

Chapter 21

Pulling the Strings of the Education Market: Private and Governmental Interests in Indicator Inflation and Deflation



Tiago Neves and Gil Nata

Abstract In a world increasingly governed by numbers, education has become both a marketplace and a battlefield for accountability. This chapter examines how governmental and private educational actors, incentivized by market rationales, manipulate statistics to serve their interests. Drawing on the Portuguese context, we scrutinize both private schools' systematic grade inflation and the governmental deflation of given performance indicators that go against the official narrative on educational progress. Combining the statistical analysis of relevant indicators and an examination of processes underlying the social construction of education statistics, we seek to shed light on how numbers are organizationally produced. The findings reveal a disturbing dynamic: while grade inflation in private schools benefits their clientele and reinforces inequities, data manipulation by governmental agencies obscures underperformance in compensatory education, leading to widened gaps for disadvantaged students. That is, both situations perpetuate inequality under the guise of meritocracy and accountability. Further, we found that, despite their often-stated harmful consequences, the absence of high-stakes assessments during the COVID-19 pandemic amplified unchecked grade inflation, revealing their complex role as both a trigger for malpractice and a safeguard for equity. This chapter calls for a critical fine-tuning of educational evaluation systems that neither romanticizes nor vilifies quantification, but rather—acknowledging its dual potential for transparency and manipulation—seeks to embed it within a more ethical, justice-oriented framework. Ultimately, the global business of education must move beyond impression management to confront systemic inequities, considering the role of 'powerful knowledge' in the promotion of inclusivity and fairness.

T. Neves (✉)

CIIE and University of Porto, Porto, Portugal

e-mail: tiago@fpce.up.pt

G. Nata

CIIE and University of Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro, Vila Real, Portugal

Introduction¹

We currently live in a metric society (Mau, 2019), increasingly governed by numbers (Rose, 1991). This expanding measurement culture has had a deep impact on educational practices and processes (Biesta, 2009): from rankings (Sauder & Espeland, 2009) and the associated “terrors of performativity” (Ball, 2003) to the role played by International Large-Scale Assessments in educational policies, curriculum, and pedagogy (Addey et al., 2017). A “numerocratic power-knowledge regime” emerges (Angermüller, 2010) as we witness the growth of a “cult of quantification” (Mau, 2019). As a social technology applied to the management of human societies, quantification creates what Hamann (2020) calls a ‘numerocratic panopticism’, a phenomenon based on three interrelated phenomena: (1) the audit explosion (Power, 1999), with its emphasis on accountability (Espeland & Sauder, 2016); (2) the intensification of the collection, production, and analysis of numerical data, from the individual to the State and global levels; (3) the massive transformations in communication, data production and storage brought about by current information technologies. This emerging numerocratic panopticism, unlike Bentham’s classical panopticon (2011), is multi-centered, non-spatial and open-purpose (Hamann, 2020). In it, everyone is subject to everyone else’s gaze (Angermüller, 2010). This numerocratic panopticism, driven by the use of data and indicators-based methods of evaluating and monitoring, is instrumental to business everywhere—including the global business of education—as it materializes in the well-known mantras that “What gets measured gets managed” and “What gets measured gets done”.

In this chapter we explore how, incentivised by market rationales, some educational actors adhere to this framework, even if that requires gaming the numbers. Specifically, the chapter focuses on the ways in which market-oriented, private school interests operate within this framework to inflate indicators—namely the grades at the end of secondary schooling, critical for access to higher education in many countries, including Portugal—to benefit their clients and, ultimately, themselves. In the same vein, and in line with the acknowledgement—central to this Volume—that the ‘global business of education’ is not confined within the sphere of private schooling and interests, but rather refers to a widespread network of activities wherein a diverse array of educational services and products are produced, traded, and consumed, this chapter also addresses the ways in which the official, governmental narrative anchors itself on the manipulation and deflation of selected indicators to create the impression that the educational system is improving—even when it is not. Therefore, this chapter addresses both meanings of the word ‘business’ explored in this book: that is, on the one hand, activities, namely

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commercial ones, oriented to profitability and, on the other hand, collective commitments and ‘matters of public concern’ (Simons & Masschelein, 2014).

Methodologically, the chapter encompasses both a statistical analysis of relevant indicators and an examination—through an articulation between statistical and documental analysis—of processes underlying the social construction of education statistics. To be sure, we are aware that the numerocratic panopticon, whose often harmful consequences we criticize in this chapter, has been central to our careers as researchers, not only as a subject of analysis, but also because it provides us with the very elements used to critique it. Hence, the issue lies not so much in the continued production of vast amounts of data itself, but rather in how we relate with and use them.

This chapter begins by exploring the diverging reactions to the contemporary numerocratic power-knowledge regime. Next, based on empirical cases, it examines how statistics and society mutually constitute themselves and the roles that both private and governmental interests may play in that process. It concludes by arguing that, in a polarized world that fosters divisive debates that set equity against excellence—often framed as manifestations of an opposition between public and private interests—it is crucial to neither sacrifice the pursuit of powerful knowledge nor disregard the imperative for greater inclusivity and fairness.

The Roles Numbers Play

Certainly, the emergence of the numerocratic power-knowledge regime generates diverging reactions. On the one hand, objectivity (Best, 2012), comparability across space and time, and the ability to create hierarchies (Sauder & Espeland, 2009) are often indicated as advantages in the use of numerical data for understanding, monitoring, and governing the educational world (Schleicher, 2017). Given that this kind of accountability systems and governance strategies feed on data, they are relentless in the creation of ever more data. Ultimately, this gives rise to the datafication of education, which refers to the “collection of data on all levels of educational systems (individual, classroom, school, region, state, international), potentially about all processes of teaching, learning and school management” (Jarke & Breiter, 2019: 1). If handled properly, this massive amount of data may provide a wealth of relevant information to agents in a wide range of positions, from researchers to teachers and educationalists, all the way through to political decision makers. As argued by Umbach (2022: 445), the “link between statistics, data and politics turns quantitative evidence into a central policy instrument”. On the other hand, opponents of the current status quo argue that statistics are, *per se*, incapable of making sense of the richness and complexity of the educational world (Teodoro, 2022). Afonso summarizes this stance when he argues that ‘not everything that counts in education is measurable or comparable’ (2009). Therefore, disregard of this situation and, instead, an overwhelming reliance on exclusively numerical data necessarily leads to incomplete understandings of the educational reality. Further, it may sometimes

happen that the measured performance becomes overshadowed by the very act of measurement, generating arithmomanic senselessness (Cortez, 2023). To further complicate matters, numeric accountability apparatuses, such as the ubiquitous rankings, while often intended to be neutral, in practice interact with—if not become a constitutive part of—the very *reality* they aim to assess (Neves et al., 2012, 2014). Finally, numerocratic panopticism typically takes numbers at their face value and is largely blind to the fact that they are the product of organizational processes. This paves the way for behaviours that have been called anything from “strategic responses” (in the benevolent approach of, for example, Ehren & Swanborn, 2012) to outright “gaming” and “corruption” (in the not so benevolent approaches of, for example, Petour et al., 2018 and Georgiou, 2021). And, at a more terrifying level, numerocratic panopticism can be regarded as a tool of surveillance capitalism, and therefore as an opponent of democracy itself (Zubbof, 2022: 2).

This chapter, then, addresses the roles numbers play not only *ex post facto* (that is, after numbers become statistics, data, information), but also *ex ante* (that is, how those statistics are organizationally produced, decisions are made or, indeed, how numbers are played—pun intended). Only by shedding light on the—often concealed—methodological and organizational procedures involved in the creation of educational statistics will it be possible to add another layer of critical analysis to the role numbers currently play in education and educational institutions. Departing from—but going beyond—the specific empirical cases addressed in this chapter, the overarching question framing our approach is this: how do statistics and society mutually constitute themselves (Espeland & Stevens, 2008; Thévenot, 2011; Asselineau et al., 2022)? We will attempt to provide answers without falling prey neither to cognitive naïveté (i.e., an unquestioning faith in numbers as purveyors of objective, absolute truth) nor scholarly cynicism (i.e. a dismissal of numbers as meaningless manipulations).

Private Interests in the Business of Education: Inflation and Profitability

Around 2010, the authors of this chapter began their research into a widely spread rumour in the Portuguese society, at the time empirically supported only by anecdotal evidence: that independent private, fee-paying secondary schools, predominantly attended by students from wealthier families, engaged in grade inflation to enhance their students’ chances of accessing higher education. To put it simply, we wanted to confirm whether the rumour was true or not. This led us on a path that was both scientifically fruitful and socio-politically lively. Indeed, not only did we publish several papers (e.g., Neves et al., 2012, 2014, 2016) and did plenty of presentations on the subject, but the topic proved quite engaging for a number of relevant social actors. Indeed, our research made the front pages of national papers and the opening of news programmes in TV and radio channels. Further, after we presented our work to the Portuguese Parliament, the Ministry of Education started taking

measures against grade inflation—namely increased vigilance and disciplinary action against schools that repeatedly engaged in it. Finally, the General Directorate for Education and Science Statistics created what they named the ‘indicator of the alignment of internal grades’ informed by our methodology and findings; this indicator is currently used in the official infoESCOLAS portal² to assess schools’ grade inflation and make those data publicly available.

In our work, grade inflation is defined as the positive difference, relative to the national average differences, between the score awarded by schools to any given student in each subject and the score that same student obtains in the national exam on that same subject (Nata et al., 2014). Grade inflation is therefore defined in a clear fashion and can be calculated by anyone with Internet access and statistical know-how, simply using the grades from schools and national exams. In Portugal, anonymized databases with these data are made freely available online by the Ministry of Education. This means we were able to conduct our analysis for the population of national exams and not for a sample, a feature which grants unusual robustness to our findings. It is important to highlight that national exams are subject to blind assessment—contrary, of course, to what happens in internal grading. Also, the grades obtained in national exams typically amount to something between 35% and 50% of the application score to higher education; that is, they weigh heavily in admission to higher education.

Our work, which encompasses 10 consecutive years, has shown clearly that private schools grade inflate more than public schools. There are at least three dimensions worth highlighting regarding this phenomenon:

1. there is an eery repetitiveness in the patterns of grade inflation throughout the years, almost as if we were analysing a cyclical natural phenomenon rather than a recurring social process;
2. those patterns reveal that grade inflation in private schools is not equally distributed across internal grades. Instead, grade inflation is higher for internal scores between 14 and 16 points (out of 20); that is, for those students who got good but not excellent grades, and who may more clearly benefit from a competitive edge from having their grades inflated in their application to higher education. Those students’ advantage will (on average) amount to almost 1 point (out of 20) in comparison with students coming from public schools;
3. a 0.5-point increase in a candidate’s admission score to higher education may boost their position in the access list by 50–60% (we analysed this impact in 3 consecutive years) in the most competitive courses, 20–30% in moderately competitive ones, and around 20% even in the least competitive courses. For the most competitive courses, a 1-point increase results in an 80–90% (depending on the year of the analysis) leap in the access list (Neves et al., 2016). As mentioned above, students from private schools benefit, on average, from nearly 1 point in grade inflation relative to public school students; however, some private schools systematically inflate grades at a much higher rate, sometimes amounting to 3 points.

²<https://infoescolas.medu.pt>

The conjunction of all these features may be summarized like this: on average, there is a systematic unfair advantage of private school students over those from public schools, an advantage which in most extreme cases is downright outrageous. The systematicity of this unfair advantage leads—particularly in some schools—to very plausible suspicions of illicit behaviour. As a result of this state of affairs, public and governmental attention grew and, in 2020, the Ministry of Education filed 57 disciplinary actions against schools (mostly private schools) for engaging in grade inflation (PÚBLICO, May 30, 2020). In 2021, the pedagogical director of one of those schools was suspended and the school ordered to close for one year (although the sentence for school closure was later suspended) (PÚBLICO, July 9, 2021).

However, this drive towards increased surveillance and accountability suffered a blow during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the school years of 2019/2020 and 2020/2021 (and, to a lesser extent, in 2021/2022), students were no longer required to do 4 national exams to complete secondary education. Instead, they were only required to do national exams in case they wanted to pursue their studies in higher education and, in that case, they were only required to undergo examination in the subjects required by the courses they wished to apply to—in most cases, 1 or 2 exams would suffice. Thus, internal grades were the only requirement to complete secondary education and those who wished to apply to higher education could do so without having to undergo as many exams as in the past. The softening and/or outright removal of an external checking device such as the national exams immediately led to an increase in internal grades, particularly in private schools. This phenomenon is in accord with what Freitas found for a similar, yet less impactful, situation: in his study, he shows that “the introduction of high-stakes exams leads to a change in teacher scores distribution, namely a significantly higher share of failing scores and a lower percentage of higher scores” (2023: 1). Regarding the case of the changes due to the COVID-19 pandemic, data from the General Directorate of Education and Science Statistics show this phenomenon clearly.

Table 21.1 reveals that, in 2021, teachers from private schools graded 73.1% of their students as Excellent (that is, with a grade 18 or above) in subjects that did not have an associated national exam; in public schools, that proportion was ‘only’ 49.7%. Further, it reveals a nearly 15 p.p. increase in such gradings in private schools since the pre-pandemic period, a raise which surely cannot be attributed to mere coincidence. Interestingly, the same phenomenon is observable in public schools, where there was an increase of almost 13 p.p. in such gradings since the pre-pandemic period. At the same time, in 2021, in subjects with an associated national exam, private schools graded 25.8% of their students as Excellent, and public schools 14.8%. That is, there is a reduction of approximately 2/3 in Excellent internal grades for subjects with an associated national exam. Of course, these are not only statistical abnormalities: they are the visible face of an approach to assessment and pedagogy that capitalizes on the fact that market incentives have become a core feature of the education system, turning students (and their families) into consumers. And, truth be told, while private schools excel in grading their students

Table 21.1 Distribution of internal scores by subject and school type

School year	Public schools				Private schools					
	Number of students	Average score	Mode	Internal scores between 15–17	Internal scores 18 and above	Number of students	Average score	Mode	Internal scores between 15–17	Internal scores 18 and above
Subjects without associated national exam										
2018	146,900	16.4	17	41.4%	36.8%	22,400	17.6	20	30.0%	59.5%
2019	148,356	16.5	17	41.5%	37.5%	19,073	17.7	20	28.3%	61.7%
2020	142,703	16.7	18	40.6%	41.6%	18,812	17.9	20	26.4%	65.5%
2021	144,349	17.1	18	37.6%	49.7%	18,944	18.3	20	21.9%	73.1%
Subjects with associated national exam										
2018	285,477	14.0	12	28.7%	12.4%	42,420	15.2	16	31.0%	26.2%
2019	273,898	14.1	12	29.0%	13.2%	38,505	15.6	18	32.7%	30.5%
2020	282,785	14.3	13	30.7%	14.5%	38,335	15.7	17	34.0%	31.3%
2021	141,824	14.4	14	31.9%	14.8%	12,913	15.4	16	36.0%	25.8%

Source: Base ENES (DGEEC)

as Excellent when there is no control exerted by national exams, public schools seem to have engaged in playing the same game, although at a more modest rate. In our view, then, these data indicate a clear need for the introduction of external accountability to prevent schools and teachers from embarking in a flywheel regarding grade assignment.

Therefore, contrary to what is suggested by Petour et al. (2018), while high stakes (i.e., national exams) may indeed have negative impacts upon educational agents and processes (e.g. teaching to the test, narrowing the curriculum, student anxiety, teacher exhaustion, conflicting demands on educators' roles), they are not exclusively harmful. The role of high-stakes is more complex, as they may operate both as triggers for pedagogical smothering, educational actors' distress and gaming the system, but also—as seen in the case above—as mechanisms for enhancing social justice and curbing malpractice, in addition to the more obvious incentive for students to perform well (Hvidman & Sievertsen, 2021). Therefore, we find it rather simplistic—and unfair—to regard high stakes as the epitome of or most fitting mechanism for educational activities driven by profitability. Indeed, grading itself—particularly externally unchecked, not blind grading—is more than a pure reflection of academic performance. Instead, grading—and grade inflation—are the result of power struggles, of strategic and moral choices that echo “uneasy tensions between pedagogy and marketing, the state and the market, a focus on processes or a focus on products” (Neves et al., 2014: 3). The global business of education, then, as we have just summarized, is inseparable from the business of grading.

Governmental Interests in the Global Business of Education: Deflation and Impression Management

Compensatory education—that is, the programs and policies designed to mitigate the disadvantages faced by underprivileged students and the inequities in access to educational opportunities—is a classic matter of public concern in education. Framed by our own defence of the values underpinning compensatory education, around 2014, the authors of this chapter—alongside Hélder Ferraz—delves into the under researched topic—surely in Portugal, but also elsewhere—of its effectiveness. Specifically, we assessed whether schools integrated in the major Portuguese compensatory education programme (TEIP, acronym for Education Territories for Priority Intervention) were successful in narrowing the gap in students' final exam scores at the end of secondary education when compared to their peers in non-TEIP schools. Regrettably, we found that TEIP schools had not achieved this compensatory objective; on the contrary, the gap had slightly widened (Ferraz et al., 2019). This means that the disadvantaged students covered by the TEIP programme are now slightly further behind their more advantaged non-TEIP peers regarding access to higher education and, consequently, further away from the so-called ‘social elevator’. This problem is further aggravated by three situations. First, Portuguese secondary schools with higher proportions of disadvantaged students have, on average,

a higher number of students in vocational pathways than more advantaged secondary schools (47% versus 22%) (OECD, 2018). Second, and in line with this, another study supervised by the authors of this chapter has shown that students who attend upper secondary education in TEIP schools are 16% more likely to do it in vocational courses than their counterparts in non-TEIP schools, who have a stronger preference for regular scientific-humanistic courses (Correia, 2022). This is problematic because, although both regular and vocational courses allow students to pursue higher education, vocational courses have much lower transition rates into higher education. Indeed, between 2010 and 2020, the average proportion of students enrolled in higher education a year after having completed upper secondary education in scientific-humanistic courses was 79%, compared to only 7% for vocational programs (DGEED, 2020; Amaral, 2022). Third, there has been a reduction of approximately 20% in the number of national exams—essential for access to higher education—taken in TEIP schools compared to non-TEIP schools (Ferraz et al. 2019). The combination of all these indicators strongly suggests that students from TEIP schools are becoming further estranged from higher education. Considering that, in Portugal, the average earnings' premium for tertiary-educated full-time full-year workers is 17 p.p. higher than the OECD average, it becomes clear that the reduction of socio-educational asymmetries and the social mobility of the most disadvantaged students is in jeopardy (OECD, 2024).

In addition to these issues in academic performance and student allocation to educational pathways, there are also difficulties resulting from the curricular and pedagogical organization of upper secondary vocational education. To begin with, to apply to higher education, students in vocational courses may be required to undertake national exams in subjects they did not take or show proficiency in contents they barely touched upon. That is, there is a clear mismatch between the curricular requirements of vocational courses and those of national exams, which adds another layer of disadvantage to students coming from vocational courses, that is, to already disadvantaged students. Although Decree-Law n.º 11/2020, April 2, created special conditions and quotas for access to higher education for students coming from vocational courses, the truth is that while such students amount to around 35% of the population in upper secondary education, those quotas amount to less than 2% of the vacancies available in public higher education. Also, most of those vacancies are in less competitive courses and in polytechnic institutes rather than in universities—yet two more layers in the reproduction of inequalities. Finally—and importantly, because it is a more procedural, less socially structural feature—there are differences in the assessment in vocational courses and scientific-humanistic courses. Vocational courses tend to have a more practical, labour market-oriented approach, with more diversified assessments, including professional aptitude tests and practical projects, which evaluate skills applied in the labour context. This leaves students ill-prepared to face the challenges of national exams. Moreover, as seen above, the typical vocational education student is often characterized by a history of poor academic performance and a disadvantaged socio-economic background. This profile, combined with the influence of teachers, school counselling services, and social support institutions in steering these students toward vocational

pathways, contributes to the perception of vocational education as a lesser alternative (Barbosa, 2023). This is further reinforced by the frequent perception that comparatively less rigorous assessment methods are used in professional courses, also as a way to ensure that students do complete them. The fact that vocational education students, contrary to students in the scientific-humanistic track, do not need to take national exams to complete secondary education is often seen as an example of this. That is, the learning outcomes and modes of assessment in vocational upper secondary education, while context-sensitive (to an extent, at least) are a bad fit for national exams, which are a crucial component of access to higher education (Vieira, 2018).

Yet, the official approach has been to carefully handpick the indicators to highlight, deflating most—if not all—the problematic issues identified above and avoiding engagement in serious, difficult debate. Below, a few revealing examples of this state of affairs:

1. the official yearly TEIP reports produced by the Ministry of Education,³ aimed at presenting the results of the implementation of the Programme and providing guidelines for the future, seldom compare the results of TEIP and non-TEIP. Given the compensatory nature of the programme, it is hard to fathom why this is so given that it precludes the possibility of producing meaningful comparisons, and thereby assessing the programme's compensatory effectiveness. Further, it inevitably raises the suspicion that, when comparative data are indeed presented, they have been carefully curated to disseminate a positive image;
2. in July 2021, following the publication of a news article⁴ in a major national newspaper about the research conducted by Ferraz during his PhD, him and his supervisors—i.e., the authors of this chapter—were surprisingly and rather violently attacked by the then Secretary of State of Education a few days later in that same newspaper. In a piece titled “In defence of the TEIP programme”,⁵ the Secretary of State lambasted our study, stating—among many other things—that we had relied on a “microsample” and that we were prejudiced against vocational education. Further, he stated that, in the yearly regional and national seminars organized by the schools involved in the TEIP programme, they acknowledge the effectiveness of the TEIP programme. Finally, he indicated that the dropout and retention rate dropped by 13.5% in TEIP schools between 2007 and 2017, far more than the 4% decrease in non-TEIP schools. A couple of days later, we replied, again in the same newspaper, with a piece titled “In defence of the students in TEIP schools”.⁶ To cut a long story short, we clarified that our study relied not on a sample but on the entire population of

³<https://www.dge.mec.pt/avaliacao-1>

⁴<https://www.publico.pt/2021/07/23/sociedade/noticia/programa-escolas-desfavorecidas-falha-objectivo-melhorar-notas-alunos-1971427>

⁵<https://www.publico.pt/2021/07/26/sociedade/opiniao/defesa-programa-teip-1971693>

⁶<https://www.publico.pt/2021/07/29/opiniao/opiniao/defesa-alunos-escolas-teip-1972140/>

relevant cases and that the Secretary of State did not address, much less refute, the main result of the research: that the gap between TEIP and non-TEIP students' scores in the final exams at the end of secondary education had increased slightly. Further, we made reference to a video in which the Secretary of State himself is found stating that "When we compare students from a TEIP school with students from the same socio-economic background in a non-TEIP school, we don't find a huge disparity in results. This should worry us and make us wonder how well we are managing to work with these students in both contexts".⁷ These words are surprising not only because they go against the official discourse, but also because they reveal that the Secretary of State had access to comparative data that had not been made public. Later, we learned—from a confidential source—that the Ministry of Education had conducted a study that reached the same conclusions of our own research, albeit using a different methodology. To put it bluntly: the Ministry had been withholding data. This became apparent through what can arguably be interpreted as a slip of the tongue during a video recorded in a controlled setting—a laudatory meeting about TEIP—where the Secretary of State made a veiled admission of the existence of such data.

3. There can be very reasonable doubts about the reliability of figures presented in crucial educational indicators. One example is the official "dropout and grade retention rate". Indeed, the Portuguese Tribunal de Contas (Court of Auditors) (2020) has been highly critical of the conceptual imprecisions and operational contradictions affecting data collection and processing regarding both grade retention and dropout. Identified problems include varying definitions of dropout across schools (e.g., "exclusion due to absences", "cancellation of enrolment" or "absenteeism"), disorderly data collection forms (which muddle the categories of 'dropout' and 'at risk of dropout'), and inconsistent reporting by schools to different government agencies. The Court of Auditors asserts that this situation "compromises the reliability of the data and makes it impossible to process it properly" (2020: 17). This conceptual and operational fuzziness facilitates 'gaming' the system, as rules are unclear and open to subtle manipulation of statistical methods to meet strategic or political objectives (Georgiou, 2018, 2021).

We hope to have made clear how several strategies—such as handpicking and concealing data, using unreliable and manipulable indicators, resorting to avoiding confrontation—can be used to deflate a number of problematic issues and convey an improved, although distorted, image of the education system. Moreover, implementing modes of assessment that, although covered by a cloak of sensible sensitivity to context, are probably more oriented to serve statistical than educational purposes, is also part of this impression management process.

To be sure, the aspiration to reform evaluation systems to make them more equitable—particularly by enhancing their sensitivity to contextual factors (Gipps & Stobart, 2009; Petour et al., 2018)—is a commendable goal for all those striving

⁷<https://www.dge.mec.pt/eventos>

for a more socially just world. Petour et al. (2018) emphasize that fairness must address access, opportunity, and the culture of the Other, rather than focusing solely on equality in scores or achievement outcomes. Yet, they acknowledge that there are currently no systematic advancements in the field of assessment that address such demands for recognition adequately, despite the fact that there is an extensive and long-standing literature emphasizing the need for that kind of assessment systems.

We agree with the authors above both regarding the need improve assessment mechanisms. Yet, we fear that regarding such transformations as central to solving the problem of educational inequalities grounded on socioeconomic and cultural factors amounts mostly to impression management. While context-sensitive assessments do have merit, especially in reducing immediate harms and in potentially serving as stepping stones toward broader systemic changes, overemphasizing them may ultimately lead basilar inequalities being masqueraded by a coating of modified assessment. Indeed, putting more stress on changes in assessment, namely to include added sensitivity to diversity and context factors, may obfuscate enhancing the access of the underprivileged to the types of knowledge that are more highly regarded in a given time-space. As Gipps and Stobart say, assessment must be acknowledged as a “socially embedded activity” (2009: 106). However, this fact cuts both ways: not only as grounds for defending context-sensitive assessment, but also, as we have shown above, as the context for understanding the pressures (political, statistical, educational) that assessment is subject to.

Our own standpoint on this issue is itself context-bound: it departs from the acknowledgement that—whether we like it or not—education plays a fundamental role in the social distribution of jobs, status and income in our societies. Therefore—again whether we like it or not—societies typically rank different types of knowledge; Michael Young’s notion of *powerful knowledge* comes to mind here, even if we grant that there are different powers at play (Young & Muller, 2013). Certainly, neither Gipps and Stobart nor Petour and colleagues would disagree with this. Our point is not to suggest a dichotomy between context-sensitive assessment and access to powerful knowledge, as such dichotomy would be false. Rather, it is to pinpoint the dangers of resorting to technicalities in assessment to avoid confronting structural inequalities—an analogy to resorting to financial engineering to camouflage economic shortcomings. At its most extreme, this would mean that, rather than metrics serving to highlight structural inequalities in access to knowledge and academic success, they would now be a tool for creating a simulacrum of equality—or, perhaps, becoming the simulacrum itself (Baudrillard, 1995).

Conclusion/Discussion

We hope to have made clear how statistics and society mutually constitute themselves, including in generating the numerocratic panopticon mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. This panopticon is multi-centred and multi-purpose, engulfing

us and turning us into actors in power games played within a rhizomatic network of production, interpretation, and reinterpretation of numbers. In this context, we choose to act with clear objectives in mind: equity and social justice. We take on our roles as researchers within the panopticon consciously and strategically. Hence, we began by simultaneously denouncing and producing numbers to address grade inflation. What once was nothing but a rumour now has scientific grounding, and the authorities are able to take some measures against it. This is ‘business’ in its market-oriented interpretation of profitability.

We used a concrete (Portuguese) example to illustrate what we believe to be the overall dynamics of the behaviour of private interests in the education market. Indeed, despite the need for more scientific literature on grade inflation by private schools, the same phenomenon has been found in other contexts as well (Wikström & Wikström, 2005; Hurwitz & Lee, 2018). The larger implication of our findings seems to be that private actors, while pursuing their own private interests and providing their clients with a rewarding service, tend to introduce serious distortions and injustices in the education arena. Furthermore, education statistics and numbers, such as rankings or internal grades, can easily become co-opted by these actors into their network of private interests. Notable, however, is the fact that it has also been through the production of statistics and numbers, such as grade inflation indicators and corresponding rankings, that policy makers have both been forced and become able to confront the problem. Grade inflation studies have become, therefore, a game changer in the gaming of the educational market, this time in favour of equity and social justice.

This chapter also addressed problems in data availability and use, including problems in assessment. We provided a concrete example of the Portuguese compensatory education programme. Again, this example is, in our view, representative of the inner workings of the global business of education. To be sure, it is not only the Portuguese ruling class that continues to push the narrative of the success of such programme: compensatory Education Programmes are disseminated worldwide and often are the governments’ most meaningful initiatives to curb inequalities in education. Millions have been invested, accompanied by modest studies, mostly qualitative in nature. Meanwhile, the literature keeps questioning the effectiveness of compensatory education and acknowledges the lack of advancements in assessment (Power, 2008; Ferraz et al., 2019). Because governments seem at times more prone to marketing and impression management, the numbers that attempt to gauge disadvantaged students’ learning outcomes (and the fate associated with these) may be hidden and manipulated. The larger implication is that educational governance (local and/or global) has its particular agendas, and they should not be conflated with the public good. In fact, the example provided constitutes, in our view, an epitome of institutional behaviour where the interests of governance conflict directly with the public good. Here, the absence of numbers might be of interest for the political management of public impressions and perceptions. Yet again, the production of numbers and statistics—this time revealing the (widening) gap between schools enrolled in compensatory education and the rest—becomes part

and parcel of the public and scientific perceptions regarding the efficacy of such programmes.

Are we truly able to respond to the needs of the disadvantaged? This is the main question in the ‘business’ of collective commitment. We are ethically obligated to try our best to respond effectively. We argue that perception studies are insufficient. More importantly, we argue that it is crucial for those in the ‘business’ of equity to strategically consider whether, or when, more (or perhaps a better, social justice oriented) panopticon is justified and might even prove useful. Another root in the rhizome. Yet another observation point. If it is ‘business’ for those in charge to conceal or handpick information, it is our ‘business’ to expand the rhizome, to enlarge and improve the panopticon, to provide data in the service of equity. Also to fulfil this objective, the authors of this chapter have recently worked on a project that analysed OECD’s PISA data—an instrument regarded by many as a tool of global neoliberal governance—and used it to answer a simple question: over time, have PISA participating countries been able to improve (at least some) equity indicators? In a nutshell, the answer is that they have not (Enchikova et al. [2024](#), [2025](#)), but the broader and more important point to be made here is that, more than the instrument itself (in this case, PISA assessment and data), it is the use one makes of it that ultimately defines its place in the business of education. PISA can be a piece of the global neoliberal governance machine, but it can also be instrumental for those who are pursuing ways to hold countries responsible for improving their equity.

The million-dollar question, then, is how to combine assessment as a reflection of a given (educational) output and as itself an input into a more socially just world. Whatever answers we offer should bear in mind that, in our contemporary polarized world, the approach of throwing in the towel regarding the possibility of reducing inequity on access to knowledge inadvertently runs the risk of opposing the possession of (powerful) knowledge to the consideration of diversity, making it sound as if it were necessary to emphasize one over the other. It is easy to see how this may open the door to politically charged accusations of easing standards in the name of diversity, thereby fostering divisive debates that pit equity against excellence. Such accusations can quickly diverge attention from the deeper issue at stake here: the structural inequities embedded within social and educational systems and the ways in which assessment practices can be instrumentalized to pursue different—and even opposing—education ‘businesses’, either confronting structural inequities or perpetuating them through impression management and market logics. The challenge, then, is how to more effectively defend and advance equity. We have suggested, providing several concrete examples, that it is possible to articulate an approach that neither sacrifices the pursuit of powerful knowledge nor disregards the imperative for greater inclusivity and fairness. The business of education equity is often hindered by private interests’ ability to produce numerocratic knowledge in their favour. Yet it is precisely for this reason that equity work stands in urgent need of numerocratic knowledge oriented toward the public good. Knowledge is needed for progress, decency for humanity. If we take the view from above, it becomes apparent that, in our polarized world, the very notion of a broadly shared public

good is eroding. At the same time, it is plain to see that both knowledge seeking and the quest for inclusivity remain—and plausibly so—central constitutive dimensions of the ethos of education.

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