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The Turn and the Paths
School External Evaluation in England, France and Switzerland: A Sociological Approach

Xavier Pons*

Abstract
Based on a comparison of school external evaluation processes in three countries (England, France and Switzerland), this article questions the possible quality turn in the governance of European educational systems. Using materials collected through qualitative methods (91 interviews, surveys of literature and observations) during a sociological and exploratory research, it shows that a relatively similar shift to a new set of policies and regulation tools may have a very different political meaning and give birth to very different policy configurations from one educational system to another. It also reveals that in each country references to foreign evidence are relatively rare and highly selective, depending on the domestic political circumstances, interests and frames of analysis of policy actors. Instead of invalidating the theory of a quality turn, the article concludes that the paths taken by each educational system strongly predetermine the forms, stakes and scope of this quality turn and that the main scientific challenge is to think about these two phenomena together.

Keywords: school evaluation, inspection, governance, regulation

Introduction
The term “quality” has been increasingly used in the last two decades in education policy, be it international, national or local. While this term remains largely polysemous, one can observe a growing trend in Europe of directing attention to how to measure, assure, assess and compare performances required by governments from and about schools, Quality Assurance and Evaluation (QAE) is becoming a means of standardising and harmonising education policy and practice (Ozga et al., 2011). This evolution is a consequence of various factors such as the rising influence of international organisations on national education policymaking and their increasing focus on statistical tools and indicators (Henry et al., 2000; Grek, 2010; Normand, 2011), the transformations of the European education space and its soft governance through targets, benchmarks and performance indicators particularly with the Lisbon Strategy (Lawn, 2006), the implementation of new regulation tools at national levels sometimes inspired by the New Public Management doctrine in order to increase the accountability of educational systems (Elmore, 2004) and the evolution of research
in education which has helped both to improve methods and concepts of measurement in education and to understand the current changes to governance in this field (Ball, 2006; Maroy, 2006; Van Zanten, 2011). Taking these evolutions seriously, some researchers and observers were progressively led to call this shift in education policy and educational research “the quality turn”.

Yet the same authors generally recognise that different countries receive and respond to steering through data in different ways (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004; Ozga et al., 2011). More generally, the scientific literature on policy transfers rarely concludes about an “institutional mimesis” (Mény, 1993) but about a hybridisation of practices between international trends and domestic constraints (Dolowitz, 2000; De Jong, Lelenis & Mamadouh, 2002). The reception of transversal, international and supranational messages by actors in educational systems does not lead to their mechanical enforcement, but to their translation according to various factors as shown, for instance, in the first syntheses of some findings of a recent project named Know&Pol on the reception of PISA in different European countries (Pons, 2011). Thus one can wonder if all European countries are experiencing this quality turn of the governance of their educational system, to what extent and how.

Contributing to this questioning, this article compares school external evaluation processes in three European countries (England, France and Switzerland) on the basis of the materials obtained through a two-year exploratory and qualitative research study that I coordinated and which is detailed below (Buisson-Fenet & Pons, 2011). School evaluation can be broadly defined as a reflexive and collective process of the production of feedback on the functioning of schools which allows policy actors to appreciate, in reference to various political values (efficiency, equity, quality, relevance etc.), both their organisation, their results and the effects of the various measures implemented to reform and regulate them or the education they provide to their pupils. External evaluation can be understood as an evaluation conducted by people coming from outside or as an evaluation not commissioned by the school. In this paper, “schools” are schools from primary and lower secondary education (CITE-1 and CITE-2 of the UNESCO’s nomenclature CITE-97).

Studying the school external evaluation process seems particularly relevant when questioning the quality turn for various reasons. Globally, political scientists who deeply analysed the forms and evolution of New Public Management clearly stressed that evaluation was a key principle of this doctrine since, by quantifying performance and measuring the outcomes of public organisations, it is supposed to invite the latter to increase accountability and to shift to an obligation towards results (Hood, 1991, 1996; Christensen & Lægreid, 2001). In the educational sector in particular, the external evaluation of schools was described as one of the six new education policies implemented in European countries that had contributed to progressively define the post-bureaucratic regulations of educational systems (Maroy, 2006) and as one of the major devices at the origin of new accountability policies (Harris & Herrington,
Evaluation as a business was also described as a professional space contributing to the diffusion of a new soft governance of education at the European level (Lawn, 2006; Normand, 2010).

The paper aims to show how the paths taken by each educational system strongly predetermine the possible understanding of international issues and their uses in general and more specifically the forms, stakes and scope of this quality turn. “Path” obviously refers to the path dependency theory in policy analysis and the idea that a political or institutional decision taken in the past strongly determines current decisions and policy configurations. Still, in the tradition of Pierson (2000), my approach will not only focus on the institutional dimension but will take into account various empirical factors that produce self-reinforcing effects on the policy process. I will detail them with my theoretical framework after presenting my methodology. Then I will highlight three main findings of my empirical research.

**Methodology: the Evalexe Project**

This article is based on a two-year exploratory sociological research (Evalexe project) conducted with Hélène Buisson-Fenet (CNRS researcher, ENS Lyon) comparing school external evaluation processes in England, France, Scotland and Switzerland (2009–2011). The Evalexe research was funded by the Centre Henri Aigueperse, a research institute depending on a major French federation of education unions (Unsa-éducation) with the support of the IRES². If our funders, who we had never met before, were interested in the theme of evaluation in general, we were still entirely free to choose the topic of the research and to design it. We took this situation as an opportunity to go and do research abroad to try to understand ‘from the inside’ the changes in the governance of educational systems through implementation of a specific regulation tool: school external evaluation. In our mind, it was an interesting way to confront our findings with typical presentations of foreign educational systems that were sometimes proposed in France. Yet, mainly due to other professional obligations, we could not stay a long period of time in each foreign country and had to move several times, generally for one intensive week of field research.

Our data and materials were collected in each country through three main qualitative methods of research: semi-structured interviews (91 are used in this paper), an analysis of national and European professional and institutional documents and a survey of national and European scientific literature. Where possible, we also conducted observations (mainly inspectors’ meetings at international and regional levels) and exploited personal archives of evaluators (for example, those of a French member of the SICI³). For the study of the French case, we also added some materials gathered in former research on the role of evaluators in the national policy of evaluation in education, like the internal news bulletins of high central inspectorates (Pons, 2010).

The interviews were led on the basis of a common methodological grid which had to be adapted to the contexts and which addressed institutional, professional and cogni-
tive issues as required by our theoretical approach. The idea was to understand both the institutional design regarding school evaluation, the mandate of our interviewees, the historical, organisational and professional context in which school evaluation was or might be implemented, their professional practices (as they were presented), their conception of evaluation, their main partners and their sources of inspiration. In most cases the interviews were recorded. They were then either totally transcribed or synthesised in tables with time references. Those made in England and Scotland were transcribed by an English-speaking person but not translated. About one-third of our interviewees gave us additional documents. All the interviews were then encoded and synthesised in transversal thematic files to enable analysis and comparison (“institutional design”, “jobs and professional identities”, “conception of evaluation” etc.). As far as they were concerned, literature surveys were made within organisations reputed to have important documentation in education and good visibility of the national production of research (like the Bodleian Library and the Department of Education of the University of Oxford, the IRDP\textsuperscript{4} in Neuchâtel and the SRED\textsuperscript{5} in Geneva, the Department of Education of the University of Edinburgh and the INRP\textsuperscript{6}, the CIEP\textsuperscript{7} and Sciences Po\textsuperscript{8} in France). When necessary, additional research was made on specific websites (Ofsted, regional and local education authorities etc.)\textsuperscript{9}.

We concentrated our research on specific territories which could be regarded as relatively comparable to the two French académies\textsuperscript{10} (Créteil, Aix-Marseille) in which we could guarantee the possibility to effectively lead the research: two local educational authorities (LEAs) in the London area (Greenwich and Southwark), the LEA of Edinburgh and two Swiss French-speaking “cantons” (Geneva, Valais). The idea was not to provide detailed monographs of territories but within and through them to understand how regulation of the educational system had evolved in general regarding school evaluation.

Given the short period of time, we decided to focus on specific countries: H. Buisson-Fenet worked on Scotland and France (one académie), and I worked on England, France (one académie) and Switzerland. That is why I will only talk about these three countries in this paper. England was selected as an example of a country in which school evaluation is regular and highly institutionalised. On the contrary, in Switzerland school external evaluation procedures are relatively recent and unequally developed from one canton to another. France constitutes an interesting intermediary case of a country in which school evaluation was rapidly institutionalised but in which, beyond the numerous discourses on the need to evaluate more, the actual and regular practices of evaluation remain uncertain.

**Theoretical Framework: Comparing Policy Configurations**

*Stricto sensu*, the aim of our research was not to compare school evaluation practices themselves even if they were deeply analysed, but to compare the policy configurations created around school evaluation processes in order to understand their meaning.
in terms of governance (Buisson-Fenet & Pons, 2011). In that sense, our strategy of comparison was more oriented to cases than variables refer to Ragin’s distinction (Ragin, 1987). The idea was to analyse deeply and intensively a small number of cases through an inductive, qualitative, comprehensive and interpretative approach to understand the complexity of each configuration (Giraud, 2003), to contextualise each case and highlight the dynamic links within, rather than adopting a deductive, quantitative, statistical and explanatory approach to marginal effects, to confirm or inform a previous theory or to rank the factors of explanation or even eliminate some of them.

To do so, we mobilised some concepts and tools of policy analysis in political science (policy tools, governance, State theory), some empirical findings of educational research on evaluation and some sociological approaches (to regulation and professions mainly). In the tradition of Norbert Elias’ analyses (Elias, 1991), we tried to understand how the interdependencies between policy actors participating in external school evaluation processes were set up at different levels in various educational systems. The key scientific challenge of such an approach is to determine the main variables which can explain these interdependencies, namely, their foundations, forms and evolutions. In policy analysis, it is mainly the institutional variable that has been put forward, especially in neo-institutionalist theories (North, 1990), with policy analysts stressing different sources of the structuring power of institutions (Hall & Taylor, 1997).

Our approach insists on three main dimensions of policy configurations, three main foundations of the interdependencies between policy actors. The first one is institutional and refers to the institutional forms taken by school external evaluation processes. By defining the formal rules of the games, institutional designs strongly predetermine the role and routines of policy actors, their margins and spaces of liberty, their degree and form of coordination. The second one is professional. One can indeed reasonably assume that in those European educational systems which were historically built on the accumulation of different professional bodies and in which a corporatist and bureaucratic regulation has prevailed for a long time (Maroy, 2006), the way in which policy actors define their job (professional identity), embody it in specific activities (professional skills and competencies) and struggle for it (professional legitimation) plays an important role in their involvement in the policy process and in their actual evaluation practices. The third one is cognitive and designates all the representations, ideas, and pieces of knowledge that policy actors from the same educational system may share and which may influence their conception of evaluation.

**Finding 1. The Weight of Domestic Contexts**

The research first stresses the importance of the institutional and the political domestic contexts to understand the specificities of the shift in each country to a policy of school external evaluation. Far away from the assumption often shared by the instigators of
new policies of accountability in education at the national and international levels, who tend to think that new regulation tools like school evaluation can ‘travel’ easily across different contexts since they imply mainly procedural and not substantial changes to the policy process (Ball, 2006; Ozga & Jones, 2006), the research shows: 1) that there are various degrees and forms taken by the institutionalisation of the external evaluation of schools from one country to another; and 2) that the move to these forms of evaluation was mainly due to domestic political factors. In England, the implementation of a systematic and standardised process of inspection by a non-ministerial central government agency was a means to struggle against local and professional powers and to improve standards by creating a market regulated by central agencies. In France, it was only from the 1980s, when for structural and cognitive reasons the school as an organisation appeared as a relevant level for the implementation of education policies, that official texts on evaluation were enacted and speeches about the need to improve the culture of evaluation in this country were pronounced. In Switzerland, the first initiatives for school external evaluation in the German-speaking cantons took place in the 2000s in a broader context of the progressive harmonisation of compulsory education at the federal level (the HarmoS project) in a country made up of 26 different cantonal educational systems. If the cantons are still responsible for the external evaluation of their schools and if effective practices are more or less institutionalised from one canton to another, the HarmoS project progressively pointed out the need to reinforce the role of headteachers and school leaders in various cantonal systems, paving the way for questions about the possible evaluation of these systems at the school level.

**England: A Systematic Inspection of Schools for a Reinforced Central Government**

In England, school external evaluation can be made by various bodies like the National Audit Office, some offices within the Department for Education, several institutes of research or private companies. Yet one collective actor plays a key role: inspectors. England is indeed the emblematic example of a systematic, highly formalised and centralised external evaluation of schools through an inspection process led by a non-ministerial government department, Ofsted. This new evaluation process was part of a global change of governance of the English educational system, which progressively moved to a new mode of regulation based on both a quasi-market and a strong central evaluating state (Maroy, 2006). This change started during the 1980s with reforms implemented by conservative governments (Education Act in 1980 imposing the publication of schools’ results for national exams, the “assisted places scheme” in 1981 and so on). Among others, the idea was to provide a political answer to the anxiety aroused by the ‘black papers’ published during the 1960s, the famous speech by the minister James Callaghan in the Ruskin college in 1976 and the low ranking of England in international comparisons (Breuillard & Cole, 2003). This change was
clearly formalised in the Education Reform Act (ERA) in 1988 which gave an explicit objective to the national education policy (“to raise standards”) and which contained a series of measures like implementation of a national curriculum, recognition of the free choice of schools by parents, the need for schools to conceive and enact development plans, the ‘opting out’ system or the principle of the local management of schools.

As far as school external evaluation was concerned, the ERA only called for a reinforcement of inspection without giving more details on the forms the latter could or should take. This was due to several factors. Few academic works called for the massive and regular enforcement of inspection at the end of the 1980s (Gray & Wilcox, 1996). Even if the central government and the Parliament, mainly through circulars and White Papers, invited LEAs several times in the 1980s to develop a regular inspection of their schools and even if about 90% of them did so, the local inspection practices were actually very diverse. According to two independent reports published in the same year, the LEAs encountered various problems when trying to develop school inspection, (Audit Commission, 1989; Stillmand & Grant, 1989) and it remained difficult to know which kind of inspection was the most effective: performance reviews, team inspections, whole schools reviews, consultative, negotiated and contract-based reviews, lonely inspections, the IBIS device etc. (Gray & Wilcox, 1995, 1996). Moreover, before 1989 the ‘full inspection’ model proposed by Her Majesty’s Inspectorate (HMI) was not yet regarded as a credible alternative. Historically, these full inspections had not always been implemented mainly because the central government and the Parliament always hesitated between two conceptions of HMI’s job as a punctual national advisor or as a systematic controller of the use of government funds (Gordon, 1989; Dunford, 1998). Between 1966 and 1983, HMI had to cope with ten different forms of audit and review of their activities, revealing a strong crisis of expectations about this institution (Taylor, 1989). In the 1980s, some researchers even showed that HMI’s inspections presented several methodological biases (Gray & Willcox, 1995).

Thus, even if the central government rapidly created several government non-ministerial bodies in order to control the right implementation of the ERA and to regulate this new education market, it was only in 1992 that a specific body devoted to school inspection (Ofsted) was created on the basis of HMI. According to the Education (Schools) Act, Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector (HMCI) leads Ofsted and is responsible for the actual and regular inspection of schools. Ofsted inspections must determine if a school provides “an acceptable standard of education” to its pupils. To do so, Ofsted appreciates “the quality of the education provided by schools, [...] the educational standards achieved in those schools; whether the financial resources made available to those schools are managed efficiently; and the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils at those schools” (Section 9). The final aim of inspection is to supply parents with reliable information on their schools, to provide schools with an external evaluation of their strengths and weaknesses, to identify unsatisfactory schools and to provide evidence of the global performance of the educational system.
as a whole. Since 1992, the inspection process has been transformed several times, with each new cycle of inspection taking account of the criticisms levelled at the former Framework of inspection conceived by Ofsted (see Table 1 for a synoptic view).

Table 1. The Cycles of Ofsted’s Inspections: A Synoptic View (1992–2009)

| Cycle 1 | Cycle 2 | Cycle 3 |
|---------|---------|---------|
| Periods | Primary (1994–1998) Secondary (1993–1997) | Primary (1998–2002) Secondary (1997–2003) | Primary (2002–2006) Secondary (2003–2009) |
| Key Texts | *Education Schools Act* (1992, Section 9); *Framework* (1992–1993, 1994); *School Inspections Act* (1996, Section 10) | *School Inspections Act* (1996, Section 10); *Framework* (1997) | *School Inspections Act* (1996, Section 10); *Framework* (2003, 2005, 2009); *Education Act* (2005, Section 5), *Education and Inspections Act* (2006) |
| Main Changes to the Framework | - Code of conduct of inspectors | - Lessons are judged on the basis of a 7-category scale, some criteria are modified | - 2003: introduction of questionnaires for pupils, detailed description of grades, greater focus on targeted inspection |
| | - No more comparisons between schools with similar social and school contexts | - Greater focus on self-evaluation | - 2005: Ofsted provides its own document on schools’ self-evaluation (self-evaluation form, SEF) |
| | | - Inflexions in the judgement (focus on strengths and weaknesses rather than on the gap with the average national results, greater attention to literacy, greater focus on achievement rather than on attainments) | |
| Evaluation of the School Inspection Process | - 1993: very positive audit by Coopers & Lybrand. | - 1998: the National Union of Teachers commissions a study by the NFER on the impact of inspections in failing schools (Scanlon, 1999) | - 2004: a balanced but globally positive evaluation of the impact of Ofsted’s inspections on school improvement and pupils’ results by the London Institute of Education (Matthews & Sammons, 2004) |
| | - 1994: publication by the National Primary Centre of the booklet *Partners or Victims?* in which various actors talk about their bad experience of inspection | - 1998: the House of Commons calls for the creation of an independent body to resolve conflicts | |
| Reactions by Ofsted | - 1994: work sessions with the London Institute of Education to improve inspectors’ judgements on pupils’ performances to national exams | - 1998: creation of the Ofsted Complaints Adjudicator (OCA) | - 2005: externalisation of the recruitment, training and management of inspection teams to a small number of private companies. |
| | - 1994: 219 RgI are inspected by HMI | - 2001: Ofsted becomes involved in a three-year programme to provide a quality service according to the norms defined by the SDA (Service Delivery Agreement) | |

Section 5 of the Education Act of 2005 introduced important changes. It redefined the roles of inspectors: the former system distinguishing HMI, “registered inspectors” (RgI, who were responsible for inspection teams and trained and registered by HMI), “team members” (TM, members of an inspection team) and “lay inspectors” (LI,
people without any experience in the educational field participating in the inspection process) was abandoned and replaced by two categories of inspectors (HMI and AI for “additional inspectors”, the latter being LI or not). It also redefined the conditions of the recruitment, training and management of inspection teams. Instead of choosing (through public invitations to tender) and training directly all inspection teams, Ofsted contracted five “regional inspection service providers” (RISPs), i.e. private companies which must constitute, manage and provide inspection teams in specific territories (they were reduced to three in 2009).

France: New Official Texts in a Growing Differentiated System

Contrary to England, the school in France, as an organisation (établissement in French), has not always been regarded as an autonomous and entire entity within the educational system, and thus as a relevant object of evaluation. It was only from the 1980s onwards that, due to major structural reforms and the evolution of research in education, it started to be. These reforms required the use of new national regulation tools (evaluations but also projects, contracts or partnerships), they implied an improvement of the pieces of knowledge produced about the functioning of educational systems and new territories (researches, studies, expertise or evaluation reports) and they transformed schools as key organisations to implement the reforms.

Three particular structural reforms had a deep impact. The first is the implementation of a policy of compensation in education from 1981. By creating education priority zones (ZEP in French) in which schools are supposed to collaborate within specific networks on the basis of a zone project and a contract of success for disadvantaged pupils, it progressively raised the question of the effectiveness and efficiency of the ZEP: do they really help improve the success of disadvantaged pupils? Answering this question supposed that experts, statisticians and researchers would compare the results of pupils coming from schools in ZEP with those of pupils from schools not in ZEP. The second one is the decentralisation enacted by three laws in 1982, 1983 and 1985, which implied the giving of greater autonomy to schools. Secondary schools, for example, saw their official administrative status change and became “EPLE” (établissements public locaux d’enseignement) which means that in the French administrative right they were then responsible for what happens in their places, they could be taken to court, they could have and manage their own patrimony etc. Parallel to this, schools were invited to conceive and implement their own school project (orientation law of 1989). For many high civil servants writing in various professional reviews, these changes called for a better evaluation of schools’ activities, with the triptych project-contract-evaluation becoming in their mind the pillar of a new governance of the French educational system (Pons, 2010). The third reform refers to the successive attempts in 1981–1984 and 1987–1988 to promote free choice by softening the carte scolaire, i.e. the administrative device allowing the ministry to delimit the recruitment zones of schools. Even if these attempts did not always meet their goals
and were followed by counter-reforms reasserting the key role of the carte scolaire, they contributed – as did the ranking of the French lycées published by the national written press each year since 1981 to compare schools’ results to the French baccalauréat – to fuel the debate about the possible emergence among parents of new “consumers of school” (Ballion, 1982). This debate encouraged the ministry to provide new statistical tools to appreciate the performance of French secondary schools and if possible to structure the development of the public debate (Pons, 2010).

To meet these new functional needs of knowledge and regulation, French policymakers and political leaders enacted a series of official texts creating and then reinforcing the mission of evaluation in general, the evaluation of schools in particular being integrated in this global trend without justifying specific texts or institutional arrangements. In 1984, an arrêté gave a new evaluation mission to one of the two high central inspectorates in charge of administrative and financial issues (IGAENR). In 1987, a department specifically devoted to evaluation and prospective analyses was created within the central administration of the Ministry of Education, on the basis of the office of statistics. In 1989, an orientation law gave the two high central inspectorates an official evaluation mission at all levels of the educational system (Art. 25). To enforce this law, two decrees were enacted in 1989 (for the high central inspectorate in charge of pedagogical issues) and in 1990 (for the local and regional inspectors working in the académies). Other texts then confirmed this trend, like the orientation law of 2005, the letter of the President to his Minister of Education in 2007 or several circulars.

Switzerland: Towards the Harmonisation of Various Cantonal Practices?

In Switzerland, there is not the same national and formal school external evaluation policy as in England or even in France for at least two reasons. First, education largely remains the responsibility of the cantons with the result that there are 26 different cantonal educational systems within this “little Europe” of education that is Switzerland (Cardinet Schmidt et al., 1994). Thus school external evaluation is unequally institutionalised from one canton to another. The German-speaking cantons seem to have developed this regulation tool more than the French-speaking ones. In 2002, for instance, the intercantonal conference on external school evaluation (ARGEV) was created which gathers all the cantonal services in charge of school external evaluation existing since 1999 (the date of the first initiatives in the canton of Zurich). In 2005, the intercantonal conference of ministries of education from German-speaking Switzerland asked ARGEV to build its own networks of experts, develop methodological and conceptual tools, define the basic principles of school external evaluation and think of its inscription in the Swiss institutional landscape. ARGEV, which represents German-speaking Switzerland in the SICI, now has the 20 German-speaking cantons as members. In June 2006, an important national symposium was organised in Bienne on the theme “evaluation and quality of schools” which was an opportunity for the
German-speaking cantons to describe their own experiences in that field (like the cantons of Zurich, Bale-City or Lucerne). There was no equivalent in the French-speaking cantons that I studied (Geneva and Valais). In these cantons, school external evaluation consisted of three main diffuse and irregular activities: the timely use in schools or at the level of one particular school by inspectors (Valais) or cantonal authorities (Geneva) of pupils’ results in the cantonal evaluations to position one school among others, the latter remaining anonymous; some researches, mainly by members of the SRED\textsuperscript{15} taking the “school” as an explanatory variable of pupils’ results (Geneva) and rare audits of schools in difficulty by a team of inspectors (Valais).

Second, the HarmoS project of harmonising compulsory education at the national level approved by the intercantonal conference of ministries of education (CDIP) in 2002, adopted in 2007 and enforced in 2009 does not directly and officially modify this situation since monitoring of the Swiss compulsory education system which has been implemented at the federal level since 2005–2006 does not address the question of school evaluation (CDIP, 2008). Still, an indirect consequence of this harmonisation process is to invite cantonal policy-makers to pay more attention to the role of headteachers and school leaders in the implementation of reforms so that the question of the regulation and \textit{a fortiori} evaluation of cantonal systems at the school level may be politically relevant and legitimate in the middle or long run.

Finding 2. Different Policy Configurations, Different Sources of Public Action

The second interesting finding of the Evalexe research is that the source of interdependences between the policy actors involved in external school evaluation is far from the same in each educational system. To put it briefly, in England this source is mainly institutional, whereas in France it is more professional and in Switzerland more cognitive. This means that beyond a similar shift to a new set of policies and regulation tools, the foundations, concrete forms and political meaning of public actions can differ greatly.

\textit{England: The Structuring Power of a Procedure}

In England, Ofsted’s Section 5 inspection procedure is a very formalised process which has many structuring effects on the policy configuration created around school external evaluation. That is why it seems necessary to first describe it\textsuperscript{16}.

The first stage consists of preparing the inspection visit. For Ofsted, preparing the visit means first conceiving the Framework which formalises the details of the inspection process (aims, scope, steps), the official expectations of the government and the agency (grade descriptors, scale of judgement, code of conduct of inspectors) and the consequences of inspection. Each new cycle of inspection has been an opportunity for Ofsted to adjust the Framework by taking account of the reactions of its partners (collected through a consultation process announced in national papers and through
institutional mailing lists of diffusion), the evolution of research in education (concerning the impact of inspection or processes of learning) and the political impulses from the government (rise of standards, new focus on self-evaluation, development of risk analysis, safeguarding). Ofsted must then select, train and manage inspection teams. Before 2005, the HMI did it themselves. They wrote the public invitations to tender, auditioned the representatives of the organisations providing inspection teams, selected them and trained them in use of the Framework in a short period of time. Since this process was time-consuming, costly and sometimes criticised in the press, Ofsted decided to progressively reduce the number of its contracting partners in order to increase the quality of the inspection service: the number of inspection team providers decreased from 120 in 1997–1998 to 26 in 2003 according to Ofsted’s annual reports. In 2005, five major private companies covered this public market. In 2009, the number of these regional inspection service providers (RISPs) was reduced to three: the CfBT Education Trust (North), Serco Education and Children’s Services (Midlands) and the Tribal Group (London and South). In that context, the RISPs are directly responsible for monitoring the quality of inspection teams and Ofsted can only guarantee a second-order supervision through three channels: some HMIs can undertake regular statistical verifications of RISP activity, Ofsted can use the threat of not renewing the public contract, which for a RISP constitutes a strong reputational risk, and it can rely on the feedback of the HMIs who lead the inspection teams (approximately 75% in secondary education and 10–15% in primary education according to Ofsted’s annual reports). To prepare for their visit, Ofsted’s inspection teams must also consult and accumulate all relevant pieces of information (like the former inspection reports, some testimonies by parents and so on) and statistical indicators on the school (like contextual value-added indicators).

For the school, preparation for an Ofsted inspection consists of three main activities. First, it must consult, fill in and sometimes explain to all its stakeholders the documents that Ofsted places at its disposal. The SEF (self-evaluation form), for instance, is used by about 92% of schools, although it is not (officially) compulsory. The data put into the new on-line application RAISEonline must be regularly updated. People must carefully read all the grade descriptors of the Framework, especially because from one version to another the same category of judgement can designate a different thing. Second, the school is expected to self-evaluate. It can use some DVD or podcasts proposed by Ofsted in which TV viewers are invited to fill in the inspection grid. It can use particular pieces of software allowing school leaders and managers to position their organisation in a national ranking of good governance practices (like Unisys software, for instance). Along more tradition lines, it can also work with its “school improvement partner” (SIP), a member of the LEA whose functions are to advise and monitor a sample of schools and who is supposed to play a dual intermediary role: between the school and the LEA on one hand, and between the school’s continuous self-improvement process and timely inspection on the other. Third, with
the agreement of its governing board, the school can commission an external evaluation to specialised bodies in order to improve its result at the next Ofsted inspection. For example, in a secondary school of Greenwich LA that I visited, the leading team decided to pay £50,000 a year to have an external evaluation conducted by Cambridge Assessment every 18 months.

The second stage is the visit itself. Officially, a Section 5 inspection is supposed to last two days but it actually depends on the type of school and the choices made by the leader of the inspection team. Table 2 gives a typical description of this visit as described in Ofsted’s guide for inspectors. In the interviews, my interviewees insisted on three main points: the importance of statistical data to support each appreciation; the unequal importance given to the observation of lessons from one inspection team to another and the burning issue of categorisation (Buisson-Fenet & Pons, 2011).

Table 2. Ofsted’s Visit under Section 5 of the Education Act 2005: A Typical View

| Day          | Time      | Activity                                                                 |
|--------------|-----------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Day one      | 08.00     | Lead inspector meets the headteacher; confirms or updates inspection       |
|              | 08.15     | Discussion of pre-inspection briefing with the headteacher and senior     |
|              | 08.45     | leadership team                                                          |
|              | 09.15-15.30| Inspection team meeting: the lead inspector briefs inspection team;       |
|              |           | inspectors plan lesson observations                                       |
|              | 15.30-16.00| Inspection activity; lead inspectors updates headteacher on progress of |
|              |           | inspection at least once during the day                                   |
|              | 16.00     | Feedback to observed teachers; preparation for team meeting               |
|              | 18.00     | Team meeting; headteacher or another member of the senior leadership team |
|              |           | attends                                                                  |
|              |           | Inspectors have left the school                                           |
| Day two      | 08.00     | Short meeting with headteachers                                           |
|              | 08.15-14.00| Inspection activity                                                       |
|              | 14.00-14.15| Team prepares for final meeting; completes any final lesson feedback to   |
|              |           | teachers                                                                  |
|              | 14.15-16.15| Team meeting observed by headteacher: final judgements and grades; bullet |
|              |           | points for feedback; discussion about recommendations for improvement     |
|              | 16.30-17.00| Feedback for governors, other senior staff and local authority representative if |
|              | 17.15     | Inspectors have left the school                                           |

Source: Ofsted (2010, p. 35)
The third stage refers to the institutional consequences of the inspection process. After the last oral feedback to the senior staff, the inspection team sends a first version of the report to the latter. If a disagreement persists, the school can discuss with the RISP first and then with some HMI representing Ofsted. The report is then published on Ofsted’s website. The senior staff have six weeks to send the report to the governing board and a synthesis to the parents.

The report must also be disseminated in local libraries. The school has 40 days to provide an action plan that must be sent to Ofsted and presented to parents if they ask for it. If the school’s grade is less than “satisfactory”, it can be regarded as an “underachieving school”, a “school with serious weaknesses” or a “school requiring special measures” according to specific criteria that I cannot detail here\(^7\). If difficulties continue, the school can be judged a “failing school”. In that case, either the HMCI judges that progress can be made in the short term and the school can enter a specific programme (“school with special needs”) and it is re-inspected the year after, or the HMCI confirms the judgement of the inspection team, presents it to the Secretary of State who can ultimately decide to close the school.

As this presentation suggests, the procedure has a very strong structuring power on the policy configuration in school external evaluation terms. This power is visible in the three sources of interdependencies studied in the research. Institutionally, it is first visible in the role of quality assurance given to the Ofsted inspection in the global English quasi-market of compulsory education and in the various uses of the “Ofsted” label by successful schools which are generally inclined to put ‘their Ofsted report’ on their website or by experts and education consultants who show off their “Ofsted trained inspector” status as a sign of their professional value. It is also interesting to see how the Ofsted Section 5 (or Section 9 previously) inspection process gradually gave birth to a global market of self-evaluation and consultancy which directly depends on this particular institutional arrangement. The numerous handbooks of self-evaluation, the various pieces of software to improve the self-evaluation and the internal governance of schools and the different public organisations and private companies which provide external school evaluations show how profitable it is to help schools prepare for their Ofsted inspection. The evolution of the main institutional actors is itself telling. The great majority of LEAs, for instance, renounced maintenance of their own inspectorate and concentrated on either advisory and support (pre-inspection phase) or on monitoring the school management and results (post-inspection phase). The teachers’ unions also contributed to institutionalising this inspection model by providing, as did the NUT\(^8\) for example, free training sessions on the use of Ofsted documents to help teachers prepare themselves and better resist possible abuses. Their modes of contesting are themselves significant. They are either directly inspired by the procedure: In interviews for instance, one of my interviewees explained why the senior staff of his/her school refused entry to an inspector who had forgotten his/her accreditation. The inspector did not comply with the procedure and the school
could have been reproached for not guaranteeing safeguarding! Or they consist of counter-propositions based on the missing points or failures of the current procedure, such as when the NUT commissioned research which showed that the inspection was not as profitable for bad schools as it was for good ones (Scanlon, 1999) or when it denounced the low level of attention paid to self-evaluation (MacBeath et al., 1999).

As far as the professional dimension is concerned, the procedure requires the extensive development of the professional identities of all policy actors concerned by its implementation. Let us take the example of the inspectors themselves. On one hand, Section 5 inspections fall within the tradition of the former “full inspections” by HMI and have strongly helped rationalise, formalise and make more explicit the foundations of inspectors’ judgements. The specific design of the procedure, the code of conduct, the detailed description of grades and categories of judgement are all opportunities for inspectors to prove and legitimate their professionalism. On the other hand, this procedure tends to limit inspection to a mechanical record of activities and to deprive the inspectors of their professional liberty to interpret in the situation since these margins of interpretation may jeopardise the standardisation, and hence the equity, of the process, a trend denounced by some HMIs from Ofsted (Richards, 2001). Lastly, it is interesting to see how the procedure redefines the hierarchy within inspectors according to their position and their role in the procedure itself. This was particularly visible before 2005 with a clear hierarchy between the HMI, at the top, then the RgI, trained by the top HMI to lead inspection teams, the TM and the LI recruited to ensure the expected workforce. It was still visible after 2005 with HMI having a particular political status and “additional” inspectors (the term is telling) who work more or less regularly for private companies and have to compete in the market to be employed by them. Significantly, the inspectors who are sent to the failing schools or in the case of a conflict between a school and a RISP are HMIs, who still have a generally positive reputation among school staff. Moreover, the procedure introduced lay inspectors and by so doing it broke the monopoly of the professional group over its own activity. These lay inspectors rapidly created their own professional association, the NALIS\(^{19}\), and their presence was not contested by the Labour governments nor by the reorganisation of the statuses of inspectors after 2005. Research on these actors tends to show that there were not so many of them and that they managed to accumulate experience and promote an alternative, external but specialised point of view (Hustler & Stone in Outson, Earley & Fidler, 1996).

But it may even be cognitively that the structuring power of the procedure is the most impressive. The latter first imposed its own language with its acronyms (HMI, AI, SIP, RISP, SEF, PIB, CVA and so on), its publications (Framework, Handbook, Conducting School Inspections etc.\(^{20}\)), its own history (the SEF rather than the PAN-DA\(^{21}\), the AI rather than the RgI, the TM and the LI, RAISEonline rather than PICSI\(^{22}\) etc.) and its expressions: Ofsted is no longer merely an acronym, it is becoming an adjective or even an adverb (to be an “Ofsted inspector”, to succeed in “your Ofsted”
etc.). The procedure has also had an influence on the course of research in education which increased its focus on inspection practices and their impact (e.g. Gray, Wilcox, 1996; Outson, Earley & Fidler, 1996; Scanlon, 1999; Matthews & Sammons, 2004), each component (like the Framework) or a particular actor in the inspection process (like the LI for example) having its own specialist (see in particular Outson, Earley & Fidler, 1996). The career of some former HMs from Ofsted who became professors at universities is also a sign of the importance in the understanding of this activity in the reflexion about the current governance of the English educational system (Outson, Earley & Fidler, 1996; Richards, 2001). But it is perhaps in the conceptions of evaluation put forward in the interviews that this structuring power is particularly visible. When I asked the interviewees what a good school or what a good evaluation of school were for them, most answered by adopting a pragmatic vision of school evaluation which attributed much importance to the criteria and vocabulary of the Ofsted inspection procedure (Buisson-Fenet & Pons, 2011: 95-96). The procedure has even helped strongly redefine the meaning of self-evaluation since the latter was progressively regarded (only) as the logical complement of the external evaluation in the school improvement process, hence as an “internal inspection” (Davies & Rudd, 2001).

France: The Key Role of Professional Identities

In France, the policy configuration is somewhat opposed to the English one. First, the official texts regulating evaluation in France (Articles L241-1 and L241-11 of the French Code of Education), the annual business programmes of official evaluators or speeches on that topic by political leaders remain extremely vague and never detail the notion, expected practices or procedures and the explicit political aims of evaluation. School external evaluation, as a particular application of this legislation, does not depart from this rule. This vagueness is itself the consequence of the relatively poor contribution of scholars and researchers to the conceptualisation of evaluation and of a particular strategy by successive political leaders who were hardly encouraged to clarify their particular view of this regulation tool since the latter was very likely to displease a significant share of policy actors and organisations (Pons, 2010).

Second, the effective practices of school external evaluation are irregular in time and in space. The various initiatives by the high central inspectorates were never systematised and never survived their instigators like the first collective inspections in the “académie of Toulouse” (1976–1977), the punctual and informal inspections of schools in 1982, the three waves of evaluation of 100 schools in 1989, 1990 and 1991 or some reports on school evaluation during the 2000s (Buisson-Fenet & Pons, 2011). It is globally the same for regional and local initiatives, even in the French académie of Lille in which successive recteurs23 implemented an ambitious and systematic audit of primary and secondary schools between 1990 and 1998, and then between 1999–2003. There are several reasons for this situation: the ambiguous effects of
the audits themselves, their occasional lack of legitimacy, their cost or their difficulties surviving after a change of recteur. Lastly, according to several researches but also internal reports from the Office of Statistics of the Ministry of Education, the statistical evaluation tools provided by the Ministry of Education – like the indicators of school performance – are not always used by all schools. When they are, it is to comply with what is seen as a bureaucratic obligation rather than to orient a school policy (Buisson-Fenet & Pons, 2011: 117-119).

Third, several obstacles remain to the implementation of a school external evaluation policy. Politically, there has been an increasing turnover of recteurs since the 1970s which has had at least two effects. First, it reduces the length of the political action and local leaders cannot afford to take time to correctly evaluate the effects of their decisions. Second, each recteur generally has a different vision of the role of the evaluators under their responsibility so that school evaluators can move from one of their missions to another in a short period of time. In the “académie of Créteil” for example, the recteur changed in January 2010. During the 2009–2010 school year, the regional and local inspectors had to abandon the school evaluations they had been encouraged to implement since 2008 to rapidly focus on the individual inspection of the numerous new teachers appointed to the académie (Buisson-Fenet & Pons, 2011).

Institutionally, several obstacles can be mentioned. For instance, pursuant to the decentralisation laws, schools in France have been the property of local and regional authorities (collectivités locale in French, i.e. the cities for primary schools and the départements for lower secondary schools). The latter are mainly responsible for the building and rehabilitation of schools, the provision of materials, the canteen and the provision of some technical staff. In that particular institutional division of responsibilities, who can legitimately evaluate schools as a whole? State evaluators like the inspectors are legitimate for evaluating teaching, some organisational, administrative and financial aspects depending on state funds and state decisions, but they are not legitimate for judging the policies of local and regional authorities. Not taking these policies into account may jeopardise the equity of evaluation. But constituting plural teams of inspection remains difficult in a country which in 2008–2009 had about 53,000 public primary schools servicing about 36,600 cities! Cognitively, the evaluators that I met generally have weak knowledge of the research in evaluation even when some conceptualisations are presented in the seminars of the French college training inspectors and headteachers (ESEN). Professionally, the implementation of a school external evaluation policy sometimes deeply questions the professional identities of evaluators who are more or less inclined to make their practices evolve. With inspectors for instance, evaluation as a process required them to form plural teams whereas they were used to working alone. It also implied developing a more systemic approach to educational issues beyond the control of conformity in schools. The general inspectors can no longer only be esteemed specialists (of didactics, of particular administrative devices etc.). They must become general experts on the
functioning of the educational system, a development not accepted by the whole body (Pons, 2010; Buisson-Fenet & Pons, 2011).

In that context, the existence of a school evaluation process (or not) in specific contexts, its more or less important duration and its institutional design depend directly on the degree of convergence of the professional identities of policy actors on this specific topic of evaluation. Since political leaders will not clarify the ambiguities of their intentions and since the institutional architecture and official texts are unclear, it is only if the professional imperative of school evaluation is shared by a significant number of policy actors that school evaluation can be implemented. We clearly observed this in the two académies we studied between 2009 and 2011. In Créteil, implementation of the national campaign of school audits launched in 2008 stopped after the experimentation phase mainly due to the professional resistance of headteachers’ unions which regarded the operation, as it was being conducted, as ambiguous and illegitimate. Yet, in Aix-Marseille, the audit process was immediately integrated by the recteur as a key part of his global management of the académie and it was globally well perceived by inspectors and headteachers (Buisson-Fenet & Pons, 2011).

French-Speaking Switzerland: Coordination through Specific Regulation Tools

In the two French-speaking cantons I studied, the external evaluation of schools was often associated in interviews or in various papers (press articles, speeches, research publications etc.) with negative representations which all questioned the legitimacy of this regulation tool and its implementation. First, nearly all my interviewees tended to assimilate school external evaluation with ranking and strongly criticised this radical form of evaluation. Some press articles and the regular refusal by parents to promote free choice in popular votes in various cantons tend to show that this condemnation is important in public opinion in general. Significantly, unions of teachers did not have to adopt a specific stance on this topic, with the cantonal authorities sharing the same vision of the public school as a place of “social mixity” (Buisson-Fenet & Pons, 2011). Second, school external evaluation is more developed in German-speaking cantons and the other cantons are not sure that this new practice can and should be ‘imported’ into their own educational system. This possible dissonance aroused by school external evaluation takes various forms according to the context. In Geneva, where the cantonal authorities launched a series of managerial reforms (creation of school leaders, new individual evaluation of civil servants, speeches on the need for greater school autonomy in a centralised cantonal system), the perspective of an external evaluation of schools could revive the tensions about the creation of a control of the proximity of teachers’ work and about the loss of confidence among educational professionals that this new public management could manifest. In Valais, a traditionally very decentralised canton, the development of school external evaluation may give
birth to tensions about the possible centralisation (“cantonalisation”) of this educational system. Third, researches and statistical studies scarcely address the question of the school effect in general. When they do, they generally call for prudence and for a comprehensive, multilateral and highly contextualised approach to the school and its environment. Fourth, when they describe their conception of a good school in the interviews, my interviewees insisted a lot on the climate, the well-being of the pupils and teachers and a reciprocal entente between the professional educators and parents rather than on performance and school leadership. They believe the evaluation of a school must help the school and not only be an instrument of control.

In that particular cognitive context, the interdependencies between actors in terms of school external evaluation remain embryonic and chiefly depend on the regulation tools chosen to organise and regulate the harmonisation of compulsory education at the national level (and then at the regional and cantonal ones) like the HarmoS standards, the global monitoring of education in Switzerland, PISA or the Plan for a Roman Education (*plan d’étude romand*). These interdependencies intertwine when experts and cantonal authorities must take technical decisions which have deep political implications such as when they must decide if pupils’ results concerning the HarmoS standards and regional French-speaking tests must be published. This coordination of policy actors through instruments is a logical consequence of the uncertainties surrounding the current change in governance of the Swiss educational sector at the national level and a result of the particular state of the public opinion regarding school evaluation. It is also the fruit of a specific political strategy which consists of betting on harmonisation through technical regulation tools in a country in which former attempts to harmonise education on the basis of common values have often failed (Buisson-Fenet & Pons, 2011).

**Finding 3. Selective Collective Memories about Foreign Experiences**

As the French Durkheimian sociologist Halbwachs (1950) argues, the collective memory of a group is more than the cumulative stock of individual memories of its members. It is rather the final outcome of a social reconstruction of legitimate pieces of memory from the past according to the present; more precisely, according to the current social frames of analysis and self-representation of the group. The collective memory of my interviewees which progressively emerged from my interviews seems to comply with this sociological rule. Certainly it is wrong to conclude that no one has an example of a foreign experience, even a vague one, somewhere in mind. It is also certainly difficult to analyse in the short term the influence on collective memories of certain scientific symposiums, professional events and publications. Yet, my 91 interviews do not indicate that people have great knowledge of foreign experiences. And when they have and use it, the actual transfer of foreign practices is largely predetermined by domestic interests.
In most cases, my English interviewees have little knowledge of the experiences in France and Switzerland. For some of them, our meeting was an opportunity to ask me for more information about the French situation they had come to understand either through specific political circumstances they discovered in the media (like the period of C. Allègre in which this minister of education’s speeches gave birth to many mass demonstrations of teachers) or through classical images and stereotypes (like, of course, the French highly centralised and bureaucratised educational system). More surprisingly, my English interviewees often denied – sometimes with signs of irritation – the possible influence of the Scottish school evaluation model on their own practices even when this influence has been established by researchers. For instance, MacBeath & McGlynn (2002) show that the new focus on self-evaluation in the Ofsted inspection procedure in the early 2000s was inspired by the Scottish model disseminated through the SICI and rapidly mobilised by the Labour Government. In their qualitative study of sixteen schools in nine different LEAs, Davies & Rudd (2001) clearly establish that schools use different models to self-evaluate and to reconcile two contradictory imperatives: self-evaluating for the school’s teams and self-evaluating to prepare for the next inspection. Among them, the model of the University of Strathclyde and the handbook *How Good is Our School* were often used.

In French-speaking Switzerland, England was often mentioned by my interviewees to better introduce their condemnation of the possible perverse effects of a public school external evaluation: the logics of ranking, excessive competition in the school market, the pressure of the tabloids etc. Some did not hesitate to provide catastrophic pictures of this country in which, as one put it, English parents had to sleep in front of the most famous schools the night before registration day to ensure a place for their child! The interviews revealed that these stereotypes generally rested on a very low level of knowledge of the English educational system. If other countries were sometimes mentioned (Germany, Belgium, Québec and France), in the great majority of cases the external evidence mobilised by my Swiss interviewees referred to the experience of other Swiss cantons, with the mastering of intercantonal comparisons becoming a key source of knowledge in the context of harmonising compulsory education.

In France, my interviewees only had a vague idea of foreign experiences even when an annual meeting of the SICI could have been organised in their académie, as was the case in Créteil in November 2008 and even if this meeting entitled “Evaluating School in Europe” gathered about 150 participants. Generally, they had heard about the importance of the Scottish model without being able to describe it. They knew this model was increasingly regarded as a stimulating source of inspiration by high central inspectors but without being able to say why and to distinguish in their message what precisely referred to the Scottish example (Buisson-Fenet & Pons, 2011).
Selective Transfers of Practices: Two French Examples

The use of foreign examples by the French high central inspectors is a good illustration of the filter role played by domestic interests in the actual and selective transfer of foreign practices. My research here since 2004 allowed me to collect different materials and reconstitute some examples of reference to foreign experience (Pons, 2010; Buisson-Fenet & Pons, 2011). The high central inspectors looked first at the practices of their English counterparts in the mid-1970s when the Dean of the high central inspectorate in charge of pedagogical issues drew his inspiration from the HMI’s full inspections and invited his peers to implement collective inspections of schools to go beyond the traditional model of the individual inspection of teachers. The latter were tested in the académie of Toulouse in 1977 by about 10 high central inspectors but they were never generalised to the whole body for three main reasons: at that time, the possible shift of the inspectorate to a logic of evaluation was far from being accepted by all the inspectors; the Dean only had a power of persuasion over his peers who used to work alone and independently and he could not impose his policy; and the turn-over of the ministers and departure of the Dean himself also did not help institutionalise this new practice (Buisson-Fenet, Pons, 2011).

About ten years later, in 1989, the high central inspectorates were asked by the socialist minister L. Jospin to provide within a short period of time a methodology for evaluating schools in order to annually conduct the evaluation of 100 schools. At that time, this was clearly a political challenge for these inspectorates who had to show their utility to a minister belonging to a political majority which tended to regard them as a temple of conservatism in education and wanted to reform (some said do away with) their institution. Some inspectors who had participated in the first international inspection meetings organised by the CERI in Amsterdam (1985) and Oxford (1987) as a continuation of the ISIP project used this international experience to urgently propose a global methodology to their peers and the minister’s cabinet. Reading the internal news bulletins of the high central inspectorates reveals that these meetings were of course an opportunity for the French inspectors to (re)discover the methods used by HMI and other European counterparts and that they probably contributed to putting an emphasis on the school level. But they clearly also highlight how selective the mobilisation of these foreign experiences was. The French inspectors who participated in these meetings and provided their colleagues with a synthesis said: 1) that in most European countries inspectorates were organised in disciplines; and 2) that all European inspectorates had agreed to put the observation of the pedagogy of teachers in the heart of a global evaluation of schools and education policies. These two points are far from obvious, at least as they were presented, and are more clearly an echo of the organisation and professional priorities of the French inspectorates themselves. Moreover, the final evaluation methodology which was implemented by the high central inspectorates was hardly stabilised since each wave of school evaluation gave birth to a different process and this initiative was not extended by the new
minister in 1992 (Pons, 2010). For all these reasons, it is difficult to conclude there was an effective transfer of foreign practices.

**Conclusion**

Finally, this research does not invalidate the idea of a quality turn in the conception of education policies at the national and supranational levels and the theory of the possible internationalisation of educational issues through ideas and measurement. First, I focused on national cases, without leading field investigations at the supranational level. Second, because it remains true that in the three countries that I studied the reference to quality is made by political leaders and policy-makers. In England, it is clearly expected of Ofsted inspections that they certify the quality of education. In Switzerland, the term is also used by the intercantonal conference of ministries of education in some of its publications to describe the new national governance of the educational sector (CDIP, 2008). Lastly, in France the term is not really used but it could be argued that the “performance turn” taken by the national policy of evaluation in education in 2005 shares many common characteristics (Pons, 2010: 162).

Nevertheless, I showed how the paths taken by each educational system strongly predetermined the forms, stakes and scope of this quality turn for at least three reasons. First, the analysis of the institutional and political context in which this turn occurred showed that a relatively similar shift to a new set of policies and regulation tools may have a very different political meaning from one educational system to another (finding 1). Second, there may be a great variety of effective policy configurations beyond this apparent same global movement (finding 2). Third, the quality turn in the conception of educational policies does not prevent national policy actors being highly selective when it comes to the supranational messages and foreign experiences to identify pieces of evidence that can be efficiently integrated into their collective frame of analysis of their domestic situation and in their professional practices and interests (finding 3).

In other words, there is a turn and there are paths and the main scientific challenge is to find conceptual tools and theoretical frameworks which allow us to think about the two dimensions together. In my mind, an analysis of the “plasticity” of this kind of notion (“quality”, but also “evaluation”, “performance” and many other notions and slogans deriving from New Public Management) and of these new political imperatives would be useful since it would invite the researcher to put an emphasis on both the malleability of some concepts, values and principles and their flexible uses in various contexts and the tensions they may trigger during these phases of adaptation.

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Endnotes

1 See, for instance, the creation in November 1977 in Montréal of an international French-speaking association specialised in the promotion of methods of measurement in education (ADMEE) and in September 1985 the birth of its European partner (ADMEE-Europe).

2 Institute of Economical and Social Research
3 Standing International Conference of Central and General Inspectorates
4 Institute of Pedagogical Research and Documentation
5 Service of Research in Education
6 National Institute of Pedagogical Research in Lyon
7 International Centre of Pedagogical Studies in Sèvres
8 Paris Institute of Political Studies
9 For more details, see the Evalexe research report (Buisson-Fenet & Pons, 2011: 203-220) available (in French) at: http://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00605994/en/

10 In France, an académie is a regional education authority depending on the ministry of education. The territories of the académies are not always the same as those of the French regions. The Ile-de-France region is for instance composed by the académies of Créteil, Paris and Versailles.

11 Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills
12 Innovative Inspectors Based in Schools in London areas
13 On its website, Ofsted declared in April 2007 that it had conceived about 39 different procedures of inspection according to the evolution of its official mandate. In this paper, I concentrate on the regular inspection process of schools (“Section 9 inspections” and after 2005 “Section 5 inspections”).
14 An arrêté is a French official text adopted by the ministry, which is less important than a decree but more important than a circular in the hierarchy of norms.
15 Service of Research in Education from the Department of Public Instruction of the State of Geneva
16 For a detailed presentation, see the guide entitled Conducting School Inspections (Ofsted’s publication no. 090097), The Framework of School Inspection (no. 090019) and The Evaluation Schedule for Schools (no. 090098).
17 For a description, see Steele (2000).
18 National Union of Teachers
19 National Association of Lay Inspectors of Schools
20 I should also add the numerous school inspection reports themselves. In 2010–2011 for example, Ofsted carried out 6,031 maintained school inspections (Ofsted, 2011).
21 Performance and Assessment Report
22 Pre-inspection Context and School Indicator report
23 In France, the recteur is the official representative of the state in an académie.
24 Like in Switzerland, the researches produced under and for the national project of research on “the analysis of the effectiveness of training systems” (PNR 33) or the circulation of knowledge permitted by the national symposium in Bienne in June 2006.
25 Like the meeting of the SICI in Créteil in November 2008.
26 Like some publications from the intercantonal authorities in Switzerland or in another register the articles published in the international French-speaking review Revue internationale d’éducation.
27 In this last part, I focus only on mobilisation of the English evidence.
28 The OECD’s Centre for Educational Research and Innovation
29 International School Improvement Project
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