ‘adopting policies in the political stream’ while ‘taking into account the national mood and the constellation of organized interests when supporting (or not) a proposal’ (Herweg, Huß, and Zohlnhöfer 2015, 436). This broadened use of the MSA suits our analysis. The Portuguese political system is characterised by strong party discipline and cohesion (Leston-Bandeira 2004). The policy agenda is planned within parties, and issues are framed as problematic and opportunely raised by party leaderships in parliamentary debates, accompanied by policy proposals. We consider the implications of this in the conclusion.

### ***The political stream: the context that matters***

Kingdon (2003, 145–163) describes the political stream as a broader setting for promoting or inhibiting the agenda. It is the context in which the policymaking process occurs. Four main factors affect the political stream: national mood (institutional and public opinion); organised political forces (the balance between support of and opposition to a policy by different interest and political groups); government (changes in the government itself); and consensus building (coalitions built by concession and bargaining). All these factors are involved in Portugal’s political stream. However, we limit our analysis of the government as a political organ functioning under parliament’s scrutiny, instead of as an administrative constellation.

The political stream’s character is embedded in history. Portugal had an authoritarian regime for 48 years until April 1974 but retained external relations with other countries and international organisations despite its hard borders and closed ideology (Barreto 2002; Moreira et al. 2010). For example, Portugal was a founder member of the OECD in 1948 (MNE, in <https://www.ocde.missaoportugal.mne.pt>). This strongly influenced its economic and education policies (Gomes 1999; Barreto 2002; Teixeira, Amaral, and Rosa 2003). The first stable four-year Legislature (1976–1980) also saw the accession to the EU as essential for the establishment of Portuguese democracy. Having applied in March 1977, the country joined as a EU member state in 1986 (Mateus 1999; Fraga 2001).

Under its 1976 constitution Portugal adopted a semi-presidential political system, with power divided between the president of the Republic, parliament, and government. The unicameral parliament has strong legislative power, holds the government to account, and has the power to dismiss it through censure or confidence motions (Leston-Bandeira 2004; Freire 2005; Goes and Leston-Bandeira 2019). The 230 deputies are elected by electoral districts, using the d’Hondt method.

The political and electoral culture results in a multiparty system and usually in majority coalition governments. However, Portuguese governments can also function on a minority basis.<sup>7</sup> The complications to the policymaking process that arise from

minority governments and the parties' central parliamentary role mean that party leaders usually form coalitions with other parties politically close to their own. The parties select electoral candidates internally and form parliamentary groups (Leston-Bandeira 2004;

**Table 1.** Main political parties in Portugal, organised by number of seats in parliament (Leg. XIII).

<b>Party</b>	<b>Political spectrum</b>
PS (Partido Socialista – Socialist Party)	Centre-left
PSD (Partido Social Democrata – Social Democrat Party)	Centre-right
BE (Bloco de Esquerda – Left Block)	Left
CDS-PP (Centro democrático Social-Partido Popular – Social Democrat Centre-Popular Party)	Right
PCP (Partido Comunista Português – Portuguese Communist Party)	Left
PEV (Partido Ecologista 'Os Verdes' – Ecologist Party 'The Greens')	Left
PAN (Pessoas-Animais-Natureza – People-Animals-Environment)	Centre-left

Lobo, Pinto, and Magalhães 2015). At the time of writing there were seven parties in parliament (Table 1).

Externalisation to world situations is frequent in Portuguese parliamentary education debates. Of the 115 analysed debates, only 18 (16%) contained no external reference. In

**Table 2.** Different external references identified.

External references	Frequency
<b>Reference societies</b>	<b>63 (36%)</b>
<i>Countries (mostly European countries)</i>	45
<i>Regions (e.g. EU countries)</i>	9
<i>General references (e.g. several countries)</i>	9
<b>Reference to international actors and instruments</b>	<b>99 (58%)</b>
<i>Collective or individual international actors (e.g. EU)</i>	55
<i>Instruments (e.g. PISA, Bologna Declaration)</i>	44
<b>Reference to international events</b>	<b>11 (6%)</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>173 (100%)</b>

the other 97 there were 830 quotations with external references. Quotations often have more than one external reference. A total of 173 different targets was identified (Table 2).

References most commonly concern actors other than countries. Of the 173 targets of externalisation identified, 36% were reference societies, of which most were to specific countries ( $n = 45$ ), nine to regions, and nine to unidentified groups of countries. However, these references to individual countries represented a minority in the total of quotations with references. Of the 830 quotations with external references, 434 have reference societies. Of these, 84% include regions or unnamed groups of countries (e.g. 'European countries' or 'developed countries'), and only 26% specific countries (mostly European). Indeed, individual countries are rarely referenced in Portuguese parliamentary education debates. They are scattered among many different countries, and it is rare that any are among the five most used

external references apart from Spain, to which there were seven references during Legislature XI (Table 4).

However, most external references concern international actors (collective or individual) and instruments, constituting 57% of the 173 targets of externalisation. Slightly more than half (n = 55) were international actors (mostly organisations like the EU or OECD; sporadically, individuals like Nicholas Barr or Tibor Navracsics), and 43 were instruments (e.g. Bologna Declaration or PISA). Of the 830 quotations with external references, 566 have references to international actors or tools. Of these, 59% referred to international actors, and 58% to instruments. The remaining 11 of the 173 identified references (6%) were to international events (e.g. conferences).

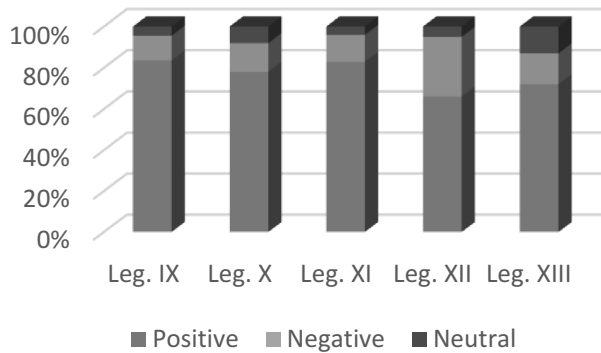


Figure 1. Tone of the external references in each Legislature.

The data reveals references were generally positive (76%) and used for legitimisation (61%) (Figures 1 and Figures 2).

The positive tone of external references in the Portuguese parliament (Figure 1) can be analysed following Kingdon (2003) as indicative of a national mood, allowing policymakers leeway to use external institutions, instruments, and other countries and regions as sources of authority to support their arguments. However, the relatively high amount of external referencing used for de-legitimation (Figure 2) prompts an examination of why externalisation often seems connected with conflict between organised political forces: external references are used to attain a balance between support of and opposition to proposals. The

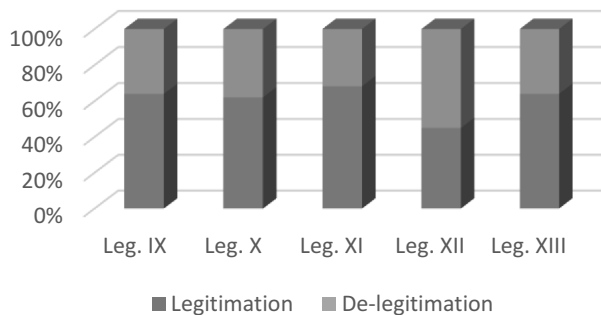


Figure 2. Functions of the external references in each Legislature.

support one's own argument can receive and the extent to which opposition or government arguments and actions can be discredited are equally important.

Parliamentary dynamics further explain this de-legitimising use of references. The left-wing parties (PCP, BE, PEV) frequently oppose the government's proposals, and they

**Table 3.** Functions of the external references used by each party.

Speaker	Function	
	<i>Legitimation</i>	<i>De-legitimation</i>
<i>PSD-CDS governments</i>	45	3
<i>PS governments</i>	169	12
<i>PS deputies</i>	93	67
<i>PSD deputies</i>	71	57
<i>CDS-PP deputies</i>	44	39
<i>PCP deputies</i>	13	72
<i>BE deputies</i>	35	64
<i>PEV deputies</i>	16	23
<i>PAN deputies</i>	2	0
<i>Luisa Mesquita (no party, previously PCP)</i>	1	2
<i>President of parliament</i>	1	0

regularly use external references to de-legitimise others (Table 3), illustrating the difficulty of consensus building among the various organised forces.

Indeed, more references were utilised for de-legitimation during Legislature XII (Figure 2). PS deputies, for example, frequently used references for both de-legitimation and legitimation. This was true of other parties like the CDS-PP and the PSD (Table 3), demonstrating the importance of discrediting others in this confrontational political environment.

Following Kingdon (2003), we observe the effect of government changes in the political stream. External referencing in the Portuguese parliament differs depending on whether a party is in government or opposition. Government parties often use references for the legitimation of their own arguments, while opposition parties use them to de-legitimise others' ideas and actions. This variation in the use of external references is especially evident in the arguments of the PS and PSD, which alternate between using external references largely for legitimation in government and de-legitimation in opposition.

### ***The problem stream: externalisation as a resource for framing***

The origins of policy problems lie in the framing of situations as issues needing repair. Situations become problems via various routes. Zahariadis (2007) mentions indicators (e.g. results of ILSAs), focusing events (e.g. sudden events and catastrophes), feedback (e.g. assessment of pilot programmes), and load (the policymaker's workload).

International actors and instruments can be used as a source of information and authority for formulating new problems. The most prominent examples in the Portuguese parliament are references to the EU and OECD, the international organisations most used as externalisation targets. These organisations are of constant and equal

Table 4. Five most frequent targets of externalisation by Legislature.

<b>Legislature IX (2002-04 to 2005-03)</b>		
<b>Total number of debates:</b> 17	- European countries	<i>Quotations:</i> 58 (42%)
<b>Total targets identified:</b> 60	- European Union	26 (19%)
<b>Total quotations:</b> 137 (100%)	- OECD	13 (9%)
	- Bologna Process	11 (8%)
	- Several/other countries	10 (7%)
<b>Legislature X (2005-3 to 2009-10)</b>		
<b>Total number of debates:</b> 41	- European countries	<i>Quotations:</i> 97 (27%)
<b>Total targets identified:</b> 95	- Bologna Process	92 (26%)
<b>Total quotations:</b> 356 (100%)	- European Union	51 (14%)
	- OECD	37 (10%)
	- PISA	22 (6%)
	- Several/other countries	22 (6%)
<b>Legislature XI (2009-10 to 2011-06)</b>		
<b>Total number of debates:</b> 15	- PISA	<i>Quotations:</i> 21 (39%)
<b>Total targets identified:</b> 37	- OECD countries	14 (20%)
<b>Total quotations:</b> 69 (100%)	- OECD	12 (17%)
	- European countries	12 (17%)
	- European Union	7 (10%)
	- Spain	7 (10%)
<b>Legislature XII (2011-06 to 2015-10)</b>		
<b>Total number of debates:</b> 24	- OECD	<i>Quotations:</i> 33 (21%)
<b>Total target identified:</b> 77	- European countries	29 (19%)
<b>Total quotations:</b> 154 (100%)	- Troika	22 (14%)
	- PISA	15 (10%)
	- European Union	15 (10%)
	- OECD countries	12 (8%)
<b>Legislature XIII (2015-10 to 2019-10)</b>		
<b>Total number of debates:</b> 18	- European countries	<i>Quotations:</i> 33 (29%)
<b>Total targets identified:</b> 50	- PISA	15 (13%)
<b>Total of quotations:</b> 114 (100%)	- OECD countries	14 (12%)
	- OECD	14 (12%)
	- European Union	13 (11%)

significance (Table 4). They are transversal references, often accumulating with other external references to reinforce arguments regarding most discussion topics. They support arguments related to the political conflicts between parties, define certain issues as problems with specific characteristics, and validate policy proposals. Their reports and assessment and guidance instruments provide indicators and feedback, while their members and participants' policies are deployed in constructing benchmarks for ideal levels of quality and efficiency. Portuguese governments have asked the OECD for reports, strategically highlighting some ideas, while undermining others. These reports work as useful indicators or feedback, and national policy actors use them to frame problems conforming to their favourite policies.

In addition, the most used reference societies in the Portuguese parliament are not high-performing individual countries but regions of unmentioned – especially European but also OECD – countries linked by these organisations. 'EU countries' (as a regional reference society) is more frequently referenced in parliament compared to other

externalisation targets. Overall, ‘European countries’ is mentioned in 229 quotations. The second most frequent externalisation target is the EU, present in 112 quotations. References to ‘EU countries’ are used positively (95%) and for legitimisation (71%). PS government members and deputies reference ‘European countries’ in 104 quotations. This shows the relevance the party and especially its governments see in EU countries as exemplifying good practice, and the need the former feel to follow their practices and policies to achieve similar levels of education development.

The international instruments associated with the EU and OECD, especially the Bologna Declaration and PISA, show interesting referencing patterns. They are referenced frequently only at specific moments (Table 4). The appearance and disappearance of certain international references reflect an evolution of events in the global and local education policy scenes, and work as focusing events, legitimising different parliamentary groups’ presenting of problems. These two instruments serve as our main examples in exploring these variations in the use of external references at specific times.

During Legislatures IX and X (2002–2009) the Bologna Process was frequently referenced in parliament. Of 106 references quotations referring the Declaration, 103 occurred during these Legislatures, especially during Legislature X (referenced 92 times). The country was hotly debating the policy adjustments required to accommodate the measures agreed in the Bologna Declaration. References to the Declaration and resulting Process vanished during Legislature XI, when most legislative adaptations had been implemented.

The use of the Bologna Process to formulate problems intensified when government representatives attended debates, especially about funding for universities or support for students. The left-wing parties (BE, PCP, PEV) strongly opposed reforms that complied with the Declaration’s criteria. These parties largely used the Bologna Process for delegitimation. They highlighted several problems and accused governments and their coalition partners (PSD + CDS-PP, later PS) of strangling universities by cutting funding for institutions and students while increasing tuition fees.

At the end of Legislature X references to the Bologna Process faded, partly because the discussion about the Declaration’s implementation had concluded. However, two other important focusing events contributed to this decline: legislative elections were followed by a partial change in the government (several ministers were replaced), with the new minority government (still PS, with the same prime minister) ruling out a coalition; and the national economic crisis and possibility of an external financial intervention increased policymakers’ burden. During Legislature XII the ‘Troika’ (the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund, which monitored Portugal’s economic adjustment between 2011 and 2014), was frequently referenced in parliamentary debates because of strong national hostility to budget cuts.

PISA further exemplifies international indicators and feedback as common routes for the framing of problems. PISA results’ use in the discussion of education has developed over the years, with a significant increase following Legislature X (Afonso and Costa 2009; Costa 2011). Indeed, after Legislature IX’s complete silence PISA emerged as one of the most frequent external references in Legislature X and the main one in Legislature XI. It has since remained one of the five most frequent references (Table 4). PISA, identified in 73 quotations starting in 2005, is referenced more often than any other ILSA in parliamentary education debates (followed by TIMSS in only 6 quotations). PISA is often used to (de-) legitimise policy solutions and as a resource for problem formulation, especially in

identifying problems in students' learning and performance, the need to reformulate legislation, or the problems caused by cuts in public education funding. However, a good PISA performance does not correlate with the reference societies used in the Portuguese parliament: high performers like Finland or the East Asian countries are very rarely referenced.

The tone concerning PISA's uses is mostly positive. Yet these references' functions depend greatly on the argument. The survey is used to highlight problems from specific angles: governments use it to frame problems associated with their programmes; the opposition uses PISA to frame problems as consequences of the governments' actions and policy decisions.

### ***The policy stream: the need for policy (de-)legitimation***

Kingdon (2003) notes that various policy actors throw policy solutions into the 'primeval soup'. The solutions in this 'soup' undergo selection (softening-up), and only a few are brought into the deeper discussion (Zahariadis 2007). In the Portugal, once a problem is tabled in parliament, an array of alternative policy proposals (already selected from each party's primeval soup) emerges. Debates typically include several slightly different proposals presented by the different party leaders. After the first debate the bills are further discussed in committee, and an amended version is sent back to the plenary for final discussion and a vote. The softening-up process therefore occurs at three levels: within parties; in plenary session; and in committee.

A policy solution must meet three criteria to survive: technical feasibility (its clarity and detail); value acceptability (its compliance with existing values and ideology); and anticipation of future constraints (factors that may disable a programme's implementation) Kingdon (2003, 131–139).

The problems discussed in parliament have remained the same. Barroso (2016) argues that 'when we look at an extended period, we see that the big questions posed twenty years ago remain current today; although many things have changed, everything seems to remain the same' [*author's translation*]. In our data the main issues debated between 2001 and 2018 were the ongoing subjects which Barroso references: teachers' assessment and recruitment, education funding, equality and inclusion, and students' performance, to name the most relevant. Each party's policy actors present their pre-planned pet solutions to these problems in conformity with their party ideology and policy agenda, and the same solution seems sometimes to recurrently fit different problems. A pattern in the data can be observed which, independently of the debated issue or problem, shows that the CDS-PP party is expected to demonstrate the value of private schools. This argument is sometimes supported by external references. For example, a deputy will use PISA and the OECD countries to justify their view that the minister of education has a limited view of public services, and that private schools should be considered no less a public service than state schools.

Policy's survival on the agenda is evident in the case of the Bologna Process, which was used both to legitimise (58%) and de-legitimise (42%) proposals and ideas. The Bologna Process was slow and problematic in Portugal (Veiga and Amaral 2009; Diogo 2014). There was much discussion in parliament, with both government and opposition encountering difficulty in achieving a consensus on applicable legislation. Externalisation to world situations played into the controversy. While most external references were positive, there were



more negative or neutral references to the Bologna Process (31%) than most of the other frequent references in all the studied Legislatures (apart from references to the Troika during Legislature XII). In discussing higher education reforms, opposition deputies referenced the Declaration to de-legitimise the government's policy proposals and highlighted future constraints arising from the implementation of its policies, such as inequalities in access to university education due to rising tuition fees.

Yet the government referenced the Bologna Process to argue for the importance of proposed legislation to modernise the country and follow or achieve European partners' development levels. They argued that the Declaration's criteria were technically feasible and valuable for the country's development.

PISA was also used to ladle solutions from the policy primeval soup. It was used to (de-)legitimise policy ideas in several areas, among them to legitimise proposals concerning the value of increasing schools' autonomy or the importance of students' free access to schoolbooks.

Interestingly, references to PISA rarely mentioned individual countries. There was no reference to 'PISA countries', and only one to 'PISA's best performers'. 'OECD countries' was the most frequent reference society associated with PISA ( $n = 15$ ), functioning as a benchmark for comparing Portugal with other countries. When a specific country was mentioned in relation to PISA, it was rarely a high performer. Such countries were used as benchmarks in a) identifying problems, b) presenting reform proposals, or c) celebrating the country's performance improvement and demonstrating that recent policy reforms lay behind this improvement. Sweden was the most frequently mentioned PISA participating country (7), followed by Ireland (5), Spain (5), Germany (4), and the UK (4). None performed highly in the survey: they were either countries Portugal had recently surpassed or was close to surpassing in the PISA rankings (Sweden, Spain), or with which Portugal could reasonably aim to achieve parity (Ireland, Germany, and the UK). There is therefore a rational modesty in the arguments<sup>8</sup>: instead of referencing the survey's highest-performing countries, Portuguese policymakers referenced countries whose positions were closer to the country's own. We interpret this as associated with value acceptability: sensing a proposal might be considered technically infeasible (a utopian ambition of catching high performers) and hampered by future constraints (a sense that it would be unrealistic to aim for a top position with the available resources), policymakers opted to use countries whose rankings were in what Bermeo (1992) calls 'geographic proximity' as benchmarks, giving credibility to the argument and less room for de-legitimation.

## Conclusions

We explored externalisation to world situations (Schriewer 1990) in the Portuguese parliament's education policy debates, using the MSA's theoretical lenses (Kingdon 2003). We identified and explored the use of external references within the three streams Kingdon proposes (political, problem, and policy). In the political stream, we identified strong party discipline and cohesion in the Portuguese political system (Goes and Leston-Bandeira 2019) as the most influential political aspect of the policy process. This cohesion leads to parliamentary dynamics characterised by conflict and difficulties in balancing the different political forces, with a high incidence of what Hood (2002), among others, calls

a ‘blame game’. This results in a lack of continuity in public policy and a continuum of incremental, often oppositional, policy changes (Diogo 2014; Barroso 2016) every time the government changes. World situations are referenced to feed parties’ arguments in these struggles for power and consensus and blame others (often the government) for poor decisions and failed policies.

External references to OECD reports or PISA results are used very differently by different actors in the problem stream, as indicators, feedback, and focusing events to frame issues as problems. Sections of country-specific reports commissioned by international organisations are also selected and reframed to support problems awaiting addressing by national policy-makers and governments. This follows the MSA approach to the problem and the policy stream as Kingdon describes (Kingdon 2003), and concurs with Moisiso’s (2014) idea that governments promote their own plans with international agendas. Externalisation is used in the policy stream in the softening-up process to legitimise one’s own policy proposals or discredit opponent’s proposals by highlighting possible constraints of future policies, their technical feasibility, or their value acceptability.

This study adds an analysis of the Portuguese parliament to previous research analysing externalisation in contexts as diverse as Japan, Germany, and the USA (e.g. Takayama 2009; Waldow 2017; Rook and Espeña 2018). This is relevant in clarifying the disagreement concerning the influence of ILSAs like PISA in the (re)construction of reference societies. We have demonstrated that PISA is a significant external reference in parliament, but it does not affect the choice of reference societies used. The reference societies the deputies use reveal the importance of the country’s foreign relations. The only country in the five most frequent external references is Spain, which has not performed outstandingly in any ILSA, but with which Portugal has long maintained close relations, and whose levels of development have always been a target. Geographical proximity (Bermeo 1992), country’s image of another country or region, and historical, economic, and cultural relationships of cooperation or competition appear to most influence the choice of these references (Waldow 2017).

We identify a similar situation with the OECD and the EU. Portugal’s relationship with these organisations is longstanding (Gomes 1999; Moreira et al. 2010; Lemos 2014; Teodoro 2019). With their assessment and guidance instruments, mainly PISA and the Bologna Process, and their affiliated countries, parliament’s policymakers perceive these organisations as sources of authority and validation. Relations with these organisations are more prominent because of the national sentiment that has persisted since the nineteenth century – supported by statistics and international comparative data – that the country’s education system lags behind other European countries’ (Nóvoa 2005). This lag, accentuated during the dictatorship, increases the country’s eagerness to attain the levels of development and modernity of countries seen as more advanced (e.g. Gomes 1999; Magone 2006) – precisely the frequently referenced European and OECD countries. We argue that the strong referencing of ‘EU countries’ and ‘OECD countries’ represents a clear shift to using the broader regional reference societies constructed by these organisations and constituting general benchmarks for improvement, confirming the previous literature’s argument that the concept of reference society that Bendix coined (1978, in Waldow 2017, 2019) needs to be expanded to encompass criteria other than national borders.

The study's contribution to the analysis of the policy process is twofold. First, by exploring how Portuguese policymakers strategically reference international organisations, their instruments, and countries as external sources of legitimacy, we have demonstrated that when a political consensus among various organised political forces is required, the local 'socio-logic' (Schriewer 1990) drives the selection of the external references used. Second, by analysing a relatively long timeframe (17 years), we could identify changes to the external reference points used and the fluctuations in their frequency and modes of use, allowing us to conclude that local conditions and events combined with specific needs for (de-)legitimation at specific moments are the main determinants of how external outputs are interpreted and used. The referencing of the Bologna Declaration and PISA aptly illustrate these fluctuations.

The interpretations of external outputs are volatile and make evident the policy-making process's non-linearity and complexity. We therefore argue that the use of external references ultimately serves as a mechanism for dealing with contingency and attempting to decrease its characteristic uncertainty and ambiguity, with the aim of convincing others that a certain policy idea is the best solution to a specific problem (e.g. private schools in improving the education system).

The study empirically tested the MSA's applicability beyond the analysis of federal states to a new policy setting – a parliament in a semi-presidential system. Against the classical view of the MSA that Kingdon (2003) suggests, the parliamentary system – albeit less than federal systems – can also be considered an organised anarchy, characterised by chaotic dynamics, complex interactions, time constraints, and problematic preferences.

Our analysis also revealed the MSA's suitability for analysing externalisation to world situations. The MSA allows a detailed analysis of the parties' use of these externalisations in the agenda-setting process in the Portuguese parliament, which demonstrates – while not denying influences from international organisations in policymaking's national setting – that these are used nationally as external reference points, and as such are instrumentalised by policy actors seeking sources of information to (de-)legitimise arguments within the policy process's streams. The MSA enables an understanding of how the different parties utilise externalisation as mechanisms to influence the policy process, ultimately opening policy windows and combining the three streams, resulting in policy change.

## Notes

1. Luhmann and his colleague Schorr categorise three kinds of externalisation: reference to scientific evidence, reference to values, and reference to organisation (Steiner-Khamsi 2002). Schriewer (1990) identifies a fourth: reference to world situations.
2. In the early use of reference societies (Bendix 1978, in Waldow 2017) more developed countries were used as models for other countries; later, the concept of reference societies was broadened beyond the borders of nations to include sub-national regions (e.g. Shanghai) and groups of countries (e.g. East Asia) (Waldow 2019, 3).
3. Originally, this study departed from the assumption that PISA influenced Portuguese policymaking after its first cycle. However, the preliminary analysis of the data revealed that PISA was not referenced in education debates in the Portuguese parliament until May 2005. Given that the analysis was ongoing, revealing otherwise interesting aspects of the policy process, we decided to keep the initial timeframe (Dec. 2001–December 2018), expanding the scope from references to PISA and its top performers alone to all the external references used.

4. In post-dictatorship Portugal the periods between elections are called Legislatures and numbered consecutively in Roman numerals.
5. DAR Series I is a meticulous transcription of the debates occurring in plenary session.
6. The data was collected in August 2018 and January 2019, using several keywords: ‘educação’ [education]; ‘ensino’ [teaching]; ‘aluno’ [student]; ‘escola’ [school]; ‘educador’ [educator]; and ‘professor’ and ‘docente’ [both meaning teacher in Portuguese].
7. For example, since 2015 Portugal has had a minority PS government with the pre-agreed parliamentary support of all the left-wing parties in parliament.
8. Also observed by Pi Ferrer, Alasuutari, and Tervonen-Gonçalves (2018) in their analysis of reference to others in Portuguese national policymaking.

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## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.


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#### **Visited Webpages**





## Appendix 1.

### Kinds of debate as described in the Portuguese parliament's Rules of Procedure

	Kind of debate	Quantity	Explanation
<i>Government representative must be present at the debate</i>	Debates of interpellation to the government	10	Requested by one of the PGs to discuss general or specific policy topics with the government.
	Debates with ministers (in this case of education)	8	Each minister must be present at the plenary session at least once each legislative session (1 year) to answer deputies' questions on the topics related to his/her area. The president of the parliament sets the date of the debate after discussions with the government and the Conference of Representatives.
	Debates with the Prime Minister	14	The Prime Minister is required to attend plenary sessions twice a week to answer deputies' questions concerning one or more topic usually chosen by the Prime Minister. The president of the parliament sets the dates of the debate after discussions with the government and the Conference of Representatives.
	Urgent debates with the government	10	Both the PGs and the government may request an urgent debate. The request and the reasons for it are analysed by the Conference of Representatives, which sets the date for the debate.
	Debates on the state of the nation	0 (verified but not included)	Regular debates happening at the end of each legislative session arranged by the president of the parliament on a date agreed with the government. During these debates general policy actions and the government's activities are analysed.
<i>Debates do not require the presence of government representatives</i>	Legislative initiatives (debates on reforms)	34	Focusing on one or more bills (Law Project – presented by the PGs; Law Proposal – presented by the government or the government of the autonomous regions of Madeira and the Azores)
	Actuality debates	12	Requested by one or more PGs on a topic considered relevant. These debates may happen up to twice a month. The presence of a representative of the government is not mandatory.
	Thematic debates	2	The president of the parliament, the committees, the PGs, or the government can request a thematic debate. The requester must distribute a document beforehand to all the participants introducing the debate, with supporting documents.
	Political declarations	14	Used by PGs or individual deputies to express opinions on specific situations and events. Each PG has the right to one political declaration a week. Deputies not belonging to a PG may do this up to twice every legislative session, and single deputies belonging to a PG three times in a legislative session.
	Other debates	11	We created this category to include debates that could not fit in other categories, but which concerned education, such as <i>subjects of relevant interest, congratulatory votes, report appreciations, and government declarations</i> .

Assembleia da República Portuguesa. Accessed 3 August 2018. <https://www.parlamento.pt/Portuguese-Ministry-of-the-Foreigner-Affairs-Webpage>. Accessed 3 August 2019. <https://www.ocde.missaoportugal.mne.pt>



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**Epistemic work in Portuguese parliamentary education debates:  
Externalisation to world situations as a source of epistemic capital**

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# Epistemic work in Portuguese parliamentary education debates: Externalisation to world situations as a source of epistemic capital

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## Abstract

This article seeks to analyse how epistemic work (Alasuutari, 2018; Alasuutari and Qadir, 2019) in Portuguese parliamentary education debates develops through externalisation to world situations (Schriewer, 1990) whose references are used as epistemic capital (Alasuutari, 2018). The study explores debates occurring during Legislature X (2005–2009), in which the number of external references in plenary education debates significantly peaked compared with previous and subsequent legislatures. The analysis demonstrates that there was a change in the (de-)legitimation strategies policymakers used during this legislature. In addition to using the traditional ideological principles associated with each party, deputies often opted to use international organisations and their instruments, alongside reference societies, as authoritative sources to strengthen arguments and persuade their audience of their validity. This suggests that parliamentary policymakers assume that these external elements are useful in earning support for their policy ideas and promoting reform proposals.

## Keywords

Externalisation to world situations, reference societies, epistemic work, epistemic capital, epistemic governance framework, Portuguese parliament

## Introduction

The growth of international organisations (IOs) and their focus on education's performance and improvement makes it difficult to sustain the view that education policymaking is solely a nation state issue. The existence of a 'global education policy field' (Rizvi and Lingard, 2010) must be acknowledged. Nevertheless, despite the recognition of global-national intertwinements in education policymaking, the policy process remains highly localised. Although IOs and practices and

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policies in certain countries or regions seem to be developing and feeding global trends in the performance of education, differences between education systems remain (Steiner-Khamsi, 2002, 2004; Van Zanten, 2000). Bearing this integration of international elements in the national policy process in mind, I propose to explore how in the increasingly complex process of policymaking certain external references are used as epistemic capital (Alasuutari, 2018) in Portuguese parliamentary education policy debates.

Externalisation to world situations, a concept from sociological systems theory, refers to the opening of the system (usually externally closed and self-referential) to those outside its borders. Externalisation brings authoritative elements to the arguments that help (de-)legitimise policy ideas and proposals struggling to gather the necessary support (Schriewer, 1990; Steiner-Khamsi, 2002; Waldow, 2012). A ‘socio-logic’ based on local cultural values or societal conditions and events leads to the use of certain world situations as authority tools of (de-)legitimacy (Schriewer, 1990). Thus, to understand how IOs, their tools, the ideas they advocate, and other countries’ or regions’ practices (reference societies) are discursively integrated in national policymaking, it is essential to analyse the local context in which the policy process being analysed occurs. The concept of reference societies was originally defined by Bendix (1978, in Waldow, 2017), who identified the use of developed countries as models by countries seeking improvement. His definition was later broadened beyond national borders to include sub-national regions (e.g. Shanghai) and groups of countries (e.g. East Asia) (Waldow, 2019: 3), as well as negative reference societies: nations or regions used as examples of improvements that a country should not follow (Waldow, 2017).

References to IOs, their instruments and reference societies are helpful elements in the construction of certain realities. They help to reinforce the validity of arguments that seek to persuade others of the suitability or inadequacy of certain policy ideas and proposals to solve the problems under discussion by appealing to their audience’s reasoning, desires and emotions. Alasuutari and Qadir (2019) call this process of persuading others ‘epistemic work’. In this analysis I utilise these researchers’ epistemic governance framework (EGF) to explore the external references used in Portuguese parliamentary education debates, and align with the definition of governance as the process by which policymakers attempt to ‘work upon others’ understanding of the world and of the situation at hand’ (Alasuutari, 2018: 168; Alasuutari and Qadir, 2014). I therefore follow their idea that governance is always epistemic.

More specifically, I propose to explore the strategies through which epistemic work develops in Portuguese parliamentary education debates in analysing how the use of externalisation seeks to affect others’ decisions by acting on their views of the debated issues. My research question is: How are references to world situations used as epistemic capital in the Portuguese parliamentary education debates (2001–2018)? I attempt to contribute to the theoretical discussion of how global actors, tools, practices and ideas are adopted as ‘knowledge claims and rhetoric’ (Alasuutari and Qadir, 2014: 70) in national policymaking.

Portugal is the context of this study for three reasons. First, a broad analysis of the discursive uses of external references in education debates remains scarce. Most study the influences of individual external inputs like Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA) (e.g. Afonso and Costa, 2009; Carvalho and Costa, 2014; Carvalho et al., 2017; Costa, 2011; Lemos and Serrão, 2015) or the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (e.g. Lemos, 2014, 2015; Teodoro, 2019). Second, there has been no systematic study of the use of external references as epistemic capital in Portuguese parliamentary plenary education debates. Third, and in connection with the chosen timeframe,<sup>1</sup> I find it interesting that PISA was not mentioned in Portuguese parliamentary education debates during the survey’s first two cycles (2000 and 2003), and consider that an exploration of the other external inputs used in these debates can produce

interesting findings. The lack of interest in PISA results may be related to the fact that Portugal accepted the limitations of its education system more than 150 years ago, when comparative statistics among European countries began to systematically reveal the country's continuing low literacy levels, poor school infrastructure and insufficient education funding (e.g. Antunes, 2004; Gomes, 1999; Lemos, 2015; Mendes, 2015; Nóvoa, 2005). The poor results in PISA and other international large-scale assessments (ILSAs) were therefore expected and simply taken as confirmation of what was already known.

I performed a qualitative content analysis of 115 parliamentary education debates occurring in plenary sessions. I also applied rhetorical analysis specifically to Legislature X, when the quotations identified with external references showed an unusually high peak (from 136 in Legislature IX to 354 in Legislature X). In a previous study (Santos and Kauko, 2020) we identified all the external references used in Portuguese parliamentary education debates between 2001 and 2018, and the tone and functions of their use (see list of the ten most frequent references by legislature in Appendix 2), arriving at the understanding that most external references were used positively to promote legitimacy. In that earlier paper we demonstrate that while international influences certainly occurred, Portuguese parliamentary policymakers strategically instrumentalised external references to feed arguments where problems were framed in certain ways, and policy solutions were aligned with each party's ideological and political agenda. This intensifies the controversial dynamic that characterises the Portuguese political system. Ultimately, the goal is to manage conflict between the different political forces and eventually enable policy reform. This article aims to deepen that early analysis by exploring how processes of externalisation to world situations bring to policymakers' arguments useful resources of epistemic capital used in the epistemic work developed in Portuguese parliamentary education debates.

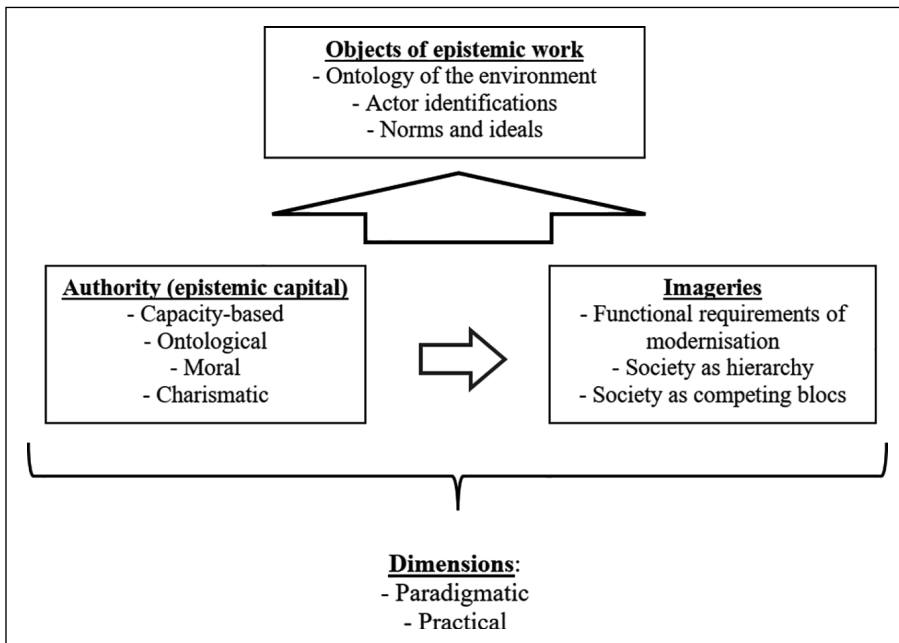
## **Epistemic governance framework: analysing the art of affecting the audience's views**

The EGF, as described by Alasuutari and Qadir (2019) and adopted in this analysis, focuses on social changes in modern societies. It is described as an additional analytical layer in the study of how power is developed and handled, and it specifically analyses the dynamics of governance and policymaking (Alasuutari and Qadir, 2014, 2016, 2019). It defines governance as 'the efforts to bring about change (and maintain status quo) in any given social system' (Alasuutari and Qadir, 2019: 3) from small organisations to the world system. Governance therefore consists of the ability to intentionally, but through conscious, semi- and unconscious actions and arguments, affect others' 'conceptions of reality', thereby producing social change (Alasuutari and Qadir, 2014: 71).

The EGF is strongly influenced by Foucault's concepts of power, order and especially governmentality, as well as his premise that the art of government involves several non-hierarchical strategies of control and power (Alasuutari and Qadir, 2014: 67–68). One such strategy consists of the ability of political actors to influence others' views and behaviour through discourse. As individuals can control their own actions and constructions of reality and consequently steer social change at different levels – especially in democratic nations – power often depends on policymakers' ability to convince others that the situation under debate is problematic and needs to be addressed through specific policy reforms. This rhetorical work is often done using different forms of constructed knowledge and authority (Alasuutari, 2018).

The EGF is a complex framework that integrates several components, which I shall describe below. The framework focuses on the analysis of the epistemic work developed in one or several specific contexts (e.g. in comparative studies). Epistemic work is described as a set of 'particular

techniques used by actors engaged in affecting views and hegemonic definitions of the situation at hand' (Alasuutari and Qadir, 2019: 22). To fully understand how epistemic work develops, one needs to identify which sources of authority – also called epistemic capital – are used and which imageries they help to build. The broader idea is that epistemic work strategically develops simultaneously around three objects: environmental ontology, actor identifications, and norms and ideals. 'These are constructions of what the world is, who we are and what is good or desirable' (Alasuutari and Qadir, 2019: 21). The epistemic work on these three objects simultaneously occurs in two dimensions: paradigmatic, constituting broad ontological assumptions of reality; and practical, through the production of knowledge concerning specific paradigmatic assumptions, for example (Alasuutari and Qadir, 2014, 2019; see Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Epistemic governance framework (based on Alasuutari and Qadir, 2019).

According to the EGF, imageries play a fundamental role in epistemic work. They consist of 'pictures' through which individuals and institutions see the world. Constructed by the 'combination of root metaphors',<sup>2</sup> they are strategically used as illustrations by policymakers seeking to affect people's views and behaviour (Alasuutari and Qadir, 2016, 2019: 37–57). The EGF identifies three different imagery narratives used by policymakers and other political and social actors: functional requirements of modernisation – new policies are presented as required to maintain or improve the country's or region's development; society as hierarchy – a view of a hierarchically organised society with the individuals or institutions at the top retaining more power, making the decisions and having the responsibility; and society as competing blocs – a conceptualisation of society as divided into units with their own interests that compete with each other (Alasuutari and Qadir, 2016, 2019: 37–53).

To construct these imageries, the EGF highlights that political and other social actors need different sources of authority that work as epistemic capital (Alasuutari, 2018): a cumulative collection of all kinds of resources that can be used as knowledge and validation bases for the arguments presented (Alasuutari, 2018; Alasuutari and Qadir, 2019: 50–61). It is important to note that authority is always relational; it depends on others' recognition of them as such (Alasuutari et al., 2016).



Alasutari and Qadir (2019: 59–77) identify four different forms of authority: capacity-based, referring to people, organisations or objects seen as respectful within their social system who are recognised as able to do what they promise legally or illegally (e.g. the idea that IOs help to change reality); ontological, referring to a person, text or institution used to ‘accurately’ present the world and the debated situation (e.g. research reports, IOs, religious texts); moral, alluding to well-accepted principles, rules and standards, and the people who represent them (e.g. laws, religious books, judges or clergy); and charismatic, referring to a person or institution because of their talents, acts, blood or rights of office. They are constructed as sacred through narratives, public emotions and rituals, and they can influence or be used to influence others, even outside their expertise and abilities (e.g. artists’ and social movements’ involvement in policymaking).

In accordance with the EGF all the above aspects of epistemic work are cumulative (Alasutari et al., 2016). Different imageries and sources of authority (epistemic capital) are often combined in arguments that seek to affect people’s views and emotions, consequently originating (or limiting) change.

Because of its focus on how discourse affects others, the EGF is a suitable theoretical and methodological framework for analysing plenary parliamentary debates.<sup>3</sup> The parliament’s work is strongly epistemic in nature, because the deputies intend to affect other deputies’ views and decisions – as well as the broader national audience – using epistemic capital in the construction of imageries that illustrate arguments (de-)legitimising the debated reforms. In the construction of such arguments, external references are often invoked as epistemic capital. My analysis focuses on which external references are most frequently used and their role as epistemic capital in the construction of the imageries that policymakers use when developing their epistemic work in Portuguese parliamentary education debates. The suitability of the EGF for the study of externalisation to world situations is related to both frameworks’ focus on the analysis of the reception and the translation of global ideas and practices in local contexts.

## Data and methods

The study starts with the overall data of 115 parliamentary education debates happening in the Portuguese parliament’s plenary between December 2001 (when PISA’s first results were announced) and December 2018 (when the data was collected). It includes debates from Legislatures IX to XIII,<sup>4</sup> with all the available 81 general or specific education debates and 34 debates on education-related bills (first reading and discussion). While this data was explored in a previous article (Santos and Kauko, 2020), I use this large dataset in this article as background/contextual information and focus only on the 41 debates of Legislature X between March 2005 and October 2009 (all the available 31 general or specific debates on education and 10 debates on education-related bills). This narrowing of focus is related to the identification of an evident change in the discourse’s strategy during this period, with an important accentuation of the use of external references, from an average of 46 quotations with external references per year during Legislature IX to 89 during Legislature X, returning to fewer external references in subsequent legislatures. The data was collected from the online *Diários da Assembleia da República (DAR)*<sup>5</sup> ([www.parlamento.pt/](http://www.parlamento.pt/)), using several keywords related to education: ‘educação’ [education]; ‘ensino’ [teaching]; ‘aluno’ [student]; ‘escola’ [school]; ‘educador’ [educator]; and ‘professor’ and ‘docente’ [both mean teacher in Portuguese]. Some debates, despite being listed, were unavailable (Santos and Kauko, 2020).

The analysis of the debates developed on two different levels. First, I developed a qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2014) with the support of the Atlas.ti8 software for the entire dataset (115 debates, 2001–2018), developing an inductive and deductive coding system. Eight categories<sup>6</sup> were

created beforehand, based on the research question and the basic information that would identify references, their tones and functions, speakers, topics discussed and so on. These categories were further complemented by the sub-categories emerging from the reading of the debates. The method was helpful for familiarisation with the data, facilitating the reduction of the amount of data to the essential elements required for the study, and giving a general idea of who the speakers were, who and what were used as external reference targets, the tone (positive, negative, neutral) and function (legitimation or de-legitimation) of the references (e.g. references to other countries: Spain; speakers: PS deputies). To better understand the political context and the government agenda, the same content analysis was performed for the XVII government programme's sections on education.

A second level of analysis, rhetorical analysis (Edwards et al., 2004; Leach, 2011), was performed for the debates of Legislature X, which are this article's analytical focus. The decision to apply rhetorical analysis in addition to content analysis was connected with the use of the EGF, because rhetorical analysis promotes an understanding of the strategies used to influence or persuade others through discourse, text or images (Edwards et al., 2004; Leach, 2011). The rhetorical analysis focused on the allusions to world situations as a rhetorical device used to strengthen the speaker's credibility (*ethos*) and to appeal to the audience's rational thinking, logic (*logos*) and emotion (*pathos*) (Leach, 2011). This analysis enabled an understanding of the parliamentary policymakers' assumptions concerning their audience's a) perception of reality, b) identification of the entities with authority and c) perception of what was positive or negative, acceptable or unacceptable; and ultimately, how the speakers considered that specific external references could contribute persuasively to constructing the debated issue in ways that suited their party's agenda.

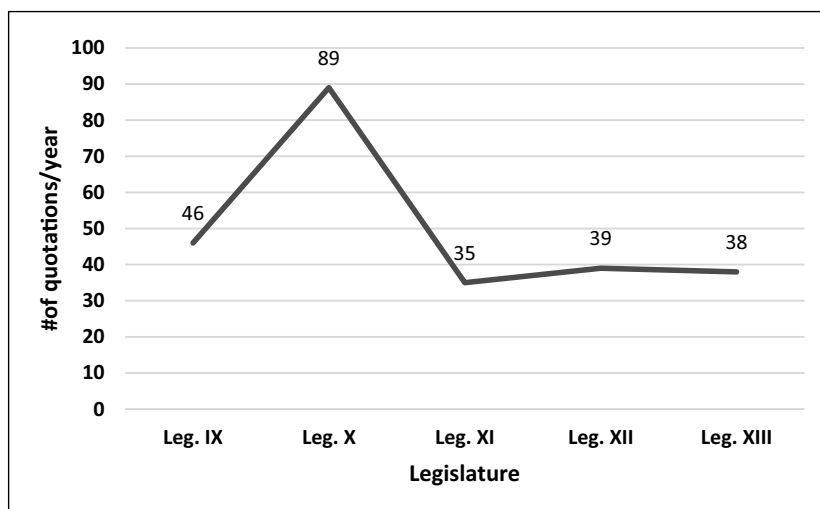
## The Portuguese political system and externalisation to world situations

To better understand the parliamentary debates, it is helpful to understand their context. Portugal has a semi-presidential political system. Power is divided between the president, parliament and government. Parliament is unicameral, has strong legislative powers and holds the government to account (e.g. Freire, 2005; Goes and Leston-Bandeira, 2019). The 230 deputies are selected by each party internally and elected by the d'Hondt method, forming party parliamentary groups (e.g. Leston-Bandeira, 2004; Lobo et al., 2015). During the legislature under scrutiny six parties were represented in parliament: three left-wing parties, one right-wing party, one centre-left (also government) party, one centre-right party and one independent deputy.

Processes of externalisation to world situations are frequent in parliamentary plenary education debates in Portugal. In the total of 115 education debates analysed (2001–2018) only 18 contained no external references. In the remaining 97 debates there were 830 quotations with external references, frequently more than one per quotation. A total of 173 different external targets was identified.

In examining externalisation during the five legislatures, an accentuated opening of the system during Legislature X can be observed (Figure 2).

Figure 2 shows an average of 46 quotations with external references every year during Legislature IX (3 years – 2002–2005), 35 during Legislature XI (2 years – 2009–2011), 39 during Legislature XII (4 years – 2011–2015), and 38 during Legislature XIII (3 years – 2015–December 2018). During Legislature X (4 years – 2005–2009) an average of 89 quotations with references to world situations was found in each year.

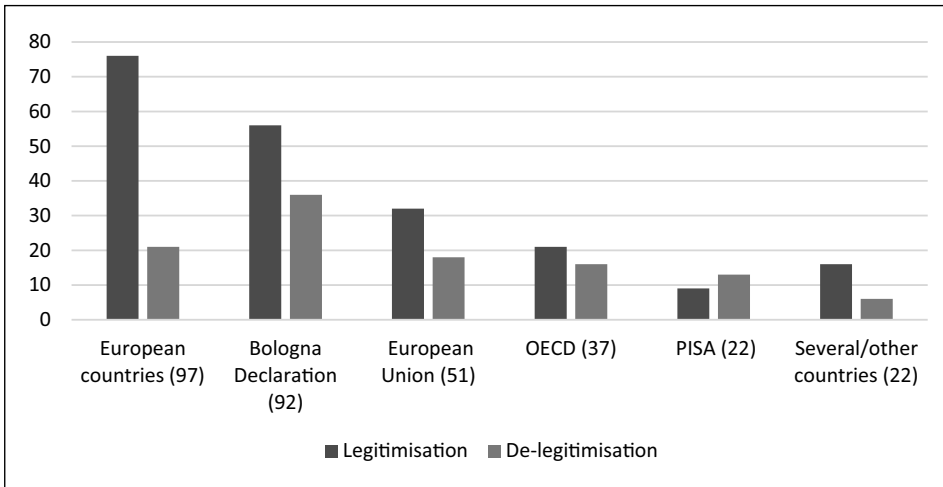


**Figure 2.** Average of quotations with external references per year per legislature.

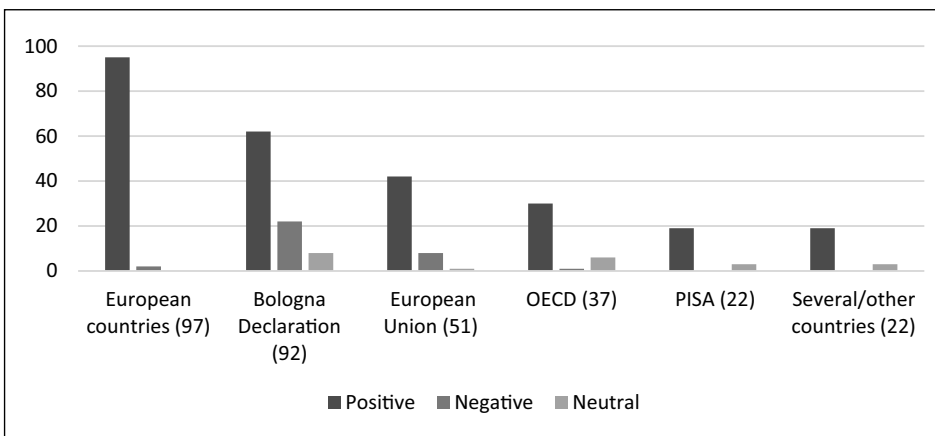
## The externalisation process as a source of epistemic capital in the XVII government programme and parliamentary education debates

Legislature X (and simultaneously the XVII Portuguese constitutional government) commenced in a national and international context characterised by an increasing focus on improving educational equality, efficiency and quality, accompanied by significant interest in international articulation, cooperation and competition. In Portugal this race to improve efficiency and quality at all levels of the education system coincided with the growth of assessment mechanisms for students, schools and teachers, along with curriculum changes and reforms in school and higher education management (Barroso, 2009, 2016; Carvalho et al., 2019), to name the most relevant. However, these issues are not new. They belong to the modernisation of public systems in western countries that started during the 1960s. Portugal followed slowly, with various incremental and frequently conflicting reforms implemented as governments changed (Barroso, 2006, 2016). What appears to have changed is the type of argument used to discuss these topics. In addition to traditional ideological arguments, during this legislature there was an increase in the use of external references as a tool to sustain rhetorical evidence claims. This externalisation peak is in line with previous research (e.g. Afonso and Costa, 2009; Costa, 2011), suggesting that during the XVII constitutional government (and Legislature X) ‘There is a change in the conceptualization of the decision-making process and a renewal of the foundations of political legitimacy, more based on scientific reasoning, and less on ideological logics’ (Afonso and Costa, 2009: 53).

When reading the XVII government programme, one notices that it is replete with terms such as ‘equality’, ‘quality’, ‘efficiency’, ‘innovation’, ‘development’, ‘assessment’ and ‘qualifications’ and their relationship with ‘employment’, ‘quality of life’, ‘economic development’ and ‘internationalisation’ of ‘people’ and ‘organisations’. The policy plans for education focus on the reorganisation of the school system, its curriculum and the assessment of its different elements at all levels, including higher education. References to the ‘European Union’ (EU) and its countries (as a broad, regional reference society – ‘European countries’) are the main targets of these externalisations, feeding arguments about the need to fulfil EU agreements or advice and to catch or keep up with other ‘European countries’. It is therefore clear that the organisation is seen by the XVII government as a key source of authority.



**Figure 3.** Function of the main targets of externalisation.



**Figure 4.** Tone of the references to the main targets of externalisation.

External references are also strongly used in parliament. They are used as sources of authority to build arguments that, although dressed up as based in external evidence, ultimately aim to gather the audience's support for proposals that follow each party's ideology and that have been longstanding agenda items. During Legislature X, 91 external targets were identified. The most frequently used (and further explored in this analysis) were 'European countries' (1st), 'Bologna Process/Declaration' (2nd), 'EU' (3rd), 'OECD' (4th), 'PISA' (joint 5th) and 'several countries' (joint 5th).<sup>7</sup> These main external targets were generally used positively, serving to legitimise speakers' own arguments. However, PISA was mostly used by opposition parties to de-legitimise and criticise government decisions (Figures 3 and 4).

In addition, in the analysed debates external references are mostly used as authorities with an ontological or capacity-based character. They are less often used as a charismatic or moral authority. The same reference often accumulates different kinds of authority.

The next section of the article explores the nuances of the use of the five most frequent external targets used by different policymakers. The aim of this analysis is to identify the similarities and

differences in how these references were used during Legislature X, who used them and for what purposes (Appendix 1 offers an overview of which party refers to each of the five top targets).

### *Performing epistemic work in the Portuguese parliament during Legislature X*

The following description of how the five main external targets are used as epistemic capital by the different party representatives is important for demonstrating how and why these targets become epistemic capital, and how their use is nuanced according to the speaker and her/his aims. This information helps to identify the different components of the epistemic work, such as the epistemic assumptions made by the speakers, the imageries they build and how these components function together in the arguments presented by the speaker, leading to an understanding of the epistemic work itself.

**References to EU countries.** The most frequent external reference during Legislature X was ‘EU countries’. Of the 356 quotations identified with external references, 97 referred to ‘European countries’ (27%). As the reading of the government programme has already suggested, most references to ‘EU countries’ were made by government members (43 quotations, 44%) in legitimising their programme’s ideas and bills concerning diverse education issues, from student and teacher assessments to higher education management. References to ‘EU countries’ were joined by many other references, ‘Bologna Process/Declaration’ and ‘OECD’ being the most frequent. For example, a (left-wing) PEV deputy uses OECD information to support an argument against higher education tuition and the inequalities it will generate compared with other European countries:

Indeed, these are the cases that prove what the OECD data says – namely, that Portugal is one of the European countries where socioeconomic inequalities are most felt in terms of access to and the frequency of higher education. (PEV deputy, 2008-06-11)<sup>8</sup>

This quotation demonstrates that references to ‘EU countries’ frequently serve as benchmarks for comparison, with an implicit expression of the need to belong to the group of ‘successful’ EU countries.

**References to the Bologna Process.** ‘Bologna Process/Declaration’ was the second most used external reference during Legislature X, present in 92 quotations (26%). This was directly linked to the government’s intensive focus on reforming higher education to accommodate the measures defined in the Bologna Declaration. It is therefore unsurprising that the policymakers who referred most frequently to the declaration were government members (30 quotations, 33%). Discussions of these reforms were long and problematic. The centre-right and right-wing parties highlighted the benefits of adopting the declaration, using it as a framework for the country’s development, or its adoption as a means to improve the percentages of qualifications, the quality of human capital and therefore people’s quality of life and the country’s economy. Meanwhile, the left-wing parties argued against most of the reform ideas legitimised by the declaration, negatively framing the declaration and its focus on the marketisation of education among other issues.

Higher education reforms were debated with the use of several external references besides the Bologna Process/Declaration. The OECD and especially the ‘European countries’ were frequently used as a symbiotic source of authority to feed arguments related to the importance of ‘fully’ belonging to these organisations, following their guidelines, or the need to catch or keep up with their countries’ practices and policies, as the quotation below from a government member underlines:

Mrs [deputy X], feeding any illusion in this joke that Bologna is a kind of ‘tailoring’ for European accreditation that does not serve us – that is, that Europe doesn’t serve us . . . I apologise, but this is unacceptable. (Government, 2005-05-12)

**References to the EU.** The EU was the most referenced IO in Portuguese parliamentary education debates. It arose in 51 quotations (14%) of the total of 356 quotations with external references. Government members used this reference most (22 quotations, 43%). Like references to ‘EU countries’, the government’s frequent referencing of the EU accorded with the government programme, in which the EU also featured strongly. The EU was often described and referred to as common ground, a ‘society’ to which the country proudly belonged, as the speech of a PS deputy (government party) demonstrates:

The internationalisation, Mr and Madam Deputies, belongs to the genetic material of the university, Europe and Portugal’s past. It will certainly belong to the genetic material of the Europe we are building . . . a cluster of wealth and social rights, to which Portugal today belongs. (PS deputy, 2007-05-09)

**References to the OECD.** During Legislature X the OECD was a frequently used external reference (37 quotations, 10%). Although the OECD (as an institution) was only mentioned in the government programme once (and five times as ‘OECD countries’), it is noteworthy that most references to this organisation were made by government members (15 quotations, 41%). It was frequently cited as an expert, a provider of trustworthy data on which policymakers could rely for information in advocating certain policies. For example, in arguing for the need to invest more in vocational and adult education to bring people with low literacy levels back to school, the government legitimised its arguments with the organisation’s data:

The OECD recently published a study showing that if all countries increased their average level of education by one year, this would have an effect of a 1.2% to 1.7% increase in employability. (Government, 2005-09-21)

As the example above effectively illustrates, references to the OECD often concerned the organisation’s core values and aims, such as its focus on workers’ qualifications, its relation to the quality and qualifications of human capital and its implications for economic growth.

**References to PISA.** Unlike the other top-five external targets, PISA’s results were used at very specific moments during Legislature X: in only 4 of the 41 analysed debates (22 quotations, 6%). It first earned sporadic status as a (de-)legitimation tool in May 2005. PISA was mostly used by opposition parties, especially CDS-PP (right-wing) (8 quotations, 36%). Most references to PISA were made in a 2007 interpellation debate requested by the CDS-PP party to question and criticise the government on the state of Portuguese education. In his opening speech the CDS-PP deputy explained the reasons for requesting the interpellation, supporting his arguments by referring to the poor Portuguese PISA 2006 results. During the debate all the other parties also cited the recently launched PISA results while criticising the government for the education system’s poor quality and inefficiency, high levels of inequality and students’ low literacy and performance.

Furthermore, as was the case in other references, the use of PISA was often accompanied by other frequently used external references, very often to ‘EU countries’ or ‘OECD countries’, but also others as in the example below, in which a PEV deputy focused on the growth of social and economic inequalities during the XVII government:

The 2006 data, which came first through the UNESCO study and then through the PISA Report, is very clear and shows again that we occupy, at almost all levels of performance, the tail end in relation to our European partners and the OECD's. (PEV deputy, 2007-12-06)

Like other references, PISA helps to construct arguments on the need to develop an education system that promotes equity and students' learning, leading to improvement in their performance.

*References to 'several/other countries'.* Besides these more specific references, a broad and vague reference to 'several/other countries' is also common (22 quotations), especially in arguments used by government members (9 quotations, 41%). Like the references to 'EU countries', this reference is routinely used as a benchmark associated with a sense of belonging to the group.

The government's policymaking role means it is unsurprising that it is the actor that most often resorts to external references as epistemic capital (see Appendix 1). References to the EU or 'EU countries', the 'Bologna Process/Declaration', the OECD, or PISA, as well as to other external elements, are accompanied by transversal (and globalised) ideas such as the importance of improving the equality, quality and efficiency of the education system. Although these external references are mostly used by the government and its supporters, they are also referenced by other parties in the parliament to highlight problems that are described as requiring attention if the country is to develop into a functional society in which every citizen has opportunities to succeed. In a country like Portugal, which has shown the ambition and experienced the struggle to attain the levels of development and quality of life of other countries (Antunes, 2004; Gomes, 1999; Nóvoa, 2005), mentioning these values and ideals is highly strategic and appeals emotionally and rationally to the audience, foregrounding common wishes for and visions of future possibilities of a better life and, ultimately, of belonging to groups of 'others' perceived as performing better.

## **Discussion: Policymakers' assumptions in the epistemic work developed in the Portuguese parliament**

Epistemic work departs to a large extent from the assumptions policymakers make about their audience. On the one hand, the analysis of which external references are used and how they are narrated in relation to shared ambitions and dreams reveals the assumptions that policymakers make about their audience. On the other, assumptions guide the selection of the external elements that are used as epistemic capital, because if the audience does not recognise these elements as authoritative, references to them cannot assist the speaker to strengthen his/her argument. Like other components of epistemic work, the assumptions have a cumulative character: in a single argument two or more types of assumption are identified.

The assumptions are directly connected with the objects of epistemic work ('ontology of the environment', 'actor identifications' and 'norms and ideals' – see Figure 1). Table 1 presents the main assumptions identified in the analysed parliamentary debates. It was possible to organise these into three categories: 'ontological assumptions', 'identification assumptions' and 'normative and ideological assumptions'.

'Ontological assumptions' concern the country and the government's performance – Portugal is seen as lagging behind other reference societies, mostly the 'EU countries', but also the 'OECD countries' or 'several/other countries'. These assumptions are unsurprising: they reflect the historically developed views of the country's development compared with others, especially European countries (e.g. Antunes, 2004; Nóvoa, 2005), as previously mentioned in this article. These countries are used as benchmarks in discussions focusing on the development of the education system and for a comparison and assessment of Portuguese students' performance (Nóvoa et al., 2014).

**Table 1.** Main assumptions identified in parliamentary education debates.

<b>Ontological assumptions</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Portugal needs to improve and develop.</li> <li>- Portugal lags behind other reference countries.</li> <li>- The government is improving/worsening the country's development.</li> </ul>
<b>Identification assumptions</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The EU is an important organisation; Portugal's membership is relevant (or irrelevant depending on which party is speaking).</li> <li>- The OECD is a reliable expert.</li> <li>- PISA data is reliable and trustworthy.</li> <li>- The government is (in)efficient.</li> </ul>
<b>Normative and ideological assumptions</b>	<i>Left-wing parties</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Importance of social equity.</li> <li>- Importance of respecting each person's and nation's characteristics, needs and independence.</li> <li>- Fundamental duty of the state to provide quality services such as education to all citizens.</li> </ul>
	<i>Right-wing party</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Importance of economic growth.</li> <li>- Unavoidability of social inequality.</li> <li>- Meritocracy.</li> <li>- Importance of free choice.</li> </ul>
	<i>Centre parties</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Equal opportunities.</li> <li>- Inclusion and economic growth as the means to improving living conditions for all citizens.</li> </ul>

Arguments are therefore frequently built around this assumption, whereas the audience is assumed to consider them essential to achieving or sustaining policies and practices that converge with those of EU and OECD partners.

In relation to 'identification assumptions', the frequent use of both the EU and the OECD shows that it is assumed by the speakers that the audience identifies these organisations as relevant, and that their data and guidelines should be taken into consideration, despite these organisations' lack of regulatory functions for the education systems of their member countries. This applies to centre, right-wing and, occasionally, left-wing parties. It seems it is assumed that EU membership is viewed today as it was during the early years of the new democracy, as fundamental for Portuguese democracy and modernisation (Royo and Manuel, 2003). Their ideas, tools and advice serve as frameworks supporting diverse policy arguments. In addition, it is frequently assumed that the audience sees the OECD as an education expert. Statements from the organisation's studies, reports and recommendations are carefully selected by each party and used as a form of scientific evidence in support of policy arguments.

'Normative and ideological assumptions' are directly related to party ideology. While the right-wing party (CDS-PP) presents more conservative and traditional proposals, revealing assumptions directly related to values such as the importance of economic growth and a focus on meritocracy, the left-wing parties express ideas centred on the value of social and economic equity, and the need to respect the characteristics and needs of each person and nation beyond international trends or views, while defending the state's role in providing quality services accessible to every citizen. The centre parties assume, as expected, that their audience sees the world more moderately, presenting arguments combining arguments of left- and right-wing ideologies, such as the importance of having a public education system that provides equal opportunities to everyone, along with the relevance of each person's academic development, the improvement of their living conditions and therefore the country's social and economic development.



### *Assumptions and the construction of imageries*

Assumptions are of great importance, not only in the selection of the external targets used but also, and in consequence of that selection, in the construction of the imageries that illustrate the reality as it is hoped the audience will perceive it. In essence, policymakers' assumptions concerning their audience's beliefs and interpretations are the basis on which policymakers choose certain externalisation targets when building the imageries used in the attempts to convince others of what the best line of action is. The analysis of the Portuguese parliamentary debates on education led to the identification of the same categories of imageries already introduced by Alasuutari and Qadir (2019) – 'functional requirements of modernisation', 'society as competing blocs' and 'society as hierarchy' (see Figure 1). Two interesting features of these imageries also became clear in the analysis that are relevant to an understanding of the dynamic of epistemic work developed by policymakers in the Portuguese parliament and these actors' interpretations of their audience, both inside and outside the parliament.

*Negative and positive imageries.* The use of imageries was identified positively or negatively. For example, when attempting to persuade others of the significance of a proposed law, in the following quotation a government member positively uses external references to demonstrate the importance of such a law if Portugal is to fulfil the 'functional requirements of modernisation':

[t]he international network [ENQA] prepared . . . the standards and guidelines for the quality assurance of higher education in the European area . . . that came to be adopted by all the signatory governments of the Bologna Declaration. This new law . . . is, in our opinion, a fundamental piece of reform for the qualification of Portuguese higher education. (Government, 2007-05-09)

In contrast, in the next quotation, one of the opposition parties also uses external references to argue that Portugal is not developing sufficiently, failing to fulfil the 'functional requirements of modernisation', lagging behind other 'European countries' and losing the battle of 'society as competing blocs':

Unfortunately, the numbers show we are behind the rest of Europe: the low education level of the Portuguese population . . . the persistence of high rates of early dropouts which compromise qualifications, the persistence of low levels of learning and success, and the existence of high social inequalities which schools have been shown incapable of countering. (PVE deputy, 2007-03-29)

*Imagery of national competing blocs.* The analysis also showed that the imageries of society as competing blocs need to incorporate national competitions. For example, external references are used to feed arguments concerning the 'battles' between parties, while promoting their policy ideas and criticisms, or attempting to prove the efficiency of their actions. A PS deputy refers to an OECD report to accuse an opposition deputy of being distant from the government's actions and the country's development during Legislature X:

In his initial speech the deputy said that he did not know the work of this government in matters of higher education. It revealed a great distance from the answers that have been given to the problems of higher education in Portugal . . . But it would be enough, I don't even say to read, but it would be enough to examine the OECD report to understand what the Portuguese government has already done. (PS deputy, 2006-12-21)

The enduring national competition concerning the quality and performance of private versus public schools is another interesting example of national competing blocs. In the following quotation right-wing deputies invoke PISA results to argue for parents being allowed to choose their child's school, leading to more equality:

[I]et it be very clear that what you are doing is perpetuating a cycle of poverty. The poorest, quite simply, do not choose other schools because they cannot! See the results of PISA, according to which students from 18 private schools or with mostly private funding are scientifically literate, with results above the OECD average! (CDS-PP deputy, 2007-12-06)

Like the character of the epistemic capital and the assumptions, imageries are also cumulative. In the analysed debates arguments using the functional requirements of modernisation imagery arguably frequently identify imageries of society as competing blocs or society as a hierarchy.

## Conclusions

The parliamentary plenary debates are rich in research possibilities, of which this article embodies one. Its premise is that governance is always epistemic and that ‘actors try to steer others’ thoughts and conducts’ with the aim of initiating social change (Alasuutari and Qadir, 2019). In identifying and exploring externalisations to world situations as a provider of epistemic capital which is used in the epistemic work developed in Portuguese parliamentary education debates, I have brought to light a) Portuguese policymakers’ assumptions about their audience, b) how and why specific external targets are chosen and c) the imageries they construct in their arguments. These clarifications help to understand the epistemic work developed in this context. This study therefore demonstrates that the two frameworks, externalisation to world situations (Schriewer, 1990; Steiner-Khamsi, 2004) and the EGF (Alasuutari and Qadir, 2019), can complement each other in a constructive analysis of policy-making and governance processes, promoting a deeper understanding of them.

First, the analysis demonstrates that during Legislature X, in addition to the traditional ideological arguments, the strategy for political (de-)legitimation was based strongly on externalisation to world situations. The increased use of specific external references indicates that they constituted powerful tools of (de-)legitimation during this legislature. However, party ideology and cohesion remain as strong as they have been since the restoration of democracy in 1974 (Goes and Leston-Bandeira, 2019; Leston-Bandeira, 2004). The continuity of the strength of party ideology is expressed in the entanglements of the topics raised by different policymakers. Although the debates include globally shared ideas like the need to reduce inequality and improve the quality and efficiency of the education system, these ideas seem to take the shape of transversal goals or justifications for issues which, as Barroso (2016) argues, are topics that are repeatedly present in Portuguese education debates and on each party’s agenda. It therefore becomes clear that global ideas are strategically selected and rhetorically used as sources of authority precisely in support of these enduring reform proposals.

Furthermore, in this analysis I demonstrate the complexity of the political interactions in the parliamentary context and the strategic character of the use of claims of knowledge and evidence in political contexts. Knowledge becomes mouldable: the same entity or practice is often referenced to *accurately* describe opposing *realities*. The epistemic work developed in the analysed debates foregrounds the mouldability of such claims. During Legislature X policymakers needed to find sources of authority beyond the traditional party-related ideological arguments, often resorting to externalisations as sources of epistemic capital in their attempts to convince their audience that their policy ideas were the best solutions for improving the education system, while their opponents’ ideas were of no use or inappropriate.

Second, by examining in detail how the same external references are used by different policymakers in the Portuguese parliament, I bring to light the assumptions (‘ontological’, ‘identification’, ‘normative and ideological’ – see Table 1) these policymakers make about their audience, highlighting an element of analysis that has yet to be central in the studies developed through the EGF lens. This focus promotes a more exhaustive comprehension of the epistemic work process. The identification of policymakers’ assumptions reveals that neither the imageries used to illustrate the presented arguments nor

the external references used to construct these imageries are randomly chosen. The choice of these external elements and their use depends on the speaker's assumptions of how the audience understands the debated issues, their perceptions of which IOs and international tools the audience considers reliable, the international practices the audience appears to consider worth pursuing and the ideas they see as valuable or acceptable. In sum, the assumptions are the foundational guide for the speakers' understanding of which references their audience will accept as valid authorities and which will help garner support for the advocated policy ideas.

In the case of the analysed parliamentary debates in education in Portugal these assumptions are strongly related to historically, culturally and socially constructed representations of the EU and the OECD, and their perceived relevance for the country's continuing educational development, as already reported in other studies (Antunes, 2004; Gomes, 1999; Lemos, 2015; Mateus, 1999; Santos and Kauko, 2020; Teodoro, 2019). In examining the entire 2001–2018 timeframe, it is noteworthy that they are the only external elements always present in the list of the ten most used references (Appendix 2). During Legislature X the top five external targets are these international organisations, their associated countries (as a regional reference society) and their tools of guidance and assessment – the Bologna Process/Declaration and, later, PISA. These constitute the main epistemic capital used by policymakers in developing epistemic work in Portuguese parliamentary education debates. This observation aligns with earlier studies focusing, for example, on the choice of reference societies (e.g. Waldow and Steiner-Khamsi, 2019), demonstrating that historically constructed relationships are a decisive element in the selection of the countries or regions used as references.

Third, the identification of the nuanced use of external elements provides information about the strategic intertwinements of the imageries constructed by each policymaker with their party's ideology. For example, while the OECD was often portrayed by all parties as an expert producing reliable information and evidence, it also caused some controversy in the debates. It is clear that the OECD's advocacy of economic aspects, such as the increase in people's qualifications with the aim of generating economic growth, were adopted by centre and right-wing parties but were contested by left-wing parties, which referred to the organisation's data in arguments focusing on the improvement of qualifications as a path to increased social equity.

While epistemic capital can be anything seen by the audience as authoritative (not necessarily external references), by utilising the EGF in the empirical analysis of externalisation as a source of epistemic capital my analysis attempts to contribute new theoretical ideas to the research into externalisation to world situations (e.g. Schriewer, 1990; Steiner-Khamsi, 2002, 2003, 2004; Takayama, 2008, 2009; Waldow, 2017). The two frameworks can fruitfully benefit from each other. In this study the epistemic governance framework deepened the understanding of the 'sociologic', which in the Portuguese parliamentary context leads to the choice of certain world situations as symbolic elements of (de-)legitimation in the epistemic work that aims to earn support for specific policy ideas, particularly regarding controversial topics. This analysis therefore buffers answers not only to the questions of which external references are used and why but also how they are used in the work of convincing others of the viability of certain policy ideas. It emphasises the complexity of global-local intertwinements: while IOs, their tools and practices in other countries/regions influence policymaking processes at the national or local levels, policy actors in specific national contexts (such as in the parliament) utilise the prominence of these external elements as epistemic capital when their traditional sources of authority are insufficient to persuade their audience of the validity of their arguments.

Future studies may continue to expand this analysis by exploring the use of externalisation to world situations as a source of epistemic capital in other governance arenas at the global, national and local

levels and their interplay, broadening its coverage and allowing a comparison of the roles that externalisations play in the epistemic work developed in a wide and diverse range of contexts.

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### Notes

1. This study originally assumed that PISA had somehow affected (at least discursively) Portuguese policy-making since the publication of its first results. However, qualitative content analysis demonstrated that PISA was completely absent in Portuguese parliamentary education debates until the later PISA cycles (external references largely existed, but not to PISA). Once the data was collected and part of the analysis was performed, revealing interesting outcomes, I decided to keep the initial timeframe (Dec. 2001–Dec. 2018; 17 years), broadening the scope of the study to include all external references used in the debates.
2. Departing from Brown's concept of root metaphors (1989, in Alasuutari and Qadir, 2019).
3. The decision to analyse plenary debates stems from the fact that they are open public debates, constituting a main moment of communication between deputies and their electorate (Ilie, 2017; Paulo and Cunha, 2013). Deputies intentionally work to persuade other policymakers and the country's citizens in general of the validity of their ideas and proposals. The plenary is therefore the ultimate stage in which deputies undertake epistemic work with the wider audience in mind (Alasuutari and Qadir, 2019).
4. The Portuguese post-dictatorship periods between elections are called Legislatures. They are numbered consecutively with Roman numerals (Santos and Kauko, 2020).
5. DAR series I has a meticulous transcription of the plenary debates.
6. The eight initial categories were: speaker, type of debate, topics/problems, reference to other countries, reference to global actors/tools, reference to global/international events, function of the reference and tone of the reference.
7. For a full list of the top 10 external targets per Legislature see Appendix 2.
8. All quotations in the article were translated by the author.

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## Author biography

Íris Santos is a research fellow, a PhD candidate at the Faculty of Education and Culture at Tampere University, Finland, and a PhD student at the Institute of Education at the University of Lisbon, Portugal. Her research interests concern the dynamics of global education governance and policy. She is a co-author of the book *Politics of Quality in Education: A Comparative Study of Brazil, China, and Russia* (Routledge, 2018). Her current research analyses the use of external references in Portuguese education policymaking.

## Appendix I. Distribution of the uses of the top five externalisation targets – Legislature X.

Target (total)	Gov.	PS	PSD	CDS-PP	PCP	BE	PEV	Ind. Dep.
<i>EU countries (97)</i>	43	19	12	3	5	3	11	1
<i>Bologna Dec. (92)</i>	30	12	18	5	11	10	6	0
<i>EU (51)</i>	22	8	4	4	4	5	3	1
<i>OECD (37)</i>	15	4	6	3	4	2	3	0
<i>PISA (22)</i>	4	3	3	8	1	1	2	0
<i>Several countries (22)</i>	9	4	2	3	1	3	0	0
<i>Total</i>	123	50	45	26	26	24	25	2

**Appendix 2.** Top ten table of targets of reference (December 2001–December 2018).

Target of reference (number of quotations)	Function			Tone		
	Legitimation	De-legitimation	Neutral	Positive	Negative	Neutral
<b>Legislature IX</b>						
European countries (57)	35	23		56	2	0
European Union (26)	17	8		24	1	1
OECD (13)	8	5		13	0	0
Bologna Declaration (11)	6	5		9	1	1
Several/other countries (10)	4	6		8	2	0
Countries of the world/world (9)	8	1		8	1	0
OECD countries (7)	5	2		7	0	0
UK (5)	3	2		2	3	0
USA (5)	3	2		4	1	0
Germany (5)	2	3		5	0	0
<b>Legislature X</b>						
European countries (97)	76	21		95	2	0
Bologna Declaration (92)	56	36		62	22	8
European Union (51)	32	18		42	8	1
OECD (37)	21	16		30	1	6
PISA (22)	9	13		19	0	3
Several/other countries (22)	16	6		19	0	3
QREN (EU funding) (20)	8	11		8	6	6
Countries of the world/world (17)	14	3		17	0	0
OECD countries (16)	12	4		16	0	0
Internat. reports/recommend./experts (16)	10	6		12	2	2
<b>Legislature XI</b>						
PISA (21)	14	7		19	2	0
OECD countries (14)	11	3		13	0	0
OECD (12)	9	3		12	0	0
European countries (12)	9	3		11	1	0
European Union (7)	2	5		7	0	0
Spain (7)	6	1		5	2	0
Ireland (6)	5	1		4	2	0
UK (5)	4	1		4	1	0
Sweden (4)	3	1		2	2	0

(Continued)



## Appendix 2. (Continued)

Target of reference (number of quotations)	Function		Tone		
	Legitimation	De-legitimation	Positive	Negative	Neutral
Denmark (3)	3	0	3	0	0
Germany (3)	3	0	3	0	0
Several/other countries (3)	2	1	3	0	0
European funding (3)	0	3	2	0	1
International Classification of Functionality (ICF) (3)	1	2	1	2	0
International Organisations (3)	3	0	3	0	0
QREN (EU-funded) (3)	2	1	2	0	1
OECD (33)	15	18	31	2	0
European countries (29)	18	11	29	0	0
Troika (22)	3	19	1	20	1
PISA (15)	9	6	12	1	2
European Union (15)	9	6	13	2	0
OECD countries (12)	6	6	12	0	0
Internat. reports/recommend./experts (11)	5	6	8	2	1
Internat. comparisons/rankings/ statistics (9)	5	4	9	0	0
Spain (8)	6	2	7	1	0
Several/other countries (7)	4	3	6	1	0
European countries (33)	25	8	30	1	2
PISA (15)	11	4	13	0	2
OECD countries (14)	11	3	14	0	0
OECD (14)	9	5	12	2	0
European Union (13)	11	2	10	3	0
Troika (9)	3	6	0	8	1
European funding (7)	4	3	2	0	5
International practices (6)	4	2	5	1	0
Several/other countries (5)	2	3	4	0	1
European Commission (4)	3	1	4	0	0
Finland (4)	4	0	4	0	0
POCH (EU-funded) (4)	2	2	0	0	4



PUBLICATION  
IV

**The media's role in shaping public opinion on education:  
A thematic and frame analysis of externalisation to world situations in  
the Portuguese media**

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# The media's role in shaping the public opinion on education: A thematic and frame analysis of externalisation to world situations in the Portuguese media

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### Abstract

This article uses thematisation theory (Luhmann, 1996; Pissarra Esteves, 2016) and frame analysis (Entman, 1993) to analyse externalisations to world situations (Schriewer, 1990) in the Portuguese print media's discussion of education. Our data constitutes news and opinion articles collected after each PISA cycle's results was published. The analysis demonstrates that the education themes discussed in the media between 2001 and 2017 are consistent, despite occasionally being discussed more intensively, frequently following the themes highlighted by PISA reports and OECD media communications. The frames used for these themes are more diverse, changing according to the speaker's agenda and viewpoints. Externalisations (frequently PISA, OECD, and other participants in the survey) serve as sources of authority that help in thematising and framing education. This process works as a mechanism of double reduction for the complexity of the social world, narrowing the possibilities of how education is seen and interpreted by the public.

### Keywords

Externalisation to world situations, PISA, media, framing, thematisation

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## Introduction

In 1993, Murray Edelman (1993) stated that ‘the social world is (...) a kaleidoscope of potential realities, which can be readily evoked by altering the ways in which observations are framed and categorized’ (231). In this sense, the social world is shaped by communications within complex networks of individuals providing and consuming information. Media actors, the providers, and the readers, the consumers, actively construct views of reality shaped by factors such as cultural values and contextual events. In modern societies, these reality constructions are also increasingly influenced by situations in the global world that accentuate their complexity.

Media actors are active participants in these processes. Indeed, media actors such as journalists, bloggers and commentators from all kinds of social, political and academic backgrounds design reality from their perspective not only by focusing on a selective number of themes considered newsworthy, but also by presenting these themes through specific frames that highlight some aspects to the detriment of all others (Entman, 1993). Interchangeably, the public’s interest in some themes more than in others defines what the media offers, and how it frames it.

As the complexity of modern society expands due to the faster rhythm of globalisation in recent decades, the rationalities, and instruments of international organisations (IOs) are considered relevant at the national and local levels by an increasing number of ‘reality makers’ within diverse social systems. During the last 20 years PISA (the Programme of International Student Assessment) more than any other International Large-Scale Assessment (ILSA) has been the focus of politicians, journalists and academics, among other actors who not only present and discuss the results of the survey departing from specific viewpoints, but also utilise it in discussing other themes related to the perceived state of the education system (see, e.g. Afonso and Costa, 2009; Berenyi and Newmann, 2009; Bonal and Tarabini, 2013; Carvalho, 2012; Carvalho et al., 2017; Costa, 2011; Fladmoe, 2011; Grey and Morris, 2018; Hopfenbeck and Görden, 2017; Hu, 2020; Rawolle and Lingard, 2014; Stack, 2006; Takayama, 2008; Yemini and Gordon, 2017).

PISA, along with other external elements such as international organisations (IOs) and practices in other countries and regions, has been one of the main elements in processes to which Schriewer (1990) refers as externalisation to world situations. Stemming from the Luhmannian theory of self-referential social systems, the externalisation to world situations thesis refers to the shift of the discourse in modern societies from self-referencing to external referencing as a tool for advocating internal policy reforms. Research suggests that the use of external references tends to occur when themes are problematic, and policies are contested, earning insufficient public support with reference to internal experiences (Steiner-Khamsi, 2002). Among the frequently used external references, reference societies, a concept originally defined by Bendix (1978) to describe developed countries used as models by countries looking to improve, has been expanded in recent years to include sub-national regions (e.g. Shanghai) and supra-national areas (e.g. the Nordic countries), as well as negative cases, that is, nations or regions used as examples not to follow (Waldow, 2017, 2019:1). In this paper, we adopt Waldow’s (2012: 418–419) description of externalisation to world situations as a discursive tool that is helpful in legitimising one’s own arguments or de-legitimising those of one’s opponents.

Our study also draws on Luhmann (1996) analysis of the role of the media in selecting certain themes as a focus of their productions and its effects on public opinion. More specifically, we utilise content and frame analysis to study how externalisations to world situations contribute to the thematisation of education and its repercussions in public opinion. We attempt to answer the question: how does the media in Portugal utilise external references in the thematisation and framing of education after each PISA cycle’s results are published?

Our aim is to understand (a) if and how the discussion of education themes varies during the 2001–2017 timeframe as the Portuguese PISA results oscillate, and (b) how the media uses references to the survey and other external elements to frame education themes in specific ways. We analyse news<sup>1</sup> and opinion<sup>2</sup> articles collected from two daily newspapers (*Diário de Notícias* and *Público*), one weekly newspaper (*Expresso*) and one weekly magazine (*Visão*), all of which strongly focus on the discussion of public policy in Portugal.

## **The role of the media in the process of public opinion formation**

Media productions are the main vehicle for citizens to inform themselves about all sorts of themes and events because citizens are otherwise unable to access vast areas of social reality. As Luhmann (1996: 1) states, ‘whatever we know about our society, or indeed about the world in which we live, we know through the mass media’. The media therefore plays a significant role in shaping public opinion (Jasperson et al., 1998) by selecting which themes are publicly discussed, and how they are framed. Nevertheless, if the media affects public opinion – through the selection of the themes presented, how they are framed and whose opinions have a voice – it also mirrors the public’s interest, and media actors select what is worthy of publication based on it (Pissarra Esteves, 2016). Media productions’ success always depends on the public’s acceptance of the selected theme (Luhmann, 1996: 12).

By selecting specific themes and silencing others, the media proposes certain meanings and attempts to manage the relevance of certain aspects of education, with the aim of limiting the social world accessed by the public (Luhmann, 1996; Pissarra Esteves, 2016). Media productions are therefore more than simple and neutral presenters of events and themes. Indeed, they ‘decide what is and is not of the public sphere’ (Nery, 2004: 16), and for that matter the themes reported in the media ‘reveal public problems’ (Nery, 2004: 2) and a sense that these problems need to be addressed (Luhmann, 1996).

The media functions as a mechanism that acts on the agenda of public opinion (Pissarra Esteves, 2016) and in doing so intertwines the public agenda with the agenda of other systems. For example, the media system establishes the communication between public opinion and the political system (Agostini, 1984; in Saperas, 1987: 89). In this sense, the media has increased power as a ‘political public space, when discussions focus on themes related to the state practices’ (Nery, 2004: 15), and it functions as a mechanism that enables processes of political control and decision making, not only mediating the political themes discussed by the public (the subjects of political action), but also helping the political system to understand public expectations and the acceptability of policy decisions (Pissarra Esteves, 2016: 414–420). Studying the media and its effects on these terms brings to the fore the thematisation theory originally developed by Niklas Luhmann in the 1970s, which within his social systems theory highlights how the media, like other social systems, is operationally closed, self-organised and autopoietic – and thus autonomous (within the limits of public acceptability) – in what it selects as a communication theme (Luhmann, 1996: 23–24). Given that the borders of the social systems are blurry, despite its functional closeness, the media’s selection of themes works as an externalisation of the media system beyond its own borders (in the binary self-reference/external reference), which allows its coupling with its environment or other systems (Artieri and Gemini, 2019: 568; Luhmann 1996). Thematisation can be described as ‘the process of defining, establishing and publicly recognising the major themes and the major political problems that constitute public opinion’ (Saperas, 1987: 88). According to Luhmann (1996) events outside the media system irritate this system which in turn attempts to process these events while preparing society for constant novelties and surprises.

Additionally, framing is a major complement to the process of thematisation. In framing the selected themes in specific ways, the media leads the public to understand these themes from specific interpretative angles. In a highly complex modern society, the mass media affects public opinion not only by injecting specific themes into the public discussion, but also by how it frames them. For example, while paying attention to education events such as PISA results and highlighting certain aspects of education through them, media actors analyse the survey and simultaneously highlight other education themes such as the impact of students' learning backgrounds, teachers' work and qualifications, or a government education reforms. Furthermore, these themes are not analysed neutrally: a stance is always adopted through the aspects of education the writer accentuates (Entman, 2010: 392). References to world situations such as PISA and other ILSAs, IOs and other countries or regions, introduce elements of authority to the legitimation of the presented arguments, potentially increasing the public acceptability of a theme under discussion, and how it is framed.

## Data and methods

Our data consists of 133 print media articles collected between October 2018 and January 2019 from the archives of the Portuguese National Library, where all the print media publications in Portugal are kept. The timeframe considered for the search was 2 months after each PISA cycle results' publication, when more attention is given to the survey (Rawolle and Lingard, 2014). The selection criterion was to collect articles discussing education using at least one reference (named or described) to PISA.

The media outlets were selected based on their coverage of and relevance to the Portuguese public policy debate. We selected two daily newspapers (*Público* and *Diário de Notícias*), one weekly newspaper (*Expresso*) and one weekly magazine (*Visão*). These are representative of the three main Portuguese print media types. In 2016, *Visão* was the most circulated weekly magazine. In 2019, *Expresso* was considered the most trustworthy newspaper in Portugal, while *Diário de Notícias* and *Público* were in third and fourth place, respectively (OberCom, 2020). The second most circulated daily newspaper is classified as a tabloid and we therefore consider that it does not explore aspects of the national public policy arena sufficiently deeply. Although the European Media Systems Survey 2010 (Popescu et al., 2011) demonstrates that in Portugal, the media puts strong pressure on political actors and the themes raised by the media are discussed by politicians, the Portuguese media do not openly admit partisan slant, as ideological diversity is seen to have a positive impact in sales (Álvares and Damásio, 2013: 139). Thus, we selected media outlets for their representation of the reference print media in Portugal, independent from the ideological positions of their leadership.

Of the total of 133 articles, 115 were published in the daily newspapers *Diário de Notícias* (30) and *Público* (85), 14 in the weekly newspaper *Expresso* and four in the weekly magazine *Visão*. Of these, *Público* is the newspaper with the greatest focus on the discussion of education. It has a dedicated education section, which explains the greater number of articles found (64%). Although the data includes articles like major news reports, smaller news articles, interviews, diary pieces, letters to the editor, and so on, in this study we organised them in two major analytical groups: news articles and opinion articles.

Because of the low coverage of PISA results during the survey's initial three cycles we will analyse the combined data of these cycles. The study therefore focuses on a comparison between news and opinion articles during four time periods: 1) between the publication of the first and third PISA cycles (2000, 2003 and 2006); 2) after PISA 2009; 3) after PISA 2012; and 4) after PISA 2015.



The analysis started with a combination of deductive and inductive qualitative content analysis with the support of the ATLAS.ti software. The aims were familiarisation with the data and to synthesise it in accordance with the relevant categories of meaning required to answer the research question (Schreier, 2014). Thirteen categories<sup>3</sup> were created beforehand for this analysis. These were complemented by the content of the articles during the reading process, allowing the identification of diverse items useful to the analysis presented here, such as the authors, the kinds of publication, the themes discussed and the externalisations made. We also performed a frame analysis (Entman, 1993, 2003, 2010).

### *Frame analysis*

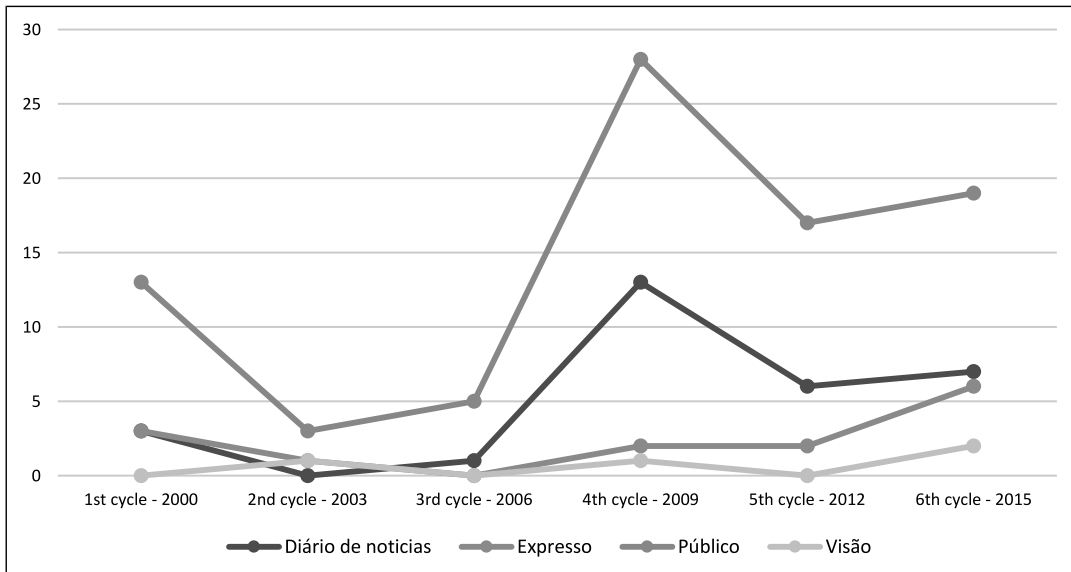
Framing is an extremely common practice. All human beings interpret and simplify world events' complexity by framing them through structured schemata constructed from their interpretative background (culture, values, previous experiences and understanding of the issue or situation at hand, and so on) by focusing on some aspects more than others (Entman, 1993, 2003, 2010).

'Frame analysis offers a theoretical, methodological and critical tool for exploring processes of meaning making and influence among governmental and social elites, news media and the public' (Winslow, 2018: 2). It focuses on how public policy issues are discussed in the media, and how the media encourages the public to discuss issues in one way instead of another (Pan and Kosicki, 1993). Framing is often used as a tool to problematise issues on diverse themes and in consequence promote certain agendas. Examples of prominent professionals using frames with this aim are politicians and journalists (Entman, 2003). They do this by 'select [ing] some aspects of a perceived reality and mak [ing] them more salient (...) promot [ing] a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation' (Entman, 1993: 52).

In practice, this means that some aspects of a story are emphasised, while others are left unsaid. This process of framing complements the process of thematisation. After a certain theme is selected some aspects of it are emphasised, and others are ignored. Like in the thematisation process, salience is constructed in the interaction between the provider of information and the public that receives it, which means that the aspect of the information highlighted must be recognised by the audience as valid and relevant (Entman, 1993).

In this article we use frame analysis to further explore the results of the content analysis by identifying frames used to discuss selected education themes (e.g. comparisons with other countries or regions highlighting Portugal's poor results, good results, or results similar to others' in PISA). The aim is to further explore how the media as a mechanism that acts on public opinion works to promote certain education themes in the public agenda, and how external references work as a legitimation tool that helps to frame these themes in certain ways.

One of the common problems of studies using frame analysis is its tendency to ignore the factor of time in the analysis, thereby leaving unidentified possible variations in framing that may be relevant (Entman et al., 2009). In an attempt to cover this gap, we perform a longitudinal exploration of the media articles. This exploration leads to an understanding of how the themes or events are discussed, and how the frames used change or are maintained after the publication of the results of each PISA cycle.



**Figure 1.** Number of publications per year, per newspaper/magazine.

## Understanding the data and the use of externalisations in Portuguese media discussions of education

An inconsistency in the media's interest in PISA results can be observed in Portugal (Figure 1). After initial 'enthusiasm' in 2001 PISA was barely discussed during the following two cycles. More attention was paid to the results of PISA 2009 and – though less prominently – subsequent cycles.

Among other possible reasons, two important factors help to explain the increased attention given to PISA 2009. First, the PISA 2009 results were a surprise – in the face of the longstanding negative perceptions regarding the quality and efficiency of the Portuguese school system (Antunes, 2004; Gomes, 1999; Nóvoa, 2005) education became a hot topic, because Portuguese students' performance was finally approaching the OECD average. Second, since the end of the 1990s a modality of regulation of the school system, more anchored in the observation of results than in the consideration of the norms, has gained expression, with the expansion of the use of assessments especially significant – of students, teachers and schools (Carvalho et al., 2019).

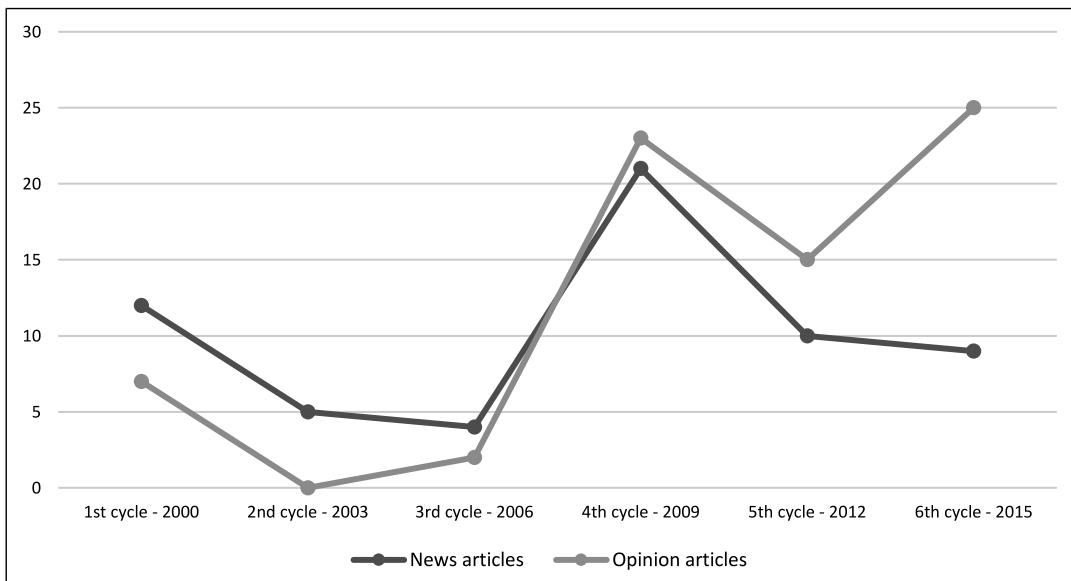
*Journalistic genre.* In the publications, 46% of the articles were news articles, including small individual news reports and extensive highlighted sections composed by several smaller articles focusing on various education issues. The other 54% were opinion articles (e.g. editorials, diary pieces and letters to the editor).

The news articles were written by journalists and most frequently, their main focus was on the PISA results. They usually described the survey and its results, comparing the performance of the various participants and their positions in the ranking often with reference to Portugal's ranking position. Consequently, in comparison with the opinion articles, the news articles displayed more externalisations to world situations (especially externalisation to other participant countries). Of the 815 quotations identified with one or more external references, 62% were in news articles.

News articles also discussed education in relation to PISA and other external references to legitimise arguments on education themes other than the students' performance in PISA. These themes frequently related to the issues emphasised by the PISA report itself and OECD media communications. Adherence to an uncritical comparative logic and the use of a league table logic forces us to examine these articles' neutrality more cautiously, because PISA reports and OECD communications are not neutral, calling attention to certain issues (thematization) and driving the conversations in specific directions (framing). Some good examples of the possible slant identified in the news articles are identified in the headlines that emphasise perspectives also highlighted in PISA reports, such as 'Portuguese students fail' (*Expresso*, 08.12.2001), or 'Excess of grade repetitions separates Portugal from the top of the PISA ranking' (*Diário de Notícias*, 07.12.2016). It is common for the articles with such headlines to present the chosen themes through one single frame instead of a thorough and multiple perspective discussion.

A longitudinal analysis of the articles reveals not only a general increase in the number of publications focusing on education themes when the PISA 2009 results were released, but also a large growth in the number of opinion articles (Figure 2), with this journalistic genre surpassing the number of news articles for the first time. The escalation in the number of opinion articles discussing education themes shows that education has, at that moment, gained importance in the public space.

Within the opinion articles the letters to the editor (10% of the opinion articles collected) are usually smaller and in less prominent areas of the newspaper, and their authors are not usually social actors viewed as relevant in the public sphere (Melo, 2005: 609). However, while these articles cannot be considered equally influential in the process of opinion making, they offer the opportunity for a broader diversity of social actors to get involved in public discussions, ask questions and express their concerns based on their own ideologies and experiences of the social world.



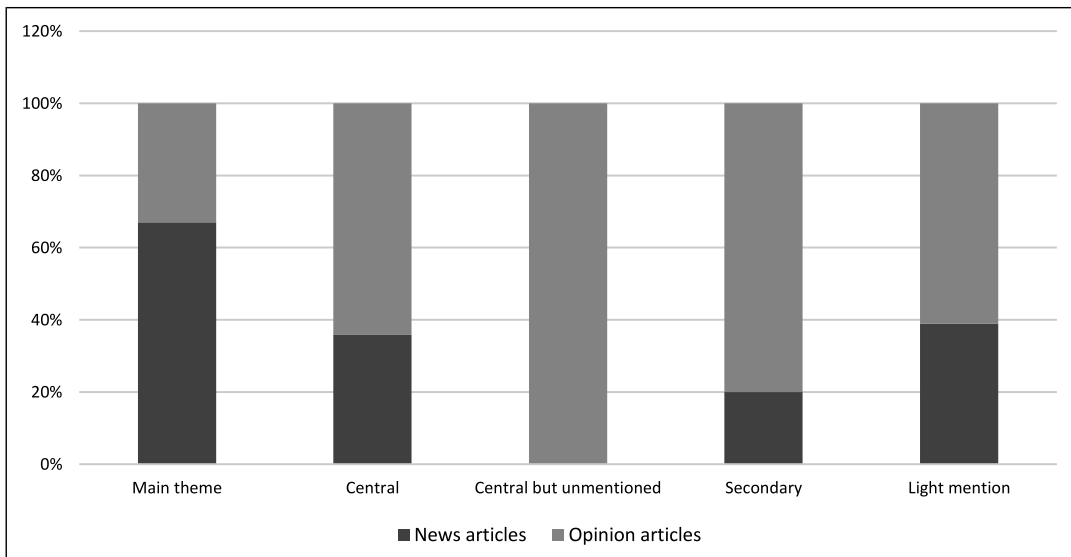
**Figure 2.** Number of articles per PISA cycle, per journalistic genre.

*Authors.* While the news articles were written by journalists, the opinion articles, in allowing more room for the expression of opinion, invited the participation of a variety of social actors (journalists and non-journalists – academics and politicians). These articles were largely written by regular opinion makers – collaborators with frequent publications in the media – and often regular columnists (e.g. academics).

*PISA centrality.* In the opinion articles, a significant interpretation of the facts can be observed (Figueiras, 2005), and clear attempts to influence public opinion by doing both: thematising education and accentuating certain aspects of the themes discussed. PISA and other external references were used in nuanced ways as a source of authority to legitimise arguments that framed a larger variety of education themes. PISA results and other external references were therefore used more frequently as support information than as the article's main topic. For example, in the quotation below the writer promoted the importance of public schools in improving equality by referring to the good performance of their students in PISA 2009:

It is proved that the public schools (to which the majority of students participating in the PISA test belong) can live up to their educational responsibilities, and that only these schools are in a position to realise the republican ideal of education equality, overcoming inequalities, and the realisation of citizenship (*Público*, 14.12.2010).

Nevertheless, PISA was the major external reference used in both journalistic genres. Of the total of 815 quotations identified with external references during the 2001–2017 timeframe, 449 (55%) referred to the survey. Figure 3 shows the different levels of PISA centrality in news and opinion articles.



**Figure 3.** PISA centrality per kind of article.<sup>4</sup>

### *Externalisation to world situations as a legitimisation tool*

The growth of the use of externalisations to world situations demonstrates that external references, especially PISA, have earned an authoritative status in the discussion of education themes. Here we identify a paradox related to the use of external references: if governance and policymaking processes become more complex with the international space being integrated in these systems, externalisations also provide elements that work as sources of (de-)legitimation for the presented arguments, narrowing the possible ways of thinking about education.

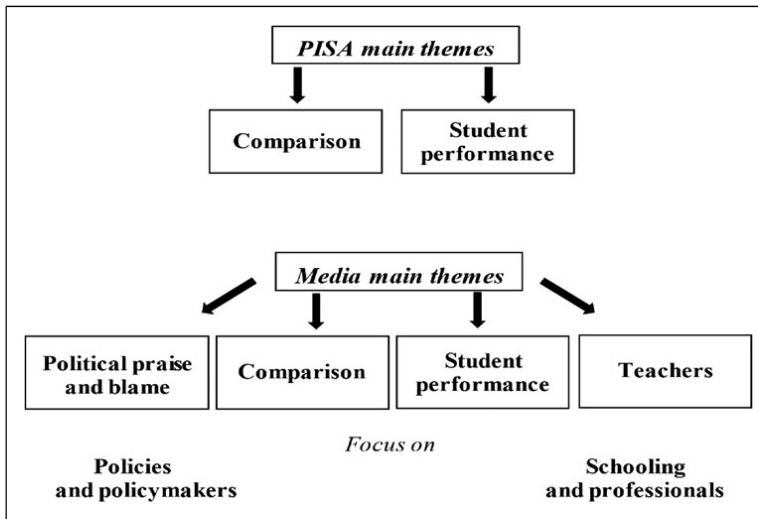
PISA and other external references were tools used by the media in attempts to guide public opinion on issues that emerged in its environment, for example, in the political system. It is noteworthy that the articles rarely comprehensively discussed education using external references and considering various and/or complementary perspectives. Education themes were usually only partly discussed, framed in accordance with agendas that were biased by some sort of ideology – for example, articles highlighting the better results of private schools in PISA to advocate the benefits of these schools and to argue for the need of state financial support for them, or the reference to the high levels of grade retention from disadvantaged socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds to support arguments advocating the stronger intervention of the state in reducing such inequalities.

### **Externalisations in the Portuguese media: thematisation of education and the multiplicity of frames**

Although it is possible to identify other broad themes, we consider that most of the quotations in our analysis can be categorised in at least one of 13 recurrent themes: comparisons (international and national); student performance; political praise and blame; teachers (work, qualifications, relations, assessment, and so on); students' socioeconomic and cultural background; families; critique/questioning of PISA/ILSAs and their use; reactions to results; education policies; education funding; grade retentions and dropouts; subject knowledge and learning; private schools and school choice. Admittedly, some quotations may be related to other themes. For example, some spoke directly of the quality of education in discussing student performance, while others mentioned the OECD's widely accepted – but also contested – idea that education was an important element in improving the quality of human capital and economic development.

Frequently, one quotation discussed more than one theme. For example, in the discussion of the impacts of grade retention on the students' performance, the themes of retentions and dropouts, and performance can be identified. Given the impossibility of presenting here an analysis of all the identified themes, in this paper we focus on the most prominent ones, because of their constant presence in the media agenda and the diversity of frames used to discuss them: student performance; comparisons; political praise and blame games; and teachers (work, qualifications, relations, assessment, and so on). The study of these specific themes also enables the analysis to focus on a) the three main actors of the education system: policymakers; teachers; and students and b) the intersections between the global, national and local levels of the education system (Figure 4).

The themes discussed during the 2001–2017 timeframe in the analysed media articles are therefore consistent. However, their centrality, and how they are framed, change. Our longitudinal analysis shows that most themes became more central after the results of some PISA cycles were published, but not after others. It can therefore be suggested that the PISA reports and the Portuguese results in the survey may have been elements that inflamed the discussion of specific themes and provided the momentum that led to an intensification of their discussion.



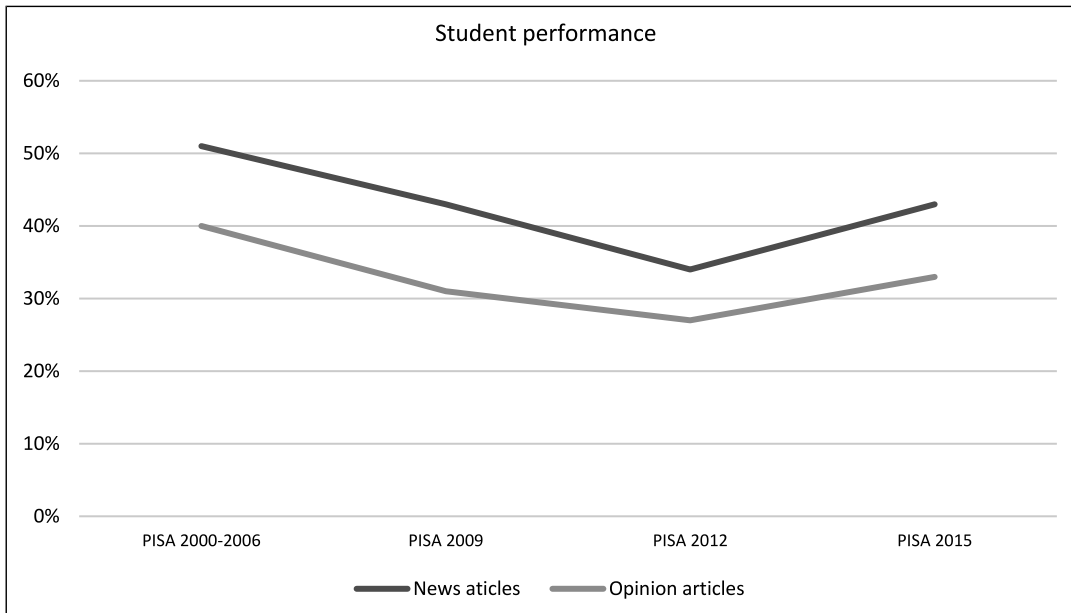
**Figure 4.** Identification of the main themes in PISA and in the analysed media.

*Student performance.* As expected, the theme of student performance was present in the great majority of articles (93%), and 39% of the total of 1253 quotations. In both journalistic genres (news and opinion), this theme was discussed most after the first, second and third PISA cycles (2000–2006). It was less discussed after PISA 2009, and even less after PISA 2012, reversing the curve after the PISA 2015 results were published. Although the intensity of the theme’s discussion followed the same tendency in both journalistic genres throughout the timeframe, student performance was consistently more discussed in the news articles than in the opinion articles.

In comparison, student performance was discussed in the news articles by focusing on describing how the students performed in PISA and in maths, sciences and reading literacy, with student performance framed as ‘poor/bad’ (2001–2006 PISA cycles), and as ‘improved/good’ (2009, 2012, 2015 PISA cycles) (Figure 5).

In the opinion articles, after the survey’s three initial cycles, the students’ poor/bad PISA performance was highlighted, but the main focus was on criticising the passivity with which the poor Portuguese performance in PISA 2000 was received by the XIV<sup>5</sup> government (1999–2002) as simply unsurprising: ‘As the minister of education said, these results are not surprising. But that was not what he should have highlighted. What should be stated is how disturbing they are’ (*Público*, 05.12.2001). After PISA 2009 and 2012 these articles framed the results as improved but remaining below the OECD countries’ average. In addition, after the survey’s 2012 cycle opinion articles strongly criticised the education reforms and cuts in funding made by the minister of education of the XIX government. Finally, after PISA 2015 was published there was a consensus that the performance in PISA (and TIMSS 2015) had improved significantly, surpassing the OECD countries’ average, and even surpassing the Finnish results in TIMSS 2015. The discussion on PISA also emphasised that in Portugal both the number of low achievers decreased, and the number of high performers increased, following the theme and frame as presented in the survey’s report.

*Comparisons.* In both article genres (news and opinion), student performance was compared with other countries, and the theme was therefore simultaneously discussed with the theme of comparisons in most articles, but with a greater incidence in the news articles, where the focus was



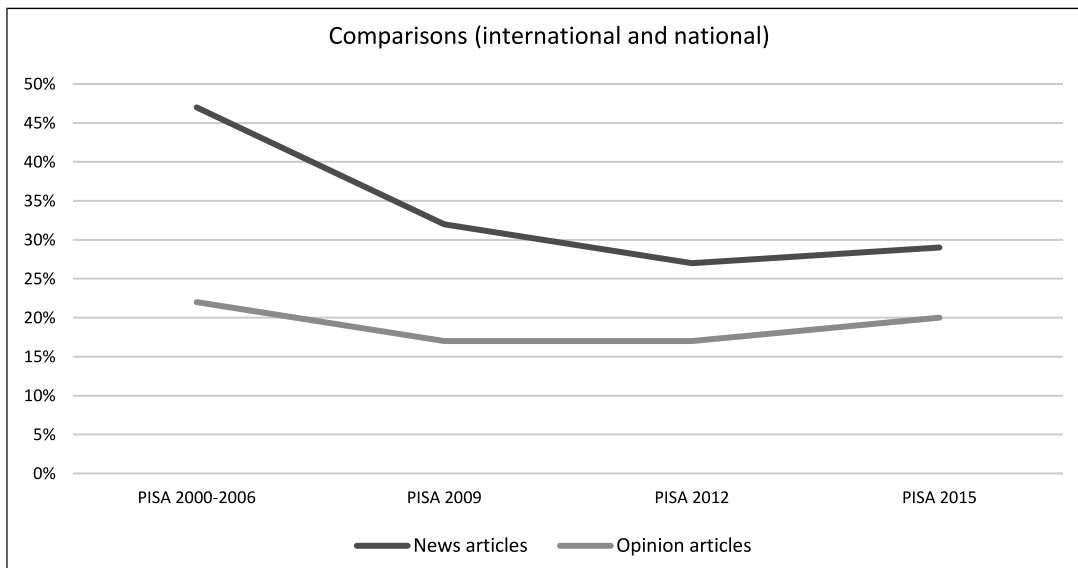
**Figure 5.** Percentage of quotations with the theme of student performance per journalistic genre per PISA cycle.

on describing the PISA results (Figure 6). About 70% of all identified comparisons were in news articles published after the first three PISA cycles (2000–2006).

These comparisons can be national (only about 4% in the total number of articles), mainly comparing regions' performance or performance by gender, but they were mostly international: especially frequent were the comparisons between Portugal and reference societies – mostly the 'OECD countries', but also individual countries like the high-performing Finland or countries or regions in similar positions to Portugal's in the PISA rankings. Both frequently occurred in the same quotation in the news articles (see Table 1 for an overview of the five main external references identified in the articles).

During the first three PISA cycles (2000–2006) the frames used in the discourses with comparisons were mainly negative, highlighting that the Portuguese education system was worse than in other countries or regions ('OECD countries', 'other/several countries,' Finland, Ireland), not only in performance but in Portugal's allocation of more funding than other countries while achieving poorer results, reflecting poor funding management. In addition, while in the opinion articles some authors critically framed the PISA results as needing further and deeper analysis, in the news articles the role of grade retention in students' performance was emphasised, as was the case in other countries with fewer retentions that performed better.

After the PISA 2009 results were published this discourse of failure changed, and both kinds of article framed the results positively as on a par with other countries or regions ('OECD countries', 'other/several countries', or specific countries, especially France, the UK and Germany) or on a par with others (e.g. Spain), and emphasising that Portugal was the country that most improved in PISA 2009. However, the opinion articles also stressed that despite the improvements, Portugal remained below the 'OECD countries' and far from other countries like the so-called 'top performers',



**Figure 6.** Percentage of quotations with the theme of comparisons per journalistic genre per PISA cycle.

Finland, and South Korea. Yet some positive tones framed the Portuguese performance as better than other countries (Spain, Turkey, Greece and sporadically the ‘OECD countries’).

After PISA 2012 results were made public, the comparisons continued to highlight that Portugal was on a par with other countries or regions (e.g. ‘OECD countries’, Luxemburg and France), and better than others (Sweden, Spain, the USA, Spain and the ‘OECD countries’), especially in the news articles. The opinion articles were more moderate and mostly compared the performance of Portuguese students with those in countries considered to have similar results (‘OECD countries’, France, Italy and the UK). At this time, Sweden emerged as a major reference society because of another theme that was much discussed: the minister of education’s policy proposal for increasing support for private schools and families’ choice of school. Interestingly, Sweden was used as a reference society on both sides of the discussion. Those who opposed school choice highlighted Sweden’s poor PISA results as a sign that the structure of the Swedish schooling system did not work. Meanwhile, the actors who supported the idea of expanding private education and school choice argued that the Swedish municipalities with more school choice had the best PISA performance.

In 2016, after the results of the fifth PISA cycle were launched, the comparisons usually emphasised that Portuguese students performed better than in other countries (in both journalistic genres), especially the ‘OECD countries’ and Finland (in both journalistic genres), and in Sweden, France, Cyprus and Denmark in the news articles. Both kinds of article also highlighted the OECD’s declaration that Portugal was the only OECD country that had consistently improved its results since the 2000 PISA cycle.

However, the frames focusing on grade retention were also common: Portugal was one of the OECD countries with higher retention levels despite recent improvements. The impact of grade retention on students’ learning was also described: students without grade retention performed better in PISA; Portugal would be at the top of the rankings if grade retention were not so high; grade retention was useless and had significant social effects; countries without retention performed better in PISA.



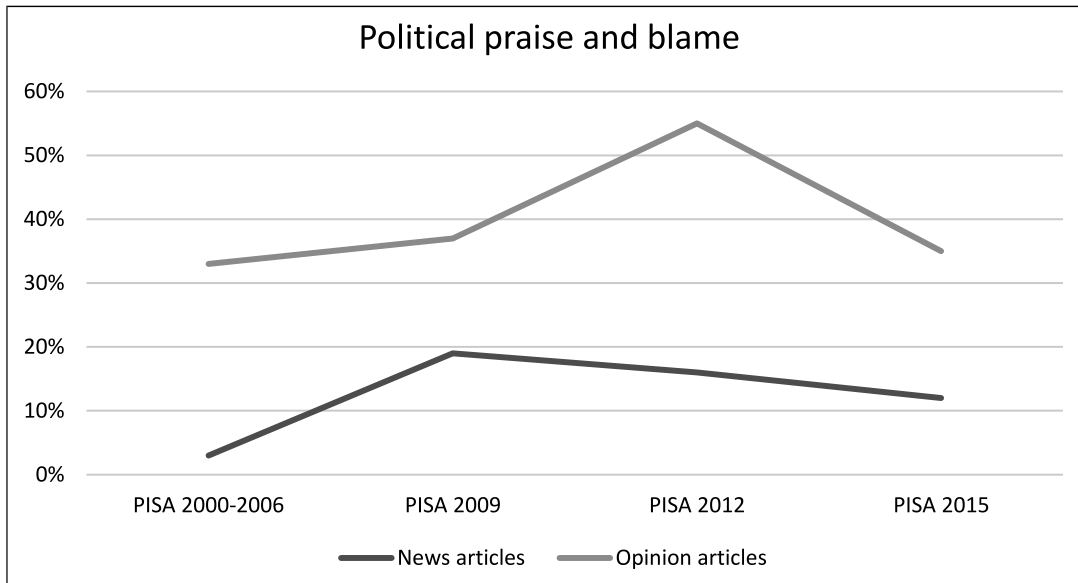
**Table 1.** Top-5 most referenced externalisation targets per PISA cycle.

PISA cycle	Target of externalisation			
	News articles	# of quotations	Opinion articles	# of quotations
PISA 2000–2006	'OECD countries'	56	PISA	16
	PISA	54	OECD	7
	'Other/several countries'	25	'Other/several countries'	5
	OECD	25	'OECD countries'	5
	Finland	17	Finland	3
PISA 2009	PISA	78	PISA	62
	OECD	49	OECD	30
	'OECD countries'	32	'OECD countries'	15
	'Other/several countries'	14	'Other/several countries'	7
	Finland	12	Finland	5
PISA 2012	PISA	53	PISA	32
	'OECD countries'	24	OECD	10
	OECD	17	TIMSS	9
	Sweden	7	Sweden	6
	'Asian countries/regions'	7	'EU countries'	4
	USA	7	'Other/several countries'	4
PISA 2015	PISA	46	PISA	80
	'OECD countries'	20	TIMSS	22
	'Other/several countries'	9	'OECD countries'	18
	OECD	7	'Other/several countries'	12
	TIMSS	6	OECD	10

*Political praise and blame games.* This theme's constant presence is unsurprising, because the political dynamics were inherently controversial, and the media was a central means of communication between the political system and the public. PISA and other external references were politicised by diverse political and social actors, becoming useful authoritative tools in the legitimisation of arguments that often opposed each other, especially after PISA 2009 and the publication of the survey's subsequent cycles (Figure 7).

This theme was identified in 289 quotations of the total 1253. The great majority was in the opinion articles (73%), revealing the strong tendency of the authors of this journalistic genre to refer to PISA results, IOs, and reference societies in political games of blame and praise. Until 2010 the reactions of the governments to the survey results were infrequent, and the comments on government reactions, arguments and decisions also remained minimal. Nevertheless, this theme was identified in 24 quotations in the opinion articles, focusing mainly on criticising the XIV government's apathetic reactions to the poor Portuguese results in PISA 2000.

After PISA 2009 and subsequent PISA cycles, the political blame and praise game increased and remained strong, only declining after the PISA 2015 results were published (Figure 7). The PISA results were discussed in 55% of the opinion articles published after the survey's 2012'. The survey, the organisation that developed it – the OECD – and some of its participant countries or regions, fed political discourses which reduced present and past governments' actions to three simple arguments: positive/good; negative/bad; or insufficient. Arguments framing the past and present governments positively emerged from these governments' members and their supporters, and each attributed the reasons for the improvements in the PISA results and the education system in general to their own



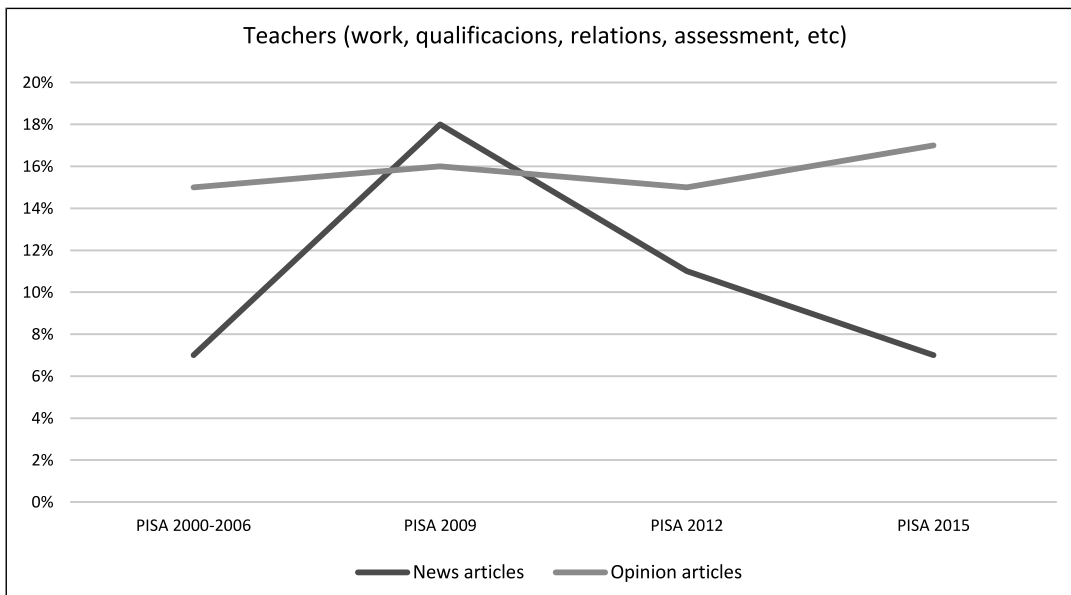
**Figure 7.** Percentage of quotations with the theme of political praise and blame per journalistic genre per PISA cycle.

policies. When PISA 2012 results were published, Portugal was being financially supported by the Troika – the International Monetary Fund, European Central Bank and European Commission. Education was hit by financial cuts and policy adjustments, which were the main themes related to education discussed in the media. The opinion articles, especially, criticised the minister of education specifically and the government in general and their policies (e.g. reforms in the maths programme, school choice, teacher assessment, vocational education and the track system) were framed as unsuitable, problematic, and even harmful for the continuity of students' improvement, and the quality and efficiency of the education system in general.

For the first time Portuguese students' performance in PISA 2015 surpassed the OECD average, leading to a consensus concerning pride in the students' improvements, and most actors agreed in framing the success in the survey as a result of teachers' good work and the continuity of the policies of the various governments in the last two decades. However, some voices in the opinion articles preferred to focus on criticising the ex-ministers of education and their claims that their reforms alone were those that had led to the improvements in student performance.

*Teachers.* Themes related to teachers, their work, qualifications and relations, among others, were also constantly present in the media discussions. In the analysed opinion articles, the theme remained equally prominent throughout the timeframe, with a slight intensification after PISA 2015. In contrast, these themes remained relatively separate from the main agenda in the news articles, apart from after the publication of the PISA 2009 results (see Figure 8).

Between the 2000 and 2006 PISA cycles the news articles only sporadically focused on the theme of teachers. When they did, they reproduced policymakers' and OECD justifications that teachers influenced student performance not only through their practices and their qualifications, but also through the relations they developed with students and parents. Teacher's degrees should therefore be improved, while student teachers should already have a



**Figure 8.** Percentage of quotations with themes related to teachers per journalistic genre per PISA cycle.

good number of practice hours in schools, and co-teaching practices should be put in place. In contrast, the opinion articles, where the theme was more frequent, engaged in a critique of the government's justification of poor student performance with teachers' poor qualifications and work practices.

In 2010 the discussion of this theme saw a spike in the news articles. It was present in 18% of the quotations identified during the period, slightly surpassing the opinion articles, which remained at 16%. This reflected the fact that after years of conflict with teachers, mainly with regard to their recruitment and assessment processes, the XVIII government (2009–2011), whose composition was in part the same as the XVII government (but with several different ministers, including the minister of education), intensively acknowledged that teachers were the main reason for the good improvements in PISA 2009. Instead of being appreciated, this attitude was often criticised as a political move, especially in the opinion articles, which also emphasised the need to respect teaching as a career.

After the PISA 2012 results were published the focus on teacher issues decreased and changed slightly. The minister of education of the XIX government (2011–2015) was accused of disrespecting teachers and worsening the relations between the government and teachers, particularly through the new strategy of teaching assessment that would include an exam to gain access to a career in teaching. The reforms in the maths curriculum that had led to the good results in PISA 2009 were highly criticised by teachers, who framed it as not being child-focused, on the contrary, it was too demanding and uninteresting for the children.

In 2016 the good performance of the Portuguese students in both PISA and TIMSS 2015 significantly reduced the conflicts between teachers and the government. It was now agreed that such improvements were to a great extent the result of teachers' good work and improvements in their qualifications. The news articles highlighted the need to increase school democracy by involving teachers and other school actors in its management, especially with the new system in which

a director, instead of a board, was responsible for school management. No significant differences between the journalistic genres can be seen here.

Interestingly, most of the discussed themes focused on identifying problems, or to some extent on referring to education policies and practices to justify the existence of these problems, or the presented student performance. Only rarely were concrete solutions offered to improve the education system in general or the students' performance specifically. It is also noteworthy that in many instances the themes pushed by the media strongly followed what was highlighted by the OECD reports – for example, teachers' work and qualifications in 2000–2006, or the impacts of grade retention and early dropouts on students' learning after the publication of the PISA 2015 results. We believe this reveals the OECD's influence on the Portuguese print media, which appears to confirm the organisation's role as an agenda setter which other researchers (e.g. Mahon and McBride, 2009; Martens, 2007; Sellar and Lingard, 2013) have identified in previous research.

Nevertheless, although these themes may have been spread by the OECD's own agenda, the frames through which they were discussed were not a simple reproduction of the IO's position. Various media actors discussed these themes using frames to legitimise their policy choices and ideological positions (often promoting specific party agenda). A good example of this strategic framing is that after PISA 2009 was published the OECD underlined that the Portuguese improvements were related to a string of policies of recent decades, while the XVIII government's (2009–2011) prime minister still focused only on the government's own policies (going back only 5 years if the XVII government is included) and argued that the OECD confirmed the benefits of these policies in improving the education system and student performance. The following statement of this prime minister illustrates this well: 'An international organisation now confirms the fairness of all the reforms we have undertaken' (*Expresso*, 11.12.2010).

## Conclusions

In this article we used thematisation (Luhmann, 1996) and frame analysis (Entman, 1993) to analyse how externalisations to world situations (Schriewer, 1990) made in the Portuguese print media contributed to the selection and framing of certain themes in education between 2001 and 2017. This analysis demonstrated that externalisation to world situations can help highlight specific themes in education and support a multiplicity of discourses constructing these education themes through different perspectives, depending on the observer's stance. In the analysed Portuguese print media education was mostly discussed through a small number of themes that gained more importance at specific moments, closely following the themes in the OECD agenda, thus constructing a very reduced reality of the education system. These constructions were further simplified through a broad range of perspectives, depending on who the observer was, and what her/his views and agenda were.

The main themes on the media agenda were student performance, comparisons, political praise and blame games, and teachers were analysed, and a diversity of frames was identified. Our analysis revealed that although the themes discussed by the media were relatively constant during the 2001–2017 timeframe, Portuguese students' performance in PISA seemed to affect the prominence of the themes in the media agenda, and the frames that were applied to them. It is possible to identify three overall tones in the discourse that dominate the majority of arguments presented in the analysed articles: a) the poor student performance in PISA 2000, 2003 and 2006 led to an unanimity in *discourses of failure*; b) the improvements in performance in PISA 2009 and 2015 resulted in the prominence of *discourses of achievement*; c) the stagnation of the Portuguese PISA results in 2012 that coincided with the social and political upheaval resulting from the financial crisis, and its related policy adjustments and cuts to public spending on education by the XIX government (2011–2015),

gave rise to an intensification of *discourses of crisis*. While one can argue that these discourses were already dominant before the survey's results were published, our analysis suggests that the publication of each PISA cycle results offers an opportunity to print media collaborators to expound on their favourite themes.

The media, therefore, earns the opportunity to perform its two main duties: to manage contingency with the aim of reducing the complexity of the social world and to couple with its environment and with other social systems – for example, political and public opinion systems. Indeed, we suggest that the combined process of thematising and framing functions as a mechanism for the double reduction of complexity, through which the public is influenced to focus on some education themes instead of others, and to interpret these themes through specific perspectives. External references (mostly to PISA and other references related to the survey such as the OECD and PISA participating countries or regions – most often the broad reference to 'OECD countries') become convenient tools that are used in arguments that attempt to achieve this double reduction of complexity and insert particular issues into the public agenda as urgently in need of action.

Moreover, a substantial amount of political criticism gained a louder voice after the publication of each round of PISA results, especially in the opinion articles after 2009. External references were politicised and used in the discussions to focus on assessing the performance of present and past governments and their education reforms, in which political actors most frequently attributed the improvements verified in the students' performance to their own policies – and even at times appropriated policies that were already implemented when they entered government, or that were not yet implemented when the PISA survey took place.

Externalisations to world situations are mechanisms that offer the resources of 'knowledge' and 'evidence' that previous research demonstrates have become volatile and mouldable to the needs of the speaker (e.g. Santos and Kauko, 2020; Santos, 2021). The growing number of opinion articles being published gave voice to an increasing number of social and political actors to express their opinions and bring to the public debate a variety of education themes. In the analysed articles, these voices defined problems, made judgements, and sporadically presented solutions, expressing their own perspectives (mainly regarding comparisons among students' performance at the national and international level, teachers' work and qualifications, and political praise and blame games). In doing so, they injected constructions of the education system into the public space that attempted to earn the support of public opinion. Furthermore, these social and political actors did so by implicitly adopting the OECD/PISA categories, as in the case of news articles, within the field of the possibilities and expectations that the results (including their assumptions and analytical tables) set (Carvalho, 2012; Dale and Robertson, 2014). It seems PISA has a chain of moments of de-politicisation-re-politicisation, the former relying on the universalism of expert knowledge with the aim of legitimising governance by numbers and comparison, and the latter on the use of externalisation to world situations with the aim of legitimising distinct understandings of education.

In its focus on the Portuguese print media this paper's analysis is strongly contextualised and therefore cannot be generalised. Yet the analysis dialogues with and combines two growing bodies of research: education research concerned with the reception and effects of global elements such as ILSAs, IOs and practices and policies of reference societies in local/national policy discussions (e.g. Carvalho et al., 2017; Elstad 2012; Santos and Kauko, 2020; Saraisky, 2015; Takayama et al., 2013); and communication studies, concerned with opinion formation and using thematisation and frame analysis (e.g. Artieri and Gemini, 2019; Baroutsis and Lingard, 2017; Camphuijsen and Levatino, 2021; Chong and Druckman, 2010; Crow and Lawlor, 2016). Indeed, our analysis demonstrates that the media provides fertile ground for

externalisation to world situations. As the social world is becoming increasingly complex, media actors need more authoritative elements to legitimise their arguments, and externalisations provide such elements. This article therefore makes a twofold contribution in offering greater understanding of the entanglements between the global and the local in policymaking and illustrating the usefulness of combining thematisation theory and frame analysis in analysing the media's role in shaping public opinion.

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### **Notes**

1. News articles are articles presenting in first-hand the PISA results without clear presence of the opinion of the articles' authors. These articles might also present quotations from political and social actors, but do not present the writer's opinion or judgement about these comments.
2. Opinion articles present PISA results and use these to discuss other education issues beyond the survey results. These texts clearly reflect the author's opinions on these themes.
3. Categories created beforehand: author; journalistic genre; theme/problem; general tone of the article; article's main arguments/ideas; references to other countries/regions; reference to international actors and tools; function of the reference; tone of the reference; PISA centrality; reasons influencing students' results; solutions to identified problems; figures and images.
4. Main theme: an analysis or description of PISA, its results, and the students' performance in the survey are the article's focus; Central: PISA, its results, and the students' performance in the survey are not the article's focus. Nevertheless, the article uses the survey and its results as the main source of authority to legitimise arguments; Secondary: PISA, its results, and the students' performance in the survey are not the article's focus, but it is mentioned in support of the argument, and other sources may also be used; Light mention: PISA, its results, and the students' performance in the survey are not the article's focus, and it is only mentioned once in passing, without any further information about the survey, or in articles that discuss other issues besides education (for example, in an article analysing the year that was ending, the prime minister claimed his government's good education reforms were reflected in the improvements in PISA among Portuguese students).
5. In the Portuguese political system, governments are identified with roman numbers.

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## **Appendix I**

### **Portuguese scores in PISA 2000–2015.**

	Maths	Science	Reading
PISA 2000	454	459	470
PISA 2003	466	468	478
PISA 2006	466	474	472
PISA 2009	487	493	489
PISA 2012	487	489	488
PISA 2015	492	501	498

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