



Educational policy in a European context: Exploring processes of governmentalisation in Flanders

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Abstract

The reported study seeks to deepen our understanding of the role of nation state government in relation to globalisation, and in particular in relation to Europeanisation. Using current policy of the Flemish government (Belgium) as a case, this study demonstrates the emergence of a new mode of government or regulation, that is, government through ‘feedback on performance’. Additionally, other scales of government (at school and class level) will be discussed briefly in order to display the wide distribution of government through ‘feedback on performance’. Hence, we regard this proliferation of government through ‘feedback on performance’ as indicating a general shift in how we are governed and govern ourselves. In the final section, we formulate some critical thoughts concerning the proliferation of ‘feedback on performance’.

1. Introduction: Central government between decentralisation and globalisation

In order to understand developments in educational policy today, it is suggested to focus in particular on two tendencies: globalisation and decentralisation. On the one hand, there is the observation that in many countries authority and power is being transferred from the central level (national government) to the local level (school administration). As a result, the local school or school community is increasingly regarded as the focal point in combination with attempts to stimulate school-based management. On the other hand, it is being noticed that educational policy is increasingly influenced by global and international developments that transcend the borders of nation states. This tendency of ‘globalisation’ may take different forms: countries draw upon studies and reports of international organisations (e.g. OECD, WTO, etc.) in order to shape educational policy, national governments take into account international agreements (e.g. GATS), European member states adopt the Lisbon strategy (and in particu-

lar ‘Education and Training 2010’), and educational policy focuses on the increased international mobility of pupils, students and teaching staff.

These trends in educational policy seem to suggest that the role and the authority of the national state in educational governance is radically diminished in favour of local governance on the one hand and international governance on the other hand. Hence, and put in a more radical way, it seems as if the role of the central government with regard to educational governance is played out. Using current policy of the Flemish government (Belgium) as a case, this study instead will demonstrate how the role of central government has changed without completely being played out.¹ The aim is to understand the role and task the Flemish government claims for itself in relation to Europe (as a particular case of globalisation). We will not focus however on changes at the level of the policy agenda and the targets and domains of educational policy. Instead, and drawing upon the results of this case study, we want to formulate a general thesis about the emergence of a new mode of government or regulation, that is, government through ‘feedback on performance’. In order to explain the scope of the analysis we will focus first in more detail on the analytical framework that undergird this study.

2. Understanding processes of governmentalisation

Meanwhile, it is widely acknowledged that globalisation caused not the abolition of nation state government, but affected and redefined its role and tasks (Bauman, 1999; Dale, 1999). Nation state government is no longer the only or most important actor, since both at a supra-national and at a sub-national level actors have emerged with governmental authority in education affairs. What is needed therefore at a theoretical and analytical level is an adequate framework and perspective to capture these changes of ‘rescaling’ in educational governance (Benner, 1999). Robertson and Dale (2003) for instance, while taking into account this “changing geography of power in education”, focus on the “new functional, institutional and scalar division of the labour of education systems”. Adopting the analytic approach of “pluri-scalar governance of education”, these authors clearly indicate changes in current governance and in particular with regard to “what gets done in ‘education’, by whom, where and how that ‘work’ is regulated”. This ‘functional’ focus on the redivision and rescaling of educational governance across and within a global/European context is helpful, especially because it reminds us to take (empirically) into account the changing geography of power and not to regard ‘nation state sovereignty’ as an implicit (analytical or theoretical) norm. However, the perspective of this analysis, as well as its aim, is different (cf. Dale, 2004). This study does not intend to determine (empirically) whether Flemish government actually plays a role neither to investigate (measure) the current influences of central government. The aim is far more modest for it is limited to an analysis of how central government rationalises its role and tasks in relation to (what it regards

as) Europeanisation. For this type of analysis I draw upon the work of Foucault (2004a, b) on governmentality as well as on further elaboration in so-called governmentality studies.

The main characteristic of the birth of the modern nation state, according to Foucault (1981, 1978a, b), is not the 'étatisation of society' but the 'governmentalisation of the state'. This means that 'the state' is to be conceived as a complex of centralising power relationships aiming at governing people (both as individuals and as a population). Government here is to be regarded as a form of 'conduct of conduct' (Foucault, 1982, p. 237) or a more or less calculated and rational attempt to direct human conduct by applying specific technical means. Thus government is not just a technical matter but involves as well a 'mentality' (governmentality) or a rationalisation of the act and actors of government. From this perspective, the birth of the modern state as a 'governmental' state implies the emergence of a particular rationalisation of the role of the state, its tasks and responsibilities as well as its objectives and the entities to be governed. As such, 'the state' should be regarded as the result of processes of governmentalisation.

In order to understand these processes of governmentalisation it is important to stress that there is no single and universal 'conduct of conduct'. As Foucault (2004a, b) has elaborated in detail, the governmental state and its rationalities and mentalities have been in continual transformation throughout history: a governmentalisation in the name of 'reason of state' in the early modern period, in the name of 'individual freedom and security' (and finding its intellectual rationalization in the reflections on political economy) in the modern era and in the name of 'the social' in the twentieth century. Foucault (2004a) noticed a new phase in the governmentalisation of the state in the second part of the twentieth century, and meanwhile many scholars (Gordon, 1991; Rose, 1999; Dean, 1999; Lemke, 1997; Bröckling, Krasmann & Lemke, 2000) have elaborated on this. The role of the state is no longer rationalised as a central agency of government that 'intervenes' in society in the name of 'the social' and in order to align individual freedom and social welfare (Rose, 1996). Instead, the state today is increasingly regarded as a 'managerial' agency that should 'enable' an 'entrepreneurial' type of freedom (at the individual level, and at the level of organisations, communities ...) through for example 'marketisation', 'investment in human capital' and in collaboration with other agencies (both local and global, public and private) of 'governance' (Olssen, Codd & O'Neill, 2004). An important dimension of this new mode of 'conduct of conduct' is the 'management of performance'. Thus in the current context, the state does not disappear, but its task is rationalised in a new way (towards global and local agencies), new technologies are being used and those being governed are required to 'conduct' themselves in a particular way. Hence, this 'advanced liberal' (Rose, 1996) governmentalisation of the state should be regarded as the current phase in the governmentalisation of the state.

Based on this framework the scope of the analysis can be formulated in more detail. Drawing upon the case of Flanders, the aim is to analyse the rationalisation of the role, tasks and objectives of the Flemish central government in relation to European actors, the governmental technologies at stake, and the mode of ‘conduct of conduct’ (of Flanders as a member state) involved. Thus the main question is: How does Flanders rationalise its conduct in relation to Europe? Again we would like to stress that we will not focus in detail on changes at the level of the policy agenda and the targets of national educational policy, but only on changes in the mode of government.

It is not sufficient, however, to focus solely on the new phase in the governmentalisation of the state. It is also important to focus on global processes of governmentalisation, and within the scope of this article, on processes related to ‘Europeanisation’.² Thus instead of regarding Europeanisation as a gradual process of integration ultimately resulting in a kind of ‘étatisation of Europe’, here we prefer to look at it in terms of a ‘governmentalisation of Europe’ (Masschelein & Simons, 2005). Also at this level it is possible to distinguish phases in processes of governmentalisation. Different mentalities, rationalities and governmental procedures have emerged from the creation of the ‘Coal and Steel Community’ to the present objective to make of the European Union “the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy” (Walters, 2004). From the 1980’s onwards, and focusing on the creation of a single European market and ultimately of a single currency, the role of Europe as well as the entities to be governed such as the member states and their economies and financial policies, have become rationalised and reconfigured for example in terms of ‘harmonisation’ and the “mutual recognition of national standards” (Barry, 1994; Walters, 2004, p. 166). As such, harmonisation functions as an art of the European government and it constitutes the European Union, its institutions and experts, as central agencies of coordination. Hence, ‘conduct of conduct’ takes the form of ‘harmonisation’ of the ‘conduct of member states’. Moreover, this governmentalisation of Europe in the name of harmonisation is connected with a governmentalisation of (member) states. ‘Europe’ and ‘Brussels’ enter in a particular way into the governmental rationalities and mentalities of member states, that is, the member states come to understand their standards, capacities and resources in relation to other member states and European norms and as being more or less in harmony. Thus in order to be able to analyse the current governmentalisation of Flanders with regard to Europe it is necessary to focus first on some features of the current governmentalisation of Europe (and in particular with regard to education): How does Europe rationalise its conduct in relation to member states?

3. *Managementalisation* of Europe³

In the European context educational policy is still claimed to be the responsibility of the member states (justified by the principle of subsidiarity). The European Union

therefore shall limit its contribution “to the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between Member States and, if necessary, by supporting and supplementing their action ...” (Maastricht Treaty, 1992, p. 28). Meanwhile, it has been noticed that the idea of “quality education” (Dale & Robertson, 2002, p. 25; cf. Murphy, 2003) has permitted the European Commission to influence national educational systems in a particular and subtle way. In order to understand this influence, and related processes of governmentalisation, it is important to focus in more detail on the so-called limited role.

Within the scope of the Lisbon strategy, the EU (LEC, 2000, § 41) understands its role as a ‘catalyst’ one in order to establish “an effective framework for mobilising all available resources for the transition to the knowledge-based economy”. This catalyst or ‘enabling’ role is exemplified very well in the Open Method of Coordination (LEC, 2000, § 37). The method is designed to help member states to progressively develop their own policies by means of spreading best practice and in order to achieve greater convergence towards the main EU goals.⁴ The latter refers to the Lisbon Declaration (LEC, 2000, § 5) and “the new strategic goal for the next decade: to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world”.

Drawing upon the method of coordination the Ministers of Education in Europe (Council of the European Union, 2001) adopted in 2001 concrete goals of education and training systems to be reached by 2010: “increasing the quality and effectiveness of education and training systems”, “facilitating the access of all to the education and training systems” and “opening up education and training systems to the wider world”. A year later the European Commission endorsed these goals. Furthermore, these 3 goals have been translated (Council of the European Union, 2002, p. 7) into 13 objectives, and a detailed framework has been developed for the implementation of each of them. For each of the objectives key issues have been formulated and a concrete timetable and plan for the organisation of the follow-up. The plan (*ibid.*) covers issues such as “indicators for measuring the progress” and “themes for exchanging experience, good practice, and, as appropriate, peer review”. Additionally, a model is presented to support the implementation of the objectives by a follow-up of quantitative indicators. This model mentions for each indicator the average performance in the EU, the average of the 3 best performing countries in the EU, and the performance of the USA and Japan. Member states can use this model to monitor their progress between 2004 and 2010. Moreover they can communicate benchmarks or reference criteria for 2004 and 2010. This should be done on a voluntary basis, although it is stressed that the availability of national statistical data is required for the implementation to be successful (*ibid.*, p. 19). The implementation of each of the objectives is supported by a Working Group and by using the findings of the ‘Standing Group on Indicators and Benchmarks.’ In 2005 the Council suggested to continue the collection of indicators in edu-

cation and training as well as to collect additional indicators. Thereby the Council (2005, p. 7) affirmed that – and this expresses very well the aim of the whole project:

Periodic monitoring of performance and progress through the use of indicators and benchmarks is an essential part of the Lisbon process, allowing the identification of strengths and weaknesses with a view to providing strategic guidance and steering for both short and long term measures of the Education and Training 2010 strategy.

This short elaboration of the Open Method of Coordination indicates that the limited role of Europe correlates with a particular conception of freedom and responsibility of member states. The freedom at stake encompasses the responsibility to calculate and mobilise resources and the virtue to optimise one's performance (as member state) in view of common targets. Thus, member states and all other partners (professionals, private and public institutions) that are mobilised for these strategic goals should come to understand themselves as 'calculative' agencies being part of 'calculable spaces' (Haahr, 2004, p. 219). These calculable spaces of benchmarks, performance indicators and best practices are required in order to orient the performance of member states (and its institutions, policies) in a competitive environment (cf. Radaelli, 2003, p. 19). As such, the Open Method of Coordination seeks to make member states govern themselves according to standards of performance. Thus the 'limited role' indeed implies that member states are to be governed through their freedom, but it is important to stress at this point that it is a certain kind of freedom, that is, 'competitive self-improvement' within calculable spaces of performance indicators and benchmarks (Haahr, 2004, p. 223). The conduct of the Flemish government or its 'practices of freedom' (Rose, 1996, p. 61 f.) within these spaces will be discussed in the next section. Here we focus on the governmentalisation of Europe and on the conduct of the European Commission.

The establishment of calculable spaces is related to the construction of a new identity of the European Commission: "an institution capable of legitimately and authoritatively passing out grades to member states, thereby establishing their relative forwardness or backwardness in terms of virtue" (Haahr, 2004, p. 223). Thus in relation to the Open Method of Coordination the role of the Commission becomes a kind of 'performance management' (Ball, 2000) with one of its main tasks being the management (collection, presentation, distribution) of information on performance. Due to these managerial concerns, and the presence of a 'manage-mentality', it would be more precise to conceive of the current phase in the governmentalisation of Europe as a kind of 'managerialisation' (Simons, 2002). From this managerial perspective 'limited' government is to be regarded in three related ways as 'economic government' or government that involves economic calculations (cf. Foucault, 2004a, p. 253; Walters, 2004, p. 166). First, European government is economic for it reflects upon its own governmental practices in economic terms, i.e. governmental (European) interventions are 'economised' by taking into account and using existing governmental practices

(member states). Second, it is economic for it conceives of these practices in economic terms as resources that should be managed in a particular way in order to reach the strategic goals. And as far as these strategic goals are themselves to a large extent economic (e.g. knowledge economy), at this level a kind of economic government can also be perceived.

Drawing upon this short analysis, we can discuss the governmentalisation of Flanders in relation to Europe, that is, the way the Flemish government frames itself as a calculating agency in these calculable spaces.

4. Calculating agencies and feedback on performance

The title of the Flemish policy declaration ‘Today champion in mathematics, tomorrow in equal opportunities also’ (Vandenbroucke, 2004) clearly explains how the Flemish government positions itself as a calculating agency within calculable spaces. Based on the good results of international, comparative studies, the minister of education (ibid., p. 8) claims that it is the task of educational policy to ‘consolidate and stimulate’ the high quality of education in Flanders, as well as to focus on the weaker performance with regard to ‘equal opportunities’ in education. With regard to the latter, and drawing on a recent PISA-report, the policy document notices a large influence of socio-economic status on the performance of students in Flanders compared to the average in other OECD-countries (ibid., p. 15).

In a similar way Flemish government refers to benchmarks or ‘reference levels of European average performance’ to orient its educational policy (cf. Leterme, 2005). An example is the benchmark introduced with regard to the number of early school leavers: “By 2010, an EU average rate of no more than 10 % early school leavers should be achieved” (Council of the European Union, 2003, p. 4). This benchmark is used as well at the level of the Flemish educational government to identify weaknesses in the performance of the Flemish educational system and to formulate policy measures (Vandenbroucke, 2004, p. 14; cf. Vanderpoorten, 2003). Another example is the benchmark concerning lifelong learning. 12,5 % participation of the adult working age group by 2010 is put forward as a target (Council of the European Union, 2003, p. 5), and used by the Flemish government (Vandenbroucke, 2004, p. 14) to assess its present performance and to take initiatives for optimisation. Similar benchmarks are formulated, and taken into account, with regard to the number of graduates in mathematics, science and technology (and a decrease concerning gender imbalance), the completion of upper secondary education and low-achieving in reading literacy.

These examples clarify very well how international assessment reports and European benchmarks influence the agenda of educational policy and are being used to justify reforms. However, it not only demonstrates that the informational base for national government has changed. The use of numbers (and international statistics) “help make up the objects of domains upon which government is required to operate” (Rose, 1999,

p. 197) and hence it “makes education policy” by focusing for example on “effectiveness and performativity” (Linblad, 2001, p. 18). Therefore it is important to focus on changes in the way national government comes to understand its national educational system and its governance responsibilities.

As the title of the policy declaration in Flanders – ‘Today champion in mathematics, tomorrow in equal opportunities also’ – expresses, the Flemish educational system is ranked with other (European) systems at the level of its performance. As a consequence, policy in Flanders affirms that educational systems are commensurable, can be compared and measured on a single scale and with regard to their performance or output. In this context of ‘performativity’, as Lyotard (1979) discussed already some time ago, the criteria of efficiency and effectiveness become of central importance. ‘Good education’ is framed as effective and efficient performance with regard to specific indicators (e.g. achievements with regard to mathematics, reading literacy, number of early school leavers, etc.) and calculated on the basis of European/global average performance (Desjardins, Garrouste-Norelins & Mendes, 2004; Commission of the European Communities, 2004, 2005, 2006). Within the calculable space of European educational quality the Flemish government regards itself as a calculating agency. As a result, domains as well as objectives of the Flemish educational policy have a European, comparative and competitive dimension.

This calculating attitude is very well expressed when the minister of education (Vandenbroucke, 2005, 2006) stresses:

An information-rich environment ... is notwithstanding essential for educational policy in Flanders. ... Are enough data, indicators and benchmarks available at the level of central policy to shape central government and to monitor local policy? ... Are we able to check our policy based on the best practice of other countries?

Although the minister (Vandenbroucke, 2005) argues that Flanders has made a great progress in what he calls the ‘professionalisation of educational policy’ based on ‘international stimuli’, according to him, more data and feedback are indispensable. However it is misleading to regard these processes merely as a further ‘professionalisation’ of educational policy and to assume that educational policy has not changed itself. The information-rich environment referred to is a calculable space of efficiency and effectiveness that correlates with the Flemish government as a calculating agency. Hence, if one is positioned within such a space a particular kind of information is indispensable: comparative information on one’s performance in relation to a specific norm or average. This kind of evaluative information is defined (in cybernetics) as feedback and its function is to control the operation of a system “by inserting into it the results of past performance” (Wiener, quoted after Van Peursen, Bertels & Nauta, 1968, p. 57; cf. McKenzie, 2001, p. 70). As a calculating agency, Flemish government experiences this feedback on performance as indispensable at two related levels.

On the one hand, comparative information evaluates the performance of the state's past and present educational policy and can be used to re-orient educational policy and to optimise its performance. As such, information generated through the European coordination method and other international assessment instruments is welcomed in Flanders "to have a better understanding of one's own educational policy" (Vandenbroucke, 2004, p. 25) and is perceived as a kind of stimulus for the "professionalisation of educational policy". Again, this process of professionalisation has a particular focus: educational policy itself is regarded as a performance in an international, competitive environment and perceived as being engaged in a "process of competitive self-improvement" (Haahr, 2004, p. 223).

On the other hand, and within this new field of competition, feedback on the performance of national educational systems justifies and reinforces the role and tasks of national government in managerial terms. The issue of 'equal opportunities' for example is used as an indicator of the system's performance and information on this indicator evaluates whether resources are mobilised and managed in an optimal way. As such, central policy in Flanders becomes a kind of 'performance targeted policy' (Vandenbroucke, 2006) in an international/European, competitive environment. At this level, feedback becomes indispensable to orient the management of processes of competitive self-improvement of the educational system.

Thus, as far as (optimal) conduct is conceived as (optimal) performance, both at the level of educational policy and the educational system, feedback is needed in order to direct this conduct and the collection and distribution of feedback information becomes a powerful steering mechanism (cf. Bröckling, 2006). In short, government or the conduct of conduct currently takes form in 'feedback on performance'.

5. Distribution of feedback on performance

The general aim of this study was to deepen our understanding of the role of nation state government in relation to globalisation, and in particular in relation to Europeanisation. However, in order to have a more detailed picture of the current process of governmentalisation it is necessary to focus on developments on other scales as well. An alternative is to use the expression: 'on other levels as well?': processes of globalisation (other than Europeanisation), processes of decentralisation and the 'conduct of conduct' at school and class level. These scales will be discussed briefly in order to display the wide distribution of government through 'feedback on performance'.

There is clear evidence that global agencies create new spaces for national governments to position themselves and to orient (educational) policy. Reports of the OECD for example install a comparative framework for both national governments and educational systems/schools to know themselves, that is, to be informed about their performance and to receive 'stimuli' to improve themselves. The World Trade Organisation (WTO), and in particular the General Agreement on the Trade in Services

(GATS), seek to promote the liberalisation of (private) education and to eliminate barriers to student mobility (Rizvi, 2004; Robertson & Dale, 2003). What is aimed at is the construction of global spaces for educational institutions to conduct themselves as free services in a global economy. These examples clarify that the governmentalisation of Europe analysed here should be regarded as just one component in the assemblage of 'global governmentality' (Perry & Maurer, 2003). How national government, and in particular Flanders, conducts itself within these other global spaces needs further research. However, because these spaces promote economic calculations, practices of comparison and procedures of benchmarking, it could be expected that 'feedback on performance' will play also here a major role as steering mechanism.

In a similar way there is evidence that 'feedback on performance' not only structures the relation between global agencies and government of member states (Flanders) but as well the 'decentralised' relation between Flemish government and self-government of local schools. Meanwhile, a substantial number of studies are available that demonstrate how current policies on decentralisation reveal a shift from social forms of governmentality towards advanced liberal forms of governmentality (Popkewitz, 1996; Marshall & Peters, 1999; Ball, 2003; Olssen et al., 2004). The state is no longer rationalised as a central agency of planning, welfare provision and distribution that rules society and education through bureaucratic power and encompassing interventions. Instead, central government seeks to manage the educational system through a particular self-government of local schools, that is, through the 'autonomisation' and 'responsibilisation' of the school in a 'quasi-market' (Rose, 1996). Also in this context, and in particular with regard to the case of Flanders, 'feedback on performance' could be regarded as major dimension of how government works. The minister of education claims for example that similar to central educational policy (at a European level) local school policy is in need of an 'information-rich environment' for without such an environment it would be impossible for schools to know their effectiveness and to improve their performance: "We want to provide schools with a mirror through which they can benchmark their own performances against those of schools that have the same pedagogic and student profile" (Vandenbroucke, 2006, cf. 2005). As such, Flemish policy aims at the organisation of calculable places of efficiency and effectiveness and addresses schools as calculating agencies in need of feedback on performance. These restructurings illustrate that 'feedback on performance' emerges also as a powerful steering mechanism within the state.⁵

Another scale of governmentalisation relates to the position of teachers, students/pupils and their interactions. Increasingly, teaching is regarded as a performance with a well-defined output (e.g. standards) and teacher's professionalism becomes a matter of effectiveness and efficiency with regard to pre-established standards (Olssen et al., 2004, p. 189 ff.). This way of looking correlates with the introduction of a whole series of technologies and procedures: standards and standard-based testing, audit pro-

cedures, performance management and methods for self-evaluation, etc. (Biesta, 2004). Meanwhile, studies have explained that these technologies and procedures indeed create new spaces and offer new vocabularies for teachers to come to understand themselves and their teaching (Ball, 2003; Webb, 2006). Through these spaces of efficiency and effectiveness teachers come to understand 'good conduct' as 'optimal performance', to regard professionalisation as an ongoing process of self-improvement and to reflect upon their individual performance as being linked up with the performance of the school as a whole. Hence, it could be expected that 'feedback on performance' also becomes a steering mechanism for teachers: 'where do I sit in relation to others, in relation to average outputs?' Additionally, new methodologies and tools for monitoring, managing and assessing students' learning have been introduced. Portfolio assessment and assignments for reflection for instance should enable students to assess their performance ('what are my weak and strong points?'), and to develop strategies to plan and manage one's own learning career (Fendler, 2003). Here, the student is addressed as a kind of calculating agency, that is, someone who should reflect upon learning as a process with a well-defined output, who can and should effectively and efficiently manage learning processes, and thus someone who is in need of permanent feedback to orient her performance. The previous paragraphs explain that processes of governmentalisation at diverse scales and in specific locales should be taken into account in order to have a more complete picture of the current governmentalisation of the state (Flanders). But the previous illustrations offer also evidence that 'feedback on performance' works as a steering mechanism on a much broader scale. Hence, we think it is legitimate to regard this proliferation of government through 'feedback on performance' as indicating a general shift in how we are governed and govern ourselves. This does not mean however that 'the state' gradually penetrates all spheres of life in order to spread the logic of competition, feedback and performance. Instead, in relation and confrontation to these dispersed processes of governmentalisation (at the level of schools, Europe, transnational agencies, etc.) the state is reshaped into a managerial agency aiming at the optimal performance of each and all (including itself). The widespread use of 'feedback on performance' thus can be conceived of as a component of what elsewhere is described as a general transition from the 'welfare state' to the 'competition state' (Yeatman, 1993; Cerny, 1997) or 'performative state' (Ball, 2000).

6. Concluding remarks

It is possible to formulate some critical thoughts concerning the proliferation of government through 'feedback on performance'. As Foucault reminds us, because power is involved in processes of governmentalisation these processes are not necessarily bad but potentially dangerous. My critical comments therefore are an attempt to grasp

some of the dangers involved in the current governmental regime. The case of Flemish policy will be used again as an example here.

As mentioned earlier, Flemish government aims at becoming a ‘champion’ in ‘equal opportunities’ in education. Within the European calculable space the issue of ‘equal opportunities’ is framed in a specific way, that is, as an output indicator of the system’s performance. As a result, also the optimisation of ‘equal opportunities’ or social inclusion is framed in a specific way: increasing the input of the system (the participation of students/pupils with a particular socio-economic profile) and/or modifying the system’s processes (in order for example to prevent early drop-out of students/pupils with a particular socio-economic profile). Here, I do not only want to stress that ‘equal opportunities’ becomes a technical or managerial matter. What also should be stressed is that a particular conception of social justice accompanies this mode of reasoning. Within the scope of the Lisbon strategy, the issue of ‘equal opportunities’ is part of a strategy to optimise the mobilisation of all resources in view of a competitive European knowledge economy: “Education is regarded as a pathway to inclusion to the labour market and doing employed work is a road to social inclusion” (Lindblad, 2001, p. 17). Hence, the motive to increase social inclusion and to optimise the system’s output is intertwined with the motive to deliver an optimal input for the labour market and to increase the overall economic performance of Europe and its member states. In short, the individual and social costs of exclusion are linked up with the economic costs of exclusion. Drawing upon this example, it is possible to stress at a more general level the dangerous tendency of the new governmental regime.

As a ‘new’ governmental state, Flanders tries to orient itself within a competitive environment and to satisfy its ‘need for feedback’ through benchmarking and collecting information about good practices (Commission of the European Communities, 2004). It is important to stress at this point that benchmarking functions as a particular type of feedback and is a stimulus for a particular kind of learning. What is ‘fed back’ in benchmarking, and used for example by the Flemish government, is evaluative information on one’s performance compared to the (average) performance of competitors and with regard to specific indicators. Benchmarking therefore functions as a kind of calculative ‘practice of comparison’ (Larner & Le Heron, 2004, p. 218) that satisfies the need for feedback (at the level of the Flemish government, for example). However, it also reinforces the experience of learning as being a fundamental resource for the process of competitive self-improvement. The present policy declaration of the Flemish minister of education (Vandenbroucke, 2004, p. 25) – in ‘need of feedback’, as we mentioned earlier – uses for instance the notion of ‘policy imitation’ or expressions such as “learning from others to make progress in achieving one’s own objectives, learning from the successes of other, as well as from their failures”. As a result, the calculative practice of benchmarking leads to the identification of so-called best practices, and more specifically the willingness to know ‘background variables’ and ‘con-

text' that explains the 'added value' (cf. Desjardins et al., 2004, p. 2 and 90).⁶ What I want to stress at this point is that framing 'good conduct' as optimal performance and competitive self-improvement, exemplified by the Flemish government, results in the competitive rationalisation of problems as learning problems.

Consequently, learning (related to feedback on performance and benchmarking) is not only perceived as a process to secure optimal performance of each (member state), but at the same time to secure the overall economic (and social) performance of Europe (in comparison to the USA and Japan) (Vandenbroucke, 2002). Hence, learning based on feedback on performance plays a kind of strategic role for it brings about a "double bind of individualisation and totalisation" (Foucault, 1982, p. 232). Learning is regarded as what constitutes optimal performance of one member state (Flanders), yet at the same time links this individual performance with a totality (Europe). Due to this double bind, questioning the importance of learning or disregarding its potential results in disconnecting oneself from the European project and loosing one's (European) identity as a member state. Since 'feedback on performance' seems to be at different scales a main characteristic of the current governmental regime, the strategy to secure optimal performance for each and all through a double bind of individualisation and totalisation appears also at other levels: states and schools, teachers and schools, students and school population/workforce.

In sum, what emerge at different scales are calculable spaces (of performance indicators, benchmarks, measures of efficiency and effectiveness) that enable actors to individualise themselves. Yet, these spaces at the same time subject these actors (e.g. member states, teachers, etc.) to the logic of competitive self-improvement needed to secure the overall performance (e.g. of Europe, the local school, and so on). The formula of rule can be summarized as: if everyone is obsessed with getting feedback on performance, and continuously asks 'were do I sit in relation to others?' (Larner & Le Heron, 2004, p. 227) and seeks to improve one's performance accordingly, the overall performance is secured. What is dangerous here is the 'soft terror' of a strategy that states: 'perform, or else' (McKenzie, 2001; cf. Lyotard, 1979). This means that placing oneself outside these calculable spaces results in loosing one's very individuality (as a member state, school, teacher, student) and/or disregarding one's responsibility for the performance of the totality to which one belongs. Thus what is dangerous is that our freedom (in terms of performance) becomes a resource for (economic) government, and there is no longer an intellectual or practical space to question the kind of future government holds for us.

Notes

1. The analysis is limited to the current state of affairs in Flanders for with regard to education (and other competencies) the Flemish government has a high level of independence within the federal state of Belgium.
2. In this article we limit ourselves to 'Europe' and its 'member states', although this can not be disconnected from other processes of 'governmentalisation' both more local (e.g. public-private partnerships at regional and local levels) and global (e.g. transnational organisations) (Perry & Maurer, 2003).
3. Part of this analysis is based on my article *To be informed: Understanding the role of feedback information for European/Flemish policy* (to be published in *Journal of Education Policy*) in which I focus in more detail on the emergence of managerial virtues of Flemish government, the changed relation between the Flemish state and its educational system and the development of a 'synopticon' (in order for the 'many to observe the few').
4. For a detailed analysis of this method: Radaelli, 2003; Tucker, 2003; Arrowsmith, Sisson & Marginson, 2004.
5. In order to understand the conduct or practices of freedom of schools within these calculable places, and the managerial role of central government, also at this level further research is needed. Policy instruments recently adopted or proposed in the Flemish policy context (such as 'testing grounds' and 'periodic assessment') could be analysed in order to have a deeper understanding of processes of governmentalisation at this 'local' level (Vandenbroucke, 2004).
6. The (five) benchmarks or "reference levels of European average performance" with regard to education and training are illustrative with regard to this (Commission of the European Communities, 2005). Based on these benchmarks and statistical data on performance indicators a table with the 'best performers in the five benchmark areas' as well as information on progress of each performer (member state) is distributed in order to stimulate "learning from best performance" (Commission of the European Communities, 2005, p. 19 f.). The point of departure is: "Considering that a number of EU Member States are already achieving world-best performances in a number of areas, whereas others are faced with serious challenges, there is real added value available in exchanging information on best policy practice at European level" (Commission of the European Communities, 2006, p. 9).

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