

Training of public-school managers in the light of practical reflexivity

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This study seeks to interpret school managers' experiences and meanings during their training in a continuing education program offered by the government of the Brazilian state of Paraíba. The study used the constituent elements of reflexive dialogue to understand school managers' training, obtained through participant observation during a module of a continuing education program for school managers with 35 school principals and a workload of 24 hours. The results point to a dissonance between training content and the managers' demands and reality, creating a binomial theory vs. practice. It is also possible to identify the political problems around hiring school principals and the consequences of such a process in school management. The research concludes that the training of public managers anchored in practical reflexivity can be a mechanism to contribute to democratic management.

Keywords: public school management; training of managers; reflexivity; practical reflexivity.

Formação de gestores públicos escolares à luz da reflexividade prática

O objetivo deste estudo é buscar a interpretação de experiências e dos significados atribuídos pelos gestores escolares durante seu processo de capacitação no contexto da formação continuada oferecida pelo Governo do Estado da Paraíba. Com base na participação num dos módulos de formação continuada de gestores escolares com 35 diretores e carga horária de 24 horas, utilizamos os elementos constituintes do diálogo reflexivo para compreender a formação de gestores escolares. Os resultados apontam para uma dissonância entre o conteúdo da formação em relação à realidade e demandas dos gestores escolares, criando um binômio teoria x prática. É possível também identificar os problemas políticos que envolvem a escolha dos diretores escolares e as consequências na prática de fazer gestão. A formação de gestores públicos, ancorada na reflexividade prática, pode ser considerada um mecanismo de contribuição para a gestão democrática.

Palavras-chave: gestão pública escolar; formação de gestores; reflexividade; reflexividade prática.

Formación de gestores de escuelas públicas a la luz de la reflexividad práctica

El objetivo de este estudio es buscar una interpretación de las experiencias y significados atribuidos por los administradores escolares durante su formación en el contexto de educación permanente ofrecida por el Gobierno del Estado de Paraíba. Con base en la participación en uno de los módulos de formación continua para administradores escolares con 35 directores y una carga de trabajo de 24 horas, utilizamos los elementos constitutivos del diálogo reflexivo para comprender la formación de administradores escolares. Los resultados apuntan a una disonancia entre los contenidos formativos en relación con la realidad y demandas de los directivos, creando un binomio teoría-práctica. También es posible identificar los problemas políticos en torno a la elección de directores escolares y las consecuencias en la práctica del hacer. La formación de gestores públicos, anclada en la reflexividad práctica, puede ser considerada un mecanismo para contribuir a la gestión democrática.

Palabras clave: gestión de la escuela pública; formación de directivos; reflexividad; reflexividad práctica.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The training of public servants has been debated for some time (Engelbert, 1964) and remains a relevant topic in public management (Coelho, Costa, & Dias, 2019; Teles & Magalhães, 2016). In the context of school management, the training of public managers is a sensitive issue for the quality of education and still lacks further scientific-academic debate (Medeiros, 2019; Paro, 2011; V. G. Santos & Keller-Franco, 2020; Simielli, A. F. Santos, & Plank, 2021), especially in strengthening the link between the areas of administration/management and education.

The emphasis on training public servants has been influenced since the 1980s by the New Public Management (Paz & Odelius, 2021). This movement began in the US and Europe and influenced administrative reforms worldwide to make management more strategic, efficient, and effective in the same way as business administration management.

The New Public Management borrowed characteristics of the capitalist and managerial model, advertising “customer satisfaction” and promising to fight public sector dysfunctions, such as patrimonialism and bureaucracy (F. B. Oliveira, Sant’Anna, & Vaz, 2010). It promotes an idea of efficiency that challenges public managers to meet goals aimed at society’s demands (Camões, 2016; Paz & Odelius, 2021). However, these demands required/inherent to the public manager become more complex than the private manager thanks to a heterogeneous public context guided by actors with diffuse and contradictory interests, making it difficult to identify a single notion of “society demands.” K.P. Oliveira and Paula (2014) criticize the idea of the efficiency of the New Public Management. For the authors, such an approach is too strongly anchored in the economic-financial dimension, proposing a relative efficiency subject to popular control.

The impact of the New Public Management was not different in the area of education. School administration emerged under the influence of technical-scientific conceptions, an influence that has currently intensified. Studies have shown that the training of school managers is treated as a protocol, focusing on fulfilling the goals of the Brazilian National Education Plan (PNE) and disregarding the true desires of managers in their daily lives. For Abrucio (2018, p. 19, our translation), “if the country wants to face the enormous and complex challenges of education, it will need to reflect on management to improve it and, above all, train qualified managers on a large-scale.” This leads to our research question: What kind of training would that be?

A study by Rocha, Carnieletto, and Peixe (2007) with 380 managers of public schools examined the suitability of candidates (to be elected) for the position of school manager in public schools in the Brazilian state Paraná. The results show that “67% of school principals, when elected, did not have the training to carry out the position’s activities, which reinforces the need of education systems to establish public policies to prepare school managers beforehand” (Rocha, Carnieletto, & Peixe, 2007, p. 67, our translation). Although the study was published in 2007, it still reflects the reality of most school managers in Brazil (A. C. P. Oliveira, Carvalho, & Brito, 2020).

The consequences of an unstructured policy for training school managers can be identified through ineffective resource management and its negative impact on educational indices (Abrucio, 2010; Vasconcelos, Leal, & Araújo, 2020); through the effects of mismanagement and corruption in schools (Rodrigues, Faroni, N. D. A. Santos, Ferreira, & Diniz, 2020); the predominance of the technical-scientific conception of management; and the need for initial and continuing training for managers (Luck, 2011; Medeiros, 2019; V. G. Santos & Keller-Franco, 2020). There are also problems related to partisan political issues that negatively influence the choices of school managers in the allocation of resources and the definition of public policies (Sorensen & Robertson, 2020; Souza, 2006).

The school managers' educational path in Brazil was left behind and represents a gap in education policies (A. C. P. Oliveira et al., 2020). Initiatives to train personnel in the area of education have emphasized and targeted teachers, while school managers receive short and superficial result-oriented training, following the neoliberal mindset (Medeiros, 2019; V. G. Santos & Keller-Franco, 2020). Therefore, how are school managers trained to work in the public sphere?

This study aims to interpret experiences and meanings attributed by school managers during their training process in the context of continuing education offered by the government of the Brazilian state of Paraíba. We use the elements that constitute practical reflexivity (Cunliffe, 2002, 2006), a way of researching and reflecting on the researcher's work, and the research subjects in public administration (Cunliffe & Jun, 2005).

The research contributes to broadening the debate on the training practices of public school managers based on an experience in the state of Paraíba, considering the perspective of practical reflexivity as a mechanism to promote democratic management. This perspective makes it possible to study the experiences of non-formal education in relation to public policy planning. Practical reflexivity is anchored in the personal and collective questioning of norms that involve management practices, to go beyond what is said and what is not said, and the understanding of political, social, and economic issues inherent to the context in which management takes place (Cunliffe, 2016; Davel & C. A. D. Oliveira, 2018).

2. PERSPECTIVES OF PUBLIC MANAGER TRAINING

The issue of school managers' training requires a look at the context around which this education occurs in Brazil, especially after the 1988 Constitution and the structural reform the country underwent during the 1990s. This reform was influenced by the New Public Management movement (Camões, 2016; F. B. Oliveira et al., 2010; Paz & Odélius, 2021) inspired by the ideas and practices of the liberally oriented private sector, in which the focus is on cost reduction and effective management (Emery & Giauque, 2005), from an economic-financial point of view (K. P. Oliveira & Paula, 2014).

New work control methods have led public servants to feel harmed and lose autonomy when working to meet the imposed requirements. These control methods are implemented through tools designed to standardize, optimize, and control work under the managerial logic (Kletz, Hénaut, & Sardas, 2014).

The field of public school management was also initially constituted under the influence of classical theories of business administration, which later unfolded into critical perspectives (Moura & Bispo, 2021).

The prominent scholars of school administration in the classical perspective, Carneiro Leão, Querino Ribeiro, Anísio Teixeira, and Benno Sander, present the concept of the school principal as a “guardian of the educational policy.” This school manager was considered an official representative of the state, even before having a role as an educator, assuming the position equivalent of the head of an official department (the public school), which must respond to government demands (Souza, 2017b).

For Miguel Arroyo and Vitor Paro, critics of this classical model of school administration, the application of scientific administration in schools contributes to the maintenance of society’s economic, social, and political conditions. According to the scholars, these management processes and control instruments ensured the productivity and efficient performance of education workers, similar to that of a manager in a company oriented toward economic and financial results (Souza, 2017b).

The classical theories do not fully match reality. There is hybridity that can only be perceived in empirical studies. Souza (2006) highlights that, despite various perspectives, the profile and practices of the school principal are not entirely equivalent to those prescribed in the classic theories since principals are not administrators in the same sense applied to companies, nor do they conduct a purely technical-administrative process. According to the critical perspective, political-pedagogical issues are part of school management and demand democratic approaches.

“Democratic management is not just a pedagogical principle; it is also a constitutional precept” (Gadotti, 2014, p. 14, our translation). The first article of the 1988 Federal Constitution establishes that “all power emanates from the people, who exercise it by means of elected representatives or directly,” inaugurating a new legal and political order in the country, which was developed under two pillars: representative democracy and participatory (direct) democracy, comprising social participation as a principle inherent to democracy. According to Souza (2017a), the conditions of democratic management in public schools in Brazil are under development; democratic management is characterized as a constant exercise of planning and implementation of practices to encourage social participation.

From a perspective of democratic management, reflecting on planning in education implies redefining its function and its form of development and organization in the perspective of participatory planning. In contrast to bureaucratic planning models, based on an instrumental and technical vision, participatory planning encourages collective processes and practices to transform and not legitimize what has already been said, what has already been done, and what has already been thought (Gadotti, 2014).

The school is a space for social interaction and training, where people have different ideas and thoughts. Therefore, it is a diverse and complex environment, which triggers a series of conflicts (Poubel & Junquillo, 2019), of which the manager will act as a mediator (Junquillo, Almeida, & Silva, 2012). Given this scenario, managers’ training is perceived as essential to deal with the school’s complex, adverse, and dynamic contexts, breaking with the authoritarian, individualistic logic, referring to collectively responsible and shared decisions (Machado, 2008).

This scenario also imposes new ways and strategies to use the managers’ training processes as an opportunity to promote knowledge. More than acquiring knowledge, managers have to apply and adapt it considering the new information within the school context. Collective learning becomes more critical as it values gains in institutional autonomy and professional development.

According to Souza (2017b), the view on school managers' training is linked to both classic and critical perspectives. Some authors advocate specific technical training for principals, understanding that their functions differ from those of teachers (Ribeiro, 1938, 1978). Others argue that training focused essentially on education is the way forward (Paro, 2009, 2011), based only on academic education in the area of pedagogy. This point of view disregards management training, assuming that such skills can be learned in everyday school life.

In a hybrid perspective, Wittmann and Gracindo (2001) recommend that the education of the school principal should consist of a solid preparation in the field of education. This comprises attending one of the many undergraduate programs in the field (programs leading to teaching careers), complemented by graduate programs (specialization or other specific qualification) on techniques for educational management. Finally, the authors point out the need for continuing education to help associate knowledge and experiences and improve personal and institutional performance.

The school manager training is one of the main targets for reflection, as it is a critical element for achieving quality in the school environment. It is up to the manager to break with the passivity of just responding to the demands of central government agencies, as one of the system's bureaucratic employees, and act as a political-social representative of education for open school management, which is participatory and engaged with society's aspirations (Abrucio, 2018; Moura & Bispo, 2021).

The Final Document of the Brazilian National Conference on Education (2010) mentions that participation must be promoted through citizen education. Considering the aspirations and the recent processes of social mobilization, the PNE aims to connect formal education with experiences of non-formal education (also aligning experiences of an education that is popular and focused on citizenship) and try to incorporate networked public policies.

Networks are part of human life in society; they can be perceived as accessible structures in which new "nodes" are added, as long as they identify and share the same codes, which leads us to reflect on the same principles, values, and ideals. The collaborative logic of networks requires dialogue, a connection of actions, and shared management (Gadotti, 2014).

For Gadotti (2014), participation in networks nowadays is expanding with media dissemination, mainly through digital technologies. Popular participation is linked to social networks in Brazil, driven by wide horizontality. However, they are still little used by educational policies. The construction of networks and forums represents a strategic alternative to engage people, especially in discussing the long-awaited educational reform.

This study proposes a dialogue with the state, enabled through the network of school managers to feed the needs of the local network in an integrated and continuous way; not periodic and "consultative," but dialogued and participatory, through practical reflexivity.

3. REFLEXIVITY: A POSSIBILITY FOR PUBLIC BUREAUCRACY

Understanding the polysemy of possible meanings of reflexivity is the first step toward exploring its possibilities and using a basis for organizational transformation in the public sphere through more critical, responsible, and ethical actions (Cunliffe & Jun, 2005).

Studies on reflexivity have permeated various sciences, such as anthropology, history, sociology, and psychology (Ashmore, 1989; Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Foucault, 2002; Latour, 1988). Although it is possible to find some studies regarding reflexivity in public administration (Farmer, 1995; Jun,

1994), the recognition of the impact of reflexivity in the field is still incipient, perhaps because of confusion on the topic or because it is challenging to implement reflexive acts in bureaucratic institutions (Cunliffe & Jun, 2005).

The terms “reflection” and “reflexivity” may have similar meanings, but they have different epistemological and ontological assumptions (Cunliffe, Aguiar, Góes, & Carreira, 2020). The objective idea of reflection is based on the logic of an original reality in which thought, and action are separate. Reflexivity, under the influence of studies by Schon (1984), treats the process as reflecting in action, incorporating discourse into practice through more critical thinking that leads to the construction of new social realities.

“Reflection” is calculative thinking, while “reflexivity” refers to meditative thinking. The first is concerned with objectivism, neutrality, and rationality. It has an objectivist ontology, in which social reality happens independently of us. From this perspective, we were born into a society where we must learn the rules to become effective members (Cunliffe & Jun, 2005). On the other hand, reflexivity has an intersubjective ontology and an epistemology of social construction. We are not separated from social reality, being able to modify it as we move away, analyze, and criticize to understand its complexity (Cunliffe et al., 2020). Thus, reflexivity goes beyond the problem, calculating and measuring solutions; it questions and explores the construction of organizational ties and networks collectively.

Critical approaches to reflexivity originate from poststructuralist and postmodern perspectives, with assumptions for thinking more critically about academic, organizational, and social policies and practices. Cunliffe and Jun (2005) present two reflexivity approaches to public management: self-reflexivity and critical reflexivity.

Self-reflexivity is based on understanding one’s role in the construction of social and organizational life. It happens in a deeper way than reflecting on a situation or problem; it is to immerse ourselves in our fundamental assumptions, values, and how we interact (Cunliffe et al., 2020). Through this process of self-criticism, we become more receptive to others, generating new possibilities for action.

Lash (1993) defines self-reflexivity as a humanistic perspective and believes that the individual is capable of questioning the means and ends of action, consciously getting involved in the act. Individuals are open to new possibilities for change when they recognize the limitations of imposed goals. Freire (2011) calls this critical consciousness. Therefore, it constitutes a socio-ontological movement, as it recognizes the impact of the practices themselves and their relationships in the construction of reality.

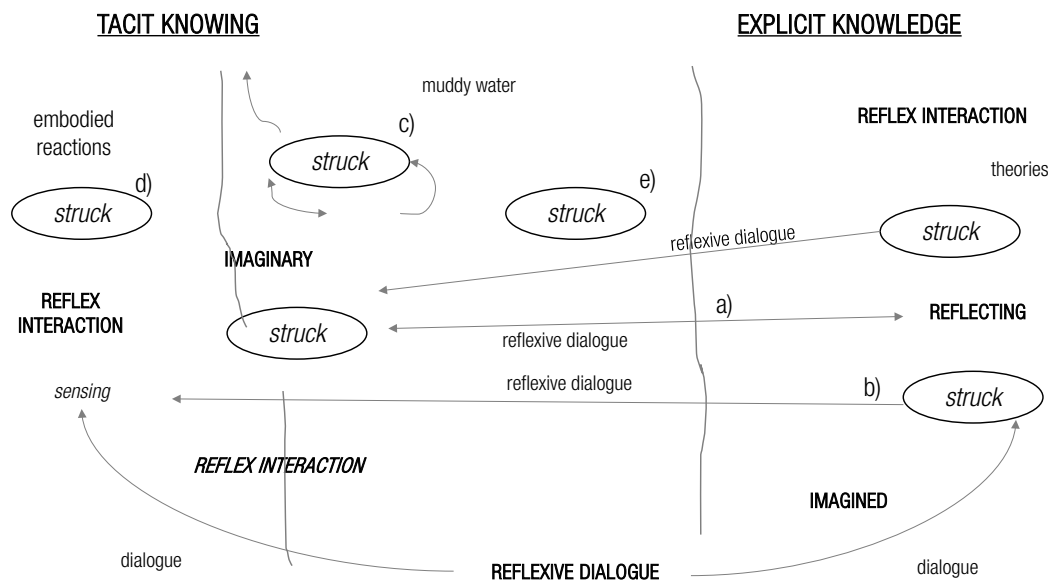
Critical reflexivity is based on ethical responsibility in actions at organizational and social levels. This assumption comes to the detriment of a hegemonic society, composed of standardized knowledge, defined rules, power, and discipline exercised by institutions that involve dominant ideologies. Employees and managers do not question normative practices that sometimes privilege some groups (Cunliffe & Jun, 2005). However, when there is a reflective practitioner, new ways of thinking about these practices of standardization, control, and discipline can be developed, creating more equitable practices, and implementing the necessary conditions to promote ethical, more democratic, and socially-relevant public management, transforming into practical reflexivity.

Practical reflexivity comprises questioning these standardized norms, going beyond what is expressed or not expressed. It encompasses understanding the contextual political, social, and economic issues and how this affects reality globally and locally (Cunliffe, 2016) — in this case, the educational context.

Thus, the theory is based on building social realities and on interactions connected by a continuous process around us as we speak and act. The reflexive dialogic practice reworks knowledge as knowing-from-within, understanding the situation in what we do and say (Shotter, 1993, p. 18). Therefore, learning can be considered an embodied, relational-responsive understanding. It is not only cognitive understanding but one in which we are “struck” (Wittgenstein, 1980, p. 85, as cited in Cunliffe, 2002).

In Figure 1, Cunliffe (2002) explains how embodied and relational learning can happen between tacit knowing (daily conversation and embodied actions) and explicit knowledge (theoretical forms) in an area of open possibilities and understandings.

FIGURE 1 REFLEXIVE DIALOGUE



Source: Cunliffe (2002).

We can be struck (see Figure 1) in an embodied and tacit way (a), resorting to the use of tacit knowing or explicit knowledge; in practical or theoretical ways, by speaking to build our experience, involving learning, and giving meaning to our reflective actions, linking theory and practice in reflective dialogue with ourselves and others. Likewise, we can be struck by explicit knowledge and (b) connect tacit ways of acting. The reflective dialogue is crucial to this point. It uses theoretical

forms of conversation to develop new ways of speaking and acting in everyday life, using the explicit for the tacit.

We perceive the meaning of only a part, but we do not understand the whole (c). The experience occurs from the inside out. One can feel the possibilities, but it is not possible to make sense of the experience because, at this point, we have no language, knowledge, or ability to act. We can act unconsciously (d) and spontaneously so that we cannot question. An example at this point is how some emotional aspects can influence our reactions. We may have been momentarily struck (e), but this type of knowledge did not mark us; the connections were not strong enough to embody the knowledge.

In this case, Morgan (1986) proposes the use of metaphors to criticize and create forms of conversation. The impact of this perspective on management learning lies in the shift in focus from a theoretical conversation about the practice to a dialogical conversation, agile in practice (Cunliffe, 2002).

Thus, in this research, practical reflexivity can be understood as a transformation strategy in school education that aims to help managers in their daily lives through reflexive dialogues with the various actors in school practice. It enables managers to promote democratization through dialogue and the resignification of the school's context, providing more autonomy and giving voice to people to contribute and act in their space.

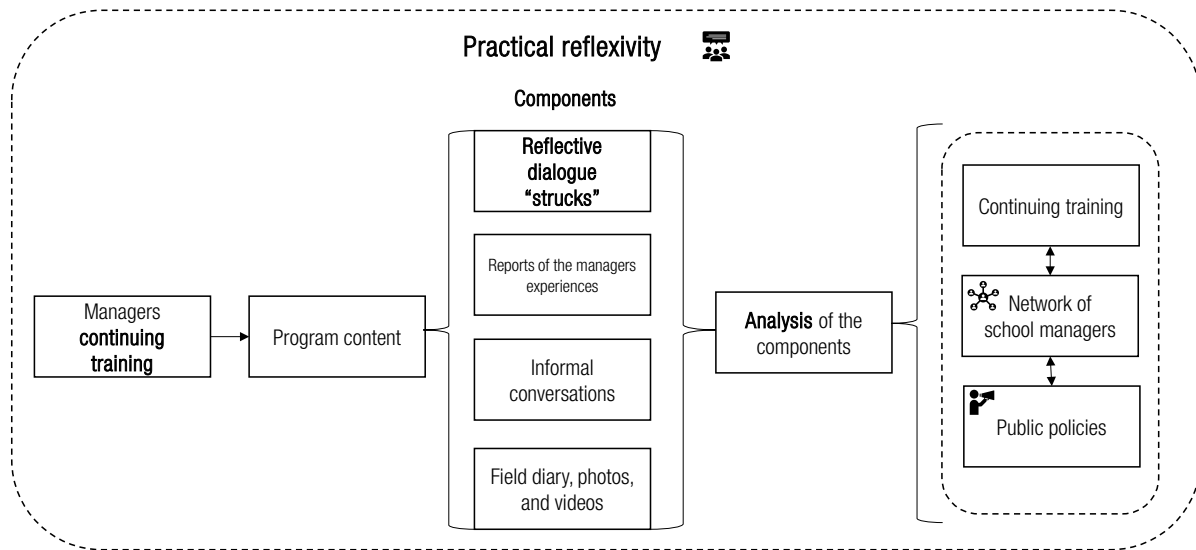
4. METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) aims to interpret experiences and meanings attributed by school managers during their training process in a module of continuing education offered in 2017 by the Department of Education of the Brazilian State of Paraíba. The module addressed the organization of pedagogical work. It was offered between March 8 and 10, with a workload of 24 hours, with the participation of 35 school managers and the first author of this article.

The research data were collected through participant observation (Serva & Jaime, 1995), photos and videos of the training course, and reflective notes in the field diary. This method had the advantage of proximity to the research subjects and their experience as school managers, providing greater knowledge of the observed practice (Machado & Boruchovitch, 2015).

The dataset comprised the notes in the field diary, the three days of the course recorded and transcribed, the course materials, videos, photos, activities the managers presented during the lessons, and informal conversations registered in a WhatsApp group created specifically for the course. The analysis started after gathering the dataset and did not count on categories established a priori (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), as shown in Figure 2.

FIGURE 2 FRAMEWORK OF THE PROCESS OF ANALYSIS OF THE PRACTICAL REFLEXIVITY



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

During the course, we focused on identifying moments that evidenced the reflexive dialogues (Cunliffe, 2002; Cunliffe et al., 2020) of school managers, especially when perceived “struck” in embodied into practice, comparing the course’s content and the reality of their work. Therefore, the interpretation of the results considered the managers’ process of resignifying practices carried out in the school’s daily life and the lessons learned during training.

The study’s processes of interpretation and analysis were simultaneous to the experiences collected in participant observation. Interpretation and analysis were not static and rely on “strucks” occurring by the researchers’ attentive eye. We highlighted and noted remarkable moments and connections and based on dialogic evidence, analyzed to what extent the training – in parts bringing explicit-theoretical knowledge – corresponded to the managers’ practical needs (tacit knowing).

The exchange of experiences through dialogues encourages reflexivity. In the context of continuing education on an annual basis, relational and reflexive learning can be perceived. This practice can continuously support strategies, program content, management practices, and public policies. These interactions emerged in the managers’ reports, referring to daily experiences at school and highlighting how much the content of the course had to do with their daily practice.

Regarding ethical aspects, we requested written authorization from the Department of Education of the state of Paraíba to monitor and participate in the training processes at the Training Center for Education Professionals (Cecapro). We also obtained authorization from all participants to conduct this study. Their identities were preserved using codes to refer to each school manager (SM1, SM2, SM3...).

5. A NEW LOOK FOR THE SCHOOL MANAGEMENT TRAINING BASED ON REFLEXIVITY

Continuing training for education professionals takes place annually in Paraíba. This section presents elements of the continuing training of school managers (principals), observed as an application of practical reflexivity. The study followed the training course's module "Organization of pedagogical work," which addressed themes related to the areas of school management (political-pedagogical project, curriculum, management practices, professional development, and internal institutional evaluation), in addition to school regulations, pedagogical intervention project and management quality indicators (PIP).

On March 8, 2017, the instructor started the class with school managers using the brainstorming technique and asked everyone to respond with one word: "What is the role of the school in society? What does the school exist for, and what does it develop in society? [...] Everyone should remember that, in the first stage, we talked about three main axes that correspond to the school's role." SM replied: "Prepare the person to exercise citizenship," and SM2 added: "The school exists today to transform and expand skills that make the subject not only someone that repeats ideas but someone that transform ideas."

With these statements, it is possible to perceive that the school has an immeasurable role in subjects' lives. It is necessary to rethink its role from the perspective of reflexivity, with "subjective understandings of reality as a basis for thinking more critically about the impact of our assumptions, values, and actions on others" (Cunliffe, 2004, p. 407).

The instructor continued the reflection and searched for an understanding of the school's different roles, which are at times distorted. The school exists as a space where we have access to knowledge and information that we use in our lives. We often hear that the school must prepare for life. When this is said, we are led to understand that school is something outside of life. In this sense, we would 'leave life' to learn and then 'return to life' (Libâneo, 2013).

"School is life itself," said the instructor (Notas de Campo, 2017). However, it constitutes only a part of education. Education involves first the parents and the family, the different social and cultural spaces that permeate life, and the construction of understanding of a subject. Amid all this conjuncture, the school permeates the subject's life in a certain period. However, educational institutions are often assumed to be 'redeemers of humanity.' They cannot exercise this role since education is a multidimensional phenomenon of which schooling is just one of the elements.

This moment of thinking that the 'school is life itself' made the participants reflect on how we understand school, work, and university as external environments to our "personal" lives instead of recognizing that these spaces are part of life itself. We relate to other people in these spaces and build our social web. So, through this reflexive dialogue (Cunliffe, 2016), we can rethink our own practice, imbricated in the context, in the senses given in a relational and situational way.

The instructor continued: "What is the school recognized as today? As a space of conflicts, as a space of tensions." Luck (2011) deals with this paradigm shift in which, before, the work environment and human behavior were predictable, and uncertainty, ambiguity, tension, and conflict were considered dysfunctions. Today, the environment is dynamic and unpredictable, with conflicts and uncertainties (Poubel & Junquillo, 2019). These same conflicts permeate schools at

all times and are part of the challenges of democratic management, which primarily aims to give voice to those involved (Souza, 2017a).

The instructor also presented the three fundamental roles of the school: the commitment to the person's development, the commitment to the sense of citizenship, and the commitment to preparing for insertion into the job market. Paro (2011) questions this third role of education, considering it as a means of maintaining the power and domination of some groups. For the author, this third element becomes preponderant in education, as it allocates the graduated students to jobs with little chance of social mobility, especially in public spaces.

Faced with these three fundamental roles, how does the school achieve them? In order to fulfill these roles, it needs some elements, means, and instruments. The instructor continued arguing that these means, these instruments, and these conditions that make the school maintain its legal function are the organization of social work. How these means, conditions, and instruments are interlinked depends on how this organization is conducted. Therefore, management is presented as the way of leading the school to achieve its social function (Notas de Campo, 2017). Thus, school management involves the process of organizing the means and the necessary conditions for the school to move toward fulfilling its social function (Luck, 2008, 2009).

Gadotti (2014), in contrast, argues that much emphasis is still given to means, methods, and techniques that characterize technicist and utilitarian education, understanding the philosophical and political question of the ends of education as something already resolved. For the author, means and ends are not related. However, we have advanced in methodologies, tests, and evaluation processes without reflecting on the meaning of the evaluation object.

During some informal conversations with the school managers, many reported not having time to dedicate to pedagogical issues as they need to meet urgent demands from the administration and address teacher-student conflicts. According to Gadotti, "it seems that the question about the ends of education has been forgotten" (Gadotti, 2014, p. 14, our translation).

Paro (2011) presents this distinction between administration and management, pointing out that the school's social function must be considered. Therefore, during training, we used and identified the approach of practical reflexivity, which recognizes and expands the practitioners' roles and the routines they share. Thus, management is analyzed based on tensions as a reflection of the social complexity in the organizational process (Souza, 2017a).

When we talk about management, we tend to limit the scope of this dimension to the mere administrative task, which is the responsibility of the school principal, the manager. But management is much broader than that. It involves all decision-making regarding what to do at school, how to do it, with whom to do it; it involves teachers, pedagogical and management staff, parents, and the school community. There is a community dimension, a pedagogical dimension, an institutional dimension, and of course, an administrative-financial dimension of management (Instructor).

The instructor used metaphors, as suggested by Morgan (1986), to clarify the concept of school management and lead the participants to rethink the harmony of their actions, as understood by Cunliffe (2016):

For example, we can compare the figure of the school principal or school manager to the task of a maestro, who seeks to connect all these processes. The maestro often has practical maieutics. When I speak of practical maieutics, I speak of the conditions and means for the orchestra to take place (Instructor).

SM3 interrupted and argued:

I believe that the idea of the course is great, but it would be interesting, before you talk about it, to say something about what it is like to be a principal in the state education system, what it is like to be a manager where there is nothing: there is no paper, no pencils [...] You have nothing, right? What is it like to be a school manager where there is a dumb employee put there by a politician, and you cannot complain about that employee? I think the approach you took is interesting, but first, you need to know the reality that we are living in. What will these courses assess? What will you monitor? Right now, we have to fill open positions. If you do not fill the positions or teachers do not receive their paychecks, it will be a big mess (SM3).

The difficulties of school management are imminent, and, at all times, they stand out during training when school managers ask how to solve them. Such complexities, presented by Luck (2009), are often part of the system of public educational policies, disorient the school principal and generate conflicts in relationships with the various agents in the network. However, like any other organization, the management process requires managing resources and people to achieve a specific purpose; in the case of the school, the purpose is the formal and social development of students (Poubel & Junquillo, 2019). The development of management is also recognized by school principals, as highlighted by SM4: “We need to look at the administrative part. It is important for us to see the theory to know how far we are from what could be.”

Concerning theoretical aspects of management and based on reflexive dialogues, Cunliffe (2002, 2016) recognizes the importance of converting explicit knowledge to tacit knowing – from theory to practice. The author explains that, in an embodied and tacit way, we can resort to knowledge and practical or theoretical forms of speaking to build our experience, involving learning, and giving meaning to our reflexive actions in the dialogue with the agent and their surroundings. Thus, some school principals recognize the need for management knowledge. However, urgent issues with short deadlines stand out to the detriment of planned practices, as Moura and Bispo (2021) pointed out.

The instructor added that the training was organized in a hurry and that lecturers had been consulted way before, but the instructor received the material to prepare the course only a week in advance. In any case, the instructor considered the principals’ questions and reprogrammed the agenda to meet the demands of the class. The impact of political issues was also reinforced: “From the [previous training] module until now, 500 school principals have been replaced.” In 2017, there were 442 public school principals and 324 deputy principals in Paraíba.

The mentioned change was due to the state government’s political decision that the position of school principals would be filled by appointment. According to Passador and Salvetti (2013, p. 6), this practice “is highly criticized for opening paths to cronyism and political patronage and the volatile connection to political cycles.” This change was made for the state government to secure a

political bargain because the local government at the state capital, João Pessoa, was also changed to a political appointment regime. Different political parties ruled the state government and the local government in the capital city, so there was a power struggle between them (Notas de Campo, 2017). Thus, having allies in positions of trust was a priority for maintaining power (Rodrigues et al., 2020). The consequences of these changes in the position of director harm the continuity of practices in the school context, and these directors simply start to comply with the demands of the ruler who appointed them (Passador & Salvetti, 2013).

The speech of SM4, when alerting that “the point today, and which everyone here needs, is called conflict management,” highlights a role considered one of the most relevant for principals (Junquillo et al., 2012; Luck, 2011). The school is a diverse and complex environment with subjects of different thoughts and actions that trigger a series of conflicts that the school manager must mediate (Souza, 2017a).

The debate on the high school reform was a source of anxiety among school managers. The debate was present in 2017 (in Paraíba, the reform started in 2021) based on the emergence of the new curricular standards (Base Nacional Comum Curricular – BNCC). Administrative changes and changes in the curriculum often happen from the top-down, imposed by higher-level government bodies without consulting school managers. The instructor confirmed this issue:

You will have to offer at school the so-called education paths as enacted in the amended approved for the LDB [law of guidelines and bases for national education]. I imagine what this process will be like with these conditions you are saying and that we know; facing this condition marked by precariousness (Instructor).

The discourse of precariousness is very present in the speech of school managers, and it is not limited to issues of infrastructure. The government of Paraíba adopted a transnational policy of outsourcing education with a system of accountability for teachers and school principals through the Paraíba Education Development Index (Ideb-PB), a test applied to basic education students. Also, the state carries out the Program Soma, a pact between local and the state governments to increase educational indices, directed by the Center for Public Policies and Assessment of Education (Caed/UFJF), which develops and applies planning, organization, and correction actions based on educational indices, and carries out training of education professionals and technicians (D. A. Oliveira & Clementino, 2020). Thus, the control of the state’s educational policies is centralized in Caed.

In addition, the state offers bonus programs such as the Prêmio Escola de Valor and Prêmio Mestres da Educação, which benefit students and teachers who achieve the best grades in exams. It is also worth noting that only career civil servants are entitled to receive bonuses, although 50% of education professionals in the state are hired as temporary workers and do not fulfill this condition (D. A. Oliveira & Clementino, 2020).

During the course, some managers also addressed the dissatisfaction and disunity among school principals, who act individually. There is an explanation behind this lack of union, justified by the distortion of interpretation of indices such as Ideb and Ideb-PB (Vasconcelos et al., 2020), used as instruments of competitiveness between schools instead of a tool to encourage improvement. These

indices are currently used as a parameter to define whether or not the student enters school, and from this distortion, these indices lose their purpose (Notas de Campo, 2017).

Such questions, which are between the lines of practice, can only be perceived in the time and space of the actors working routine (Lash, 1993). In fact, Ideb, for example, only assesses scores for Portuguese and mathematics obtained through the national assessment exam Prova Brasil. Thus, the index does not address many other criteria that can define quality education (Ribeiro, 2015; Vieira, Vidal, & Nogueira, 2015). “What quality are we talking about, and what education are we talking about?” Gadotti (2014, p. 14) asks when questioning the definition of quality in education. For the author, we have to keep caring about the quality of education, but first, we need to know what “quality” we aim for.

This quality permeates infrastructure, qualification of education professionals, available resources, democratic management, and, consequently, the level of student learning. However, these aspects are not situated and do not consider the social context for the generation of education evaluation indices (Luck, 2009, 2011; Vasconcelos et al., 2020) without the participation of agents (Gadotti, 2014). What can be seen is the use of Ideb, one of the main educational indices, as a parameter for competition between schools and not for their improvement (Notas de Campo, 2017).

The outsourcing of education in Paraíba took place through the hiring of Social Organizations (SOs) (Notas de Campo, 2017). These institutions were intended to support school principals in educational management and hiring staff such as school assistants, student caregivers, electricians, drivers, and computer technicians. However, these contracts were investigated for corruption by the Public Prosecutor’s Office, and in 2020, with the new government, these contracts were terminated. Outsourcing and decentralization of management are characteristics of the New Public Management (Kletzt et al., 2014). However, there is already a study that shows that these mechanisms do not reduce the size of the state. In fact, their “costs” are different (non-financial) and may be higher (Alonso, Clifton, & Díaz-Fuentes, 2015).

On the other hand, the previous government (2011 to 2018) made massive investments in infrastructure, as shown in the speech – collected during the training course – of the director of the state agency responsible for works related to the state development plan (Supla): “This year alone [2017], in Paraíba, we are delivering 55 renovated schools.” During the training, the former governor stressed: “We are sowing changes in our social structure through education since only through education we can provide a better future for the children [...]. Investing in the public education system to restore dignity to the school environment” (Curso de Formação da Paraíba, 2017).

These points reflect the volatility of education, with legislation reformed, political decisions superimposed, alterations in the curriculum, and changes in the provision of management positions, systems, and schools structure. The school managers’ speech reveals numerous significant changes and resistance to such transformations, as observed in the statement SM5: “There will be a change so schools will start offering full-time sessions [the traditional school day in Brazil is part-time], and they are not preparing us in this course for this type of school, which will be piloted next year.”

As observed above, the training is not planned according to the schools’ reality; it is not aligned with the particularities of each school. There is no effective communication to plan training practices aligned with the school managers’ demands, and there is no networked construction connecting

the means to the ends (Gadotti, 2014). They are decided upon and later analyzed how they will be implemented (Notas de Campo, 2017).

The State Department of Education poses many demands to school principals. They are responsible for feeding the *Sistema Saber*,¹ inserting the number of students, grades, attendance, attendance of teachers, and the school financial accounts, among other information. As reported, this school-secretary channel is noisy and becomes a one-way street, as seen in the findings of Poubel and Junquillo (2019). In view of all comments from the course participants, the instructor proposed to the class:

I have a suggestion: the elaboration of a letter to the head of the state Department of Education. While recognizing the importance given to the training processes, [...] they must consider the existing and immediate demands of schools and the training to deal with real and concrete problems of our daily lives that need to be overcome. If we can produce this letter, we can also produce a lot in this course. We will express recognition of the initiative but also its insufficiency to deal with issues that involve the political will of the management, the allocation of resources, and necessary referrals (Instructor).

The instructor's proposition represents leaving the imaginary plane of reflection and moving toward action. At this moment, the reflexivity process begins (Cunliffe, 2004, 2016): when we question what we and others can take for granted – what is being said and not said – and examine the impact this has or can have. This means examining our own assumptions, decisions, actions, interactions, and assumptions that underpin organizational policies and practices and intended impact (Cunliffe et al., 2020).

At the end of the course, the school managers discussed the importance of uniting the schools in the community, performing benchmarking, and implementing common practices together, strengthening the bond between them, and building a solidarity network or the network of school managers (Notas de Campo, 2017). This idea of a relational and fluid network corroborates the concept of managing (Cunliffe, 2016) applied to the context of Brazilian school management by Poubel and Junquillo (2019) as a reconstructed phenomenon of “doing management.” However, there are no reports that these collaborative networks are institutionalized (Gadotti, 2014).

This study proposes that this “network of school managers” is a practice (Moura & Bispo, 2021) that provides reflexive dialogues (Cunliffe, 2006; Cunliffe et al., 2020) on challenges, perspectives, and trends in school management. This leads school principals to question how they can act in plural and complex contexts with the available tools, build partnerships with other schools and institutions, work on joint projects, and search for solutions by sharing the same difficulties and anxieties.

This organizational process needs to be developed together with public educational policies (political agents) and actively participate (Gadotti, 2014) in decision-making concerning local education. According to Rodrigues et al. (2020), the higher the level of education of the manager responsible for the department of education, the lower the incidence of corruption and mismanagement in spending on basic education in municipalities. These aspects compromise the quality of education

¹ Platform to support and monitor schools of the state education system in Paraíba.

and can be accompanied by democratic mechanisms and more participation of school managers in decision-making and defining educational policies.

Thus, the more the agents involved in democratic management – school principal, manager of the department of education, political agents, parents, teachers, education professionals, school council, and organized civil society – are trained for citizenship, guided to participate effectively, and above all, work in collaborative networks (Gadotti, 2014), the closer they will get to what quality education is. This arrangement results in more monitoring, inspection, and, therefore, more ethical, transparent, collective, and participatory practices (Cunliffe, 2016; Paro, 2011; Poubel & Junquillo, 2019).

6. REFLECTIONS AND PROPOSITIONS ON SCHOOL MANAGER’S TRAINING

During the monitoring of training, these findings allowed us to reflect and propose actions closer to a reflexive training policy. It can be seen that, during training, the professor acted as a reflexive mediator and adapted the theme proposed by the initial program. During the meetings, the professor enabled reflexive dialogues about the educational context and future perspectives, and, at the end of the last day, during the proposal of the letter, the school managers prepared several questions, illustrated in Table 1.

BOX 1 PROPOSAL FOR MANAGERS’ TRAINING

What should it offer?	How should it be offered?	To whom (with whom) should it be offered?
a) Address the lack of autonomy; b) Continuing training and separated into levels; c) Technical-operational content to work on the pedagogical programs; d) Practical instruction on personnel, accountability, documents (templates of official documents), material, patrimonial and accounting logistics; e) Pedagogical team (social worker, psychologist, educational psychologist, and pedagogue).	a) Partnership with foundations and institutions; b) Ongoing training; c) Regular meetings; d) Meeting of departments/secretariats; e) Constitution of an administrative and operational technical guide (to resolve adverse situations); f) Adverse situations: assignments of each school employee, templates of official documents, spreadsheet templates, resignation, reappointment of civil servants.	Schools, teachers, students, civil servants, parents, and community.

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

The study points out that reflections and research on the training of school managers require more attention from public educational policies and political agents (Poubel & Junquillo, 2019; V. G. Santos & Keller-Franco, 2020). Regarding the training process, we list some notes to prepare managers for the challenges of “performing democratic management.”

Acting through practical reflexivity “shall take it that the basic practical moral problem in life is not what to do, but [who] to be [...]” (Shotter, 1993, p. 118). Thus, substituting a subjective ontology for an intersubjective one makes it possible to encourage reflexivity in the school managers’ training through

spaces that promote self-reflexive dialogues (Cunliffe & Jun, 2005), with questions such as: “What does it mean to be a school principal?” “What have I been doing as a school principal?” “What barriers have I faced daily?” “How can I improve my management practice?” “Who can I count on?” “What tools can I use?” “Have I been ethical in my management practices?” “Do I embrace the responsibilities given to me?”

It is also necessary to establish questions that lead to a critical reflection of the educational context: “What is your educational path?” “Which management practices would you highlight in your school?” “What are the main difficulties as a principal?” “How do you evaluate your school’s community’s economic, cultural, and social context?” “What have you, as a principal, been doing to change and improve the reality of your school community?” “Have educational policies been aligned with your school context?”

Thus, training programs for school managers concerned with the design of training – from the organization of the education program to the modalities and practices developed – can positively impact the development of managers and, therefore, the local and situated school context. As proposed in this study, self-questioning, self-reflexivity, participatory planning, and practical reflexivity work as keys to regulating future actions, even promoting the improvement of relations between principals, secretariats, teachers, employees, and students.

7. CONCLUSION

This article aimed to interpret experiences and meanings attributed by school managers to their training process. It is possible to observe that the training does not correspond to the desires and difficulties the managers face in schools. The undergraduate programs leading to teaching careers pay little or no attention to management, and continuing education does not meet these professionals’ expectations regarding their work in schools. Therefore, we seek to understand how managers see these training processes and what they propose to change and improve them.

The New Public Management movement emphasized the principles of economy, efficiency, and effectiveness, privileging the means over the ends. In the field of education, democratic management as a constitutional principle guides political and managerial actions, so the construction of quality management must go through education for citizenship and direct participatory training of those involved in public policies.

By analyzing the school managers’ training, this research empirically contributed with questions that lead to many reflections, from planning to the implementation of educational policies, analyzing how the different educational levels can contribute to the training process, creating an integrated network (Gadotti, 2014) of initial and continuing training (Medeiros, 2019).

The theoretical contribution of this research lies in the understanding of reflexivity in the context of school managers’ training and the teaching strategy (Relatório de Política Educacional do Instituto Unibanco, 2021) to form critical self-reflexive public managers (Cunliffe, 2016; Cunliffe et al., 2020). In addition, it contributed to the understanding of management as a practice integrated into the social, cultural, and historical context, situated, and developed daily as practitioners make decisions (Gherardi, 2006). We started from the assumption that this practice is conflictive and that the participation of people in the processes in which they live allows us to approach what would be democratic management in coordination with the state.

This research explored the experiences lived by agents in the field of education and working in public schools, especially school managers going through training processes – crucial to achieving quality education. As Professor Ângelo said at a conference, “democratic management does not give up technique” and should not be confused with managerialism, so we need to find ways to develop it. Notwithstanding, our study is restricted to the propositions of participatory networks of public school managers in a given period, which opens up a range of other possibilities.

Thus, future studies could establish a research agenda to analyze the school managers’ training through practical reflexivity (Cunliffe et al., 2020), in other spheres at the federal and municipal level, with other public agents, and in prominent education networks in the country. We also suggest studies that help to understand, in a broader sense, the various aspects of the development of school management, issues such as recruitment, selection, career structure, and evaluation and remuneration policies. An agenda worth exploring is the evaluation of the implementation and development of the *Matriz Nacional Comum de Competências do Diretor Escolar* (national competency-based standards for school principals) established by the National Council of Education – the guiding document of the Brazilian Ministry of Education for the upcoming training courses. Finally, international comparative studies analyzing how other countries have developed training policies is an option to elaborate alternatives for the Brazilian context.

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