

Selection of school principals and the meaning of school management: principals' perceptions about the management plan¹

Seleção de diretores e o sentido da gestão escolar: percepções de diretores sobre o plano de gestão

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ABSTRACT

Mixed mechanisms for selecting school principals have been increasingly established in public education systems in Brazil in order to assess the technical and political competence of candidates to manage schools. In the context of the process of decentralizing educational policies and affirming the post-bureaucratic paradigm of the management matrix, the management plan, a technical requirement for selecting principals, is an instrument to induce the use of educational indicators, the definition of goals and the achievement of school effectiveness. Based on bibliographic and documentary analysis and semi-structured interviews, this case study seeks to verify the perceptions of the principals of two public schools in Rio de Janeiro, considering them as street-level bureaucrats, regarding the implementation of diagnosis and self-evaluation, which are constitutive stages of the management plan in schools. We found that the principals who took part in the study acted with margins of freedom to manage the process and, based on different experiences and values, they attributed different meanings to the management plans.

Keywords: School principals. School management. Management plan. Educational policy implementation. Street-level bureaucrat.

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RESUMO

Nas redes públicas de ensino do Brasil tem se estabelecido crescentemente mecanismos mistos de seleção de diretores escolares, no sentido de aferir a competência técnica e política dos candidatos para gerir as escolas. No contexto do processo de descentralização de políticas educacionais e afirmação do paradigma pós-burocrático de matriz gerencial, o plano de gestão, requisito técnico para a seleção dos diretores, constitui-se como instrumento para indução do uso de indicadores educacionais, definição de metas e alcance da eficácia escolar. Com base em análise bibliográfica, documental e entrevistas semiestruturadas, este estudo de caso busca verificar as percepções dos diretores de duas escolas da rede pública municipal do Rio de Janeiro, considerados burocratas do nível de rua, sobre a implementação da diagnose e autoavaliação, etapas constitutivas do plano de gestão nas escolas. Verificamos que as diretoras participantes da pesquisa atuaram com margens de liberdade para gerir o processo, e que baseadas nas distintas experiências e valores atribuíram sentidos diferentes aos planos de gestão.

Palavras-chave: Diretores escolares. Gestão escolar. Plano de gestão. Implementação de política educacional. Burocrata do nível de rua.

Introduction

This study, conducted based on bibliographic and documental research and semi-structured interviews, analyzes the perceptions of school principals about management plan building. The plan is expected to be built with school communities in the first three months of their office, after ratification of the results of the mixed/hybrid selection process for principals, adopted since the 1990s in the Rio de Janeiro public school system.

This selection process was recently institutionalized throughout the country by Goal 19 of the National Education Plan, as sanctioned by Law No. 13005/2014 (BRASIL, 2014), in the sense of inducing technical and political skills in applicants for the post of school principal and integrating the participation of school communities in the process, seeking to overcome the politically motivated appointments still in force in education systems (SOUZA, A., 2018), based on Brazilian clientelism, cronyism and patrimonialism.

The model for selecting school principals adopted in the Rio de Janeiro municipal education system, from the formal point of view, presupposes that “the positive leadership of the principal is preponderant in building school success”. It states that principals, during the first three months of their office,

“should coordinate the process of building a management project, together with the school community, to be approved by the Municipal Education Department” (RIO DE JANEIRO, 2017, p. 56-57, our translation). According to these guidelines, the steps taken at school in this process should start with institutional self-evaluation focused on “the continuous quest to ensure student access and learning” (MULTIRIO, 2018b, our translation).

In this sense, we used the case study as a research method to analyze the perception of the principals of two schools about the stages of diagnosis, self-evaluation, goal setting and proposals that go to make up the management plan, in order to understand the conceptions and meanings of the processes led by these public agents.

The discussion presented in this paper is justified given the possible articulation of the management plan with the roles exercised by principals in the pedagogical management of schools and by the discretionary action of these implementing agents who act on the front line of building the management plan. Lipsky (2010) characterizes actors on the frontline of policy delivery as street-level bureaucrats, with key importance in the implementation chain, as they (re)interpret policies based on their values, knowledge, experiences, as well as State constraints and contingencies.

For organization purposes, this paper is structured in six sections, in addition to this introduction and the bibliographical references. The second section presents a literature review of public policy. The third section focuses on the development of policy implementation on the international scenario and the process still being built in Brazil. Implementation of the management plan as a mechanism for assessing the technical competence of applicants for school leadership, in the context of post-bureaucracy, is discussed in the fourth section. The fifth section presents the field of research, the characteristics of the schools and the profiles of the school principals selected in this study, analyzing ways in which they engender the building of the plan and the meaning they attribute to it. The sixth section presents our final considerations.

A preliminary discussion about the field of public policy research

In recent decades the field of public policy research in Brazil has gained prominence as an area of knowledge and a greater volume of research has emerged, notably after the enactment of the 1988 Federal Constitution and, subsequently, within the context of the Reform of the State Apparatus. These two

events substantially altered public policies in the country. The 1988 Constitution (BRASIL, 1988) was a landmark in the expansion of the Brazilian State's action in the delivery of policies focused on the population and the institutionalization of social policy watchdog councils, triggering a movement toward decentralization of public management of service provision and incorporating the participation of new actors in decision-making processes. In the 1990s, the Reform of the State Apparatus imposed restrictive spending policies, introducing the themes of efficiency and effectiveness as fundamental attributes for the use of public resources and the achievement of results (SOUZA, C., 2006; HOCHMAN; ARRETCHE; MARQUES, 2007; FARAH, 2018).

The centrality of public policies has favored the more consistent organization of a field of research that is being built in Brazil in relation to foreign production, with an important role in the translation and sharing of international studies more recently. It is in this movement that national studies have begun to integrate analytical approaches from established generations of research in order to understand the complexity of the processes that involve everything from government decision-making to the delivery of policies to citizens. This dynamic has prompted research involving policy analysis to bring to light the reasons why governments choose certain policies and how they implement them.

From the conceptual point of view, there are multiple definitions of public policies and several authors have defined the term in order to contribute methodologically to understanding government action, the nature and dimensions of the “technical-political process that aims to define and harmonize objectives and means among social actors subject to restrictions” (HOWLETT; RAMESH; PERL, 2013, p. 6, our translation), that influence and produce results in the lives of a given population.

For Jenkins (1978, p. 15), public policy is the “set of interrelated decisions, made by an actor or a set of actors, concerning the selection of goals and the means to achieve them, based on a specific situation”. Jenkins' definition extends the concept put forward by Dye (1972), which highlights the protagonism of governments in the choices they consciously make in order to make decisions. Jenkins (1978) gives public policy a more dynamic and complex character, which involves its interaction between government structures and political-administrative subsystems. In this sense, in addition to moving forward with characterization, it helps us introduce the importance of ideas, values and knowledge in shaping policy by those involved in decision making and by the actors who act and influence outcomes.

Much of the literature on public policy seeks to understand the units that make up its processes. Among the approaches used for policy analysis, the policy

cycle stands out as a heuristic resource that has the potential to didactically explain the specific characteristics and interrelationships of the sequential steps that make up public policy.

According to Howlett, Ramesh & Perl (2013, p. 12-13), broadly speaking, this analytical perspective methodologically explains public policies in four stages: 1) agenda, 2) formulation, 3) implementation and 4) evaluation.

In the agenda stage, the literature seeks to answer why some problems are put on the government agenda while others are not worthy of government attention. It discusses which social dynamics lead policymakers to include a given problem in the set of concerns, transforming it into public policy.

According to Kingdon (2006), when setting the agenda, it is necessary to consider the ideas and influence of pressure groups, as well as the circumstances that provide the ideal conditions, or “windows of opportunity”, for certain solutions to move up the political agenda.

Policy formulation is characterized by decision making, the preparation of alternatives to be adopted in addressing the problem, the definition of objectives and the means to achieve them. This phase is, as Celina Souza (2006, p. 26, our translation) states, “the stage in which democratic governments translate their electoral goals and platforms into programs and actions that will produce results or changes in the real world”. According to the author, at this stage the role of elections, bureaucracies, parties, media and interest groups becomes more important.

After formulation, the policy needs to be put into practice. This is the implementation phase, in which resources are allocated and rules are defined to structure the policy. According to Lotta (2019, p. 13, our translation), this “is the moment that depends heavily on the action of bureaucrats and the instruments of state action”.

Research focusing on this field of analysis revolves around the definition of variables that can explain the success or failure of a policy, such as: objectives lacking clarity, bureaucrats with different implementation styles, lack of control of subordinates and fragile contexts of cooperation in institutions (MAZMANIAN; SABATIER, 1983).

More recent studies, such as those by Lima and D’Ascenzi (2013), propose the inclusion of cognitive dimensions, ideas, values and worldviews of the actors involved. The authors also understand that the interaction between the formulation and implementation phases allows them to be understood as continuous processes, making it possible to analytically explore the intentions contained in the objectives that structure the policy and its ownership in local contexts by the actors that implement it.

In the evaluation stage, the results of the actions undertaken are measured, in order to provide information for adjustments, continuity or discontinuity of the policy. The aim is to evaluate expected and unintended consequences and to identify possibilities for improving state action. Evaluation research generally uses quantitative and qualitative techniques, and can focus on both process evaluation and impact evaluation.

In this policy cycle approach, the four stages are dynamic and do not exactly follow a linear progression, but need to be understood based on the possible overlaps, interactions and interdependencies between them. However, this sequential model has the advantage of being a tool to arrive at our object of analysis, which in the case of this study is situated in the implementation stage.

Public policy implementation: overall panorama and the field of education

The development of the field of research on policy implementation is a relatively new process in Brazil. During recent decades, academic studies focusing on policy formulation and evaluation have predominated (SOUZA, C., 2006). The literature that addresses the study of implementation is anchored mainly in two analytical generations that have structured the field.

The first generation is based on the prescriptive and normative perspective, in which the prevailing idea is that the view of the implementation process should start from the established norms, that is, from the top down. This top-down approach considers that the clarity of objectives and control over the actors that execute the policy are the main variables that explain the gaps between formulation and implementation.

The second generation, called bottom up, in contrast to the “top down” perspective, seeks to look at politics “from the bottom up”, proposing analysis of the action of the actors engaged in the policy, whom Lipsky (2010) calls “street-level bureaucrats”. According to Lotta (2019), studies of the actions of these frontline bureaucrats, or street-level bureaucrats, on policy

[...] reinforce the thesis that there are many decision-making processes going on in implementation, that bureaucracy is not a machine or cogs, and that understanding how it behaves and how it makes decisions is central to public policy analyses (LOTTA, 2019, p. 16, our translation).

The street-level bureaucrat was identified in a seminal study by Lipsky (2010) as the public policy implementer who delivers policy to the citizen, bridging the gap between the State and the public service user. The author cites as examples police officers, nurses, teachers, doctors, social workers, among others. In their interaction with individuals, these bureaucrats, who suffer restrictions, contingencies and are constrained by the rules imposed by the State, act with margins of discretion, changing the rules that structure the policy.

There are also studies on implementation that aim to observe the performance of bureaucracy in other dimensions, allowing analysis of high and mid-level bureaucrats, who are called as such according to the positions and hierarchical relations established in the implementation chain. Standing out among the high-ranking bureaucrats, namely those who design policy, is the federal bureaucracy that operates in the process of producing public policies and has greater autonomy to manage public resources (PIRES, 2012).

Mid-level bureaucrats, still little analyzed by the literature, are those who find themselves between the political elite and street-level bureaucrats, often acting ambiguously, with greater or lesser protagonism and capacity to simultaneously undertake technical and managerial activities in the performance of middle management (LOTTA; PIRES; OLIVEIRA, 2014; CAVALCANTE; LOTTA; YAMADA, 2018).

In Brazil, the agenda of studies on policy implementation is still a recent construct in the field of education when compared to other fields of research, such as health, for example. Research using this theoretical framework to analyze the performance of educational professionals in school contexts or in other dimensions of educational policy is still scarce. However, although research is scarce, recent studies have placed attention on school principals.

Themes related to student performance, school climate, leadership and the role of the school principal were explored by Oliveira and Abrucio (2018) in research conducted in schools in the São Paulo state education system. In that research, school principals are defined as mid-level bureaucrats, with reference to the contrast between the characteristics of street-level and mid-level bureaucrats described by the authors in a comparative matrix. In a nutshell, the matrix reveals that mid-ranking bureaucrats have autonomy to manage public resources, deal with both ends of the public bureaucracy hierarchy and “their role is not exclusively to serve the target public, but rather to coordinate and command those who implement the final service”, and they may or may not have direct contact with citizens. (OLIVEIRA; ABRUCIO, 2018, p. 213-214, our translation). Their research revealed that management styles affect the outcome of student performance and that school principals are key players in articulating policy formulation and implementation, mobilizing innovative capacity and discretionary actions, focused on organizational management.

The study conducted by Ana Cristina Oliveira, Maria de Fátima Lima and Marina Oliveira (2018) analyzed the role of school principals in the process of implementing a workflow correction policy in the Rio de Janeiro municipal public school system. The authors point out that the attributions and activities developed by principals connect them directly to the policy's beneficiaries or target audience. Through the logics of their action, school principals categorize, judge, select and deliver the policy based on moral values and discretionary actions, altering the scope of the policy formulated at the high management level and coordinated at the intermediate management level. In this sense, the research process oriented the authors' analysis toward the bottom-up approach, contributing to the fact that in this study school principals were categorized as street-level bureaucrats.

The two studies are representative of the challenge found in the literature in establishing, a priori, the definition of the category into which school principals fall in the policy implementation chain. Thus, school principals can be defined both as mid-level and street-level bureaucrats, depending on the activities they carry out when implementing the policy analyzed, the nature of the policy and the particularity of the organizational context of the education system and school, which can change the position of the principal in the policy implementation chain.

We recognize that the roles played by school principals are vast and complex, often making their actions and positions in the hierarchical chain of implementation in local contexts ambiguous. Thus, operationalization of the analysis, based on theoretical and methodological references established in political science and empirical research, must be built considering these particularities, so that the conceptual definition of the school principal as a street-level or mid-level bureaucrat is not based on assumptions, but rather on the role these actors play on/in the policy. In this study, the perspective is to analyze the management plan as an action forming part of the policy on selecting school principals, from the perspective of school management planning and democratic management. According to Resolution No. 20, dated September 29th 2017 (RIO DE JANEIRO, 2017), which provided the most recent rules for the school principal selection process in the municipal education system, the management plan must be prepared in the first quarter of the school year, after the result of the selection process has been approved and the school principal has taken office, under the supervision of the *Secretaria Municipal de Educação* [Municipal Education Department] (SME) and with school community participation.

School principal selection, management plan and school planning in the post-bureaucracy context

In Brazilian public school systems, the school principal is usually a civil servant employed by the Federal, State or Municipal government, as an interlocutor between the State and the school, therefore playing a double role: a representative of both the State public administration and the school community (SOUZA, A., 2006; OLIVEIRA, A.; LIMA; OLIVEIRA, M., 2018).

Access to the position of school principal and appointment to it has taken place historically through four mechanisms, still in place in the Federative Units: indication (whether or not preceded by a shortlist of three people), public competitive examination, election or consultation (including direct voting by the school community) and mixed or hybrid modalities (incorporating technical criteria and school community participation).

Unrestrained political appointment of school principals by local authorities, without any legitimation by the school community or requirement for technical qualification, was frequent until the 1980s, in line with the patrimonialism and clientelism that guided the holding of public positions in the state apparatus. As opposed to political appointments, public competitive examinations for the selection of school principals began to be adopted in public education systems across the country, simultaneously with political appointments, involving examinations and presentation of qualifications, in order to safeguard Weberian principles such as impersonality and technical competence in the process of choosing school principals. However, competitive examinations did not meet the demand for social participation rooted in the movements for the re-democratization of the country and the defense of democratic management in the 1980s. In that context, the agenda presented by the field of education was one of direct election of school principals, with local participation through direct voting by school communities, in order to overcome the influence of political agents in the appointment of these school leaders.

In the 1990s, during the reform of the State administrative apparatus and the expansion of the post-bureaucratic paradigm of the management matrix, the education system management and school management decentralization process and, simultaneously, the demand for results, administrative efficiency and school effectiveness, together with strategic objectives focused on analysis and use of indicators, guided the putting in place of more complex mechanisms for selecting school principals. Those mechanisms incorporated technical requirements, set out as criteria in the norms that regulated the school principal

selection process, in order to define a profile of a manager who would respond to the new political-pedagogical challenges related to the organization of strategic planning aimed at accountability.

The post-bureaucratic management matrix administrative reform was based on “New Public Management”, as implemented in the 1980s by the Ronald Reagan administration in the United States and Margaret Thatcher’s government in England. This management paradigm postulated that inefficient public administration could be overcome by reducing the Welfare State and incorporating private sector principles, tools and practices into the public apparatus. In this sense, the establishment of public-private partnerships, productivity, competitiveness, use of indicators, the centrality of evaluation, accountability for results through transparency and rendering of accounts, were presented as assumptions for the achievement of efficiency and effectiveness of public service management.

In Brazil, the post-bureaucratic managerial paradigm materialized strongly after the implementation of the State Apparatus Reform Master Plan by Bresser Pereira, Minister of State Reform, between 1995-1999. According to Lima (2014, p. 2, our translation), from this period on, there has been a progressive evolution of mixed or hybrid forms of selection and appointment of principals in public school systems in the country “with the purpose of making participatory mechanisms compatible, rooted in democratic management, with the technical skills necessary for the performance of the principal’s job”. However, due to the autonomy, multiplicity, as well as the diverse composition of political forces and different interests of the Executive and Legislative branches of the Federative Units, assessment of the technical capacity of school principals is based on certain instruments, such as: qualifications, curriculum, examination, presentation of a management plan/project before or after their election, along with the participation of the school community as an integral part of this process.

In the current context, the institutionalization of this mechanism for selecting school principals became effective nationally through Law 13005/2014 (BRASIL, 2014), which enacted the National Education Plan, to the extent that this law determines that public education systems shall take into consideration for the appointment of school principals, technical criteria of merit and performance as well as participation of the school community, observing the principles of democratic management.

In relation to the Rio de Janeiro municipal public education system, the object of this study, the last selection process for directors, which took place in 2017, for the 2018-2020 triennium, was regulated in accordance with Resolution No. 20, dated September 29th, 2017 (RIO DE JANEIRO, 2017). As provided for by the Resolution, standing out among the principles guiding the selection of school

principals are: their positive leadership to build school success; consolidation of the school democratization process with constant integration between school, family and community; and democratic and participatory management. The Resolution also establishes that the management plan must be prepared once the principal has taken office, jointly supervised by the Municipal Education Department and with school community participation (RIO DE JANEIRO, 2017).

It should be noted that the Resolution does not mention the procedures relating to drawing up the management plan and defining the roles of principals in the stages that make up the process. This information was disseminated after the principals took office, through the School Unit Self-Evaluation Campaign and the announcement of the Self-Evaluation Kit in internal communications and SME digital media, such as the MultiRio website (Rio de Janeiro City Municipal Multimedia Company).

According to information posted on the website, the Self-Evaluation Kit provides “suggestions and guidelines that aim to ensure that a diagnosis is made which illuminates the mission of each school in the municipal education system and favors the building of their management plans” (MULTIRIO, 2018a, our translation). That diagnosis is to guide collective self-evaluation that “must be based on the schools’ *raison d’être*, i.e. the continuous quest to ensure student access and learning” (MULTIRIO, 2018a, our translation). The texts indicate that the school principals are called upon to coordinate the self-evaluation process, to promote and conduct meetings with representatives of the segments of the school community, to make a record of the decisions and prepare the final text, in order to build “school management that is both democratic and effective” (MULTIRIO, 2018a, our translation). In this sense, school principals are central figures in the process of implementing the management plan, which starts in schools with the diagnosis done jointly with the school community, under the leadership of the school principal, with the support of an administrative supervisor and a pedagogical supervisor (MULTIRIO, 2018a, 2018b).

Regarding forms of mediation, roles exercised and actions of the agents at the top management level (Municipal Education Department) and the middle management level (Regional Education Coordinating Bodies), the site offers little information, limiting itself to briefly mentioning the sequence of actions that make up the process. According to the calendar, the 11 Regional Education Coordinating Bodies held a training course on pedagogical and administrative management for the school principals who took office in January. Subsequently, the principals had a pedagogical supervisor and an administrative supervisor to support them in the preparing the management diagnosis. This included helping them to carry out between April and May the survey at their schools of “strong points, which are working well, as well as those that need to be put right” (MULTIRIO, 2018a,

our translation). According to the guidelines for the self-evaluation process in schools, the Management Plan should be structured in three sections: 1. *Our school as it is now*, containing the diagnosis and self-evaluation of the school; 2. *Our school as we want it to be*, presenting the identity built by the school, goals and desired results, and 3. *How we are going to get there*, containing strategies and proposals prepared by the school community in order to achieve the results. The guidelines also state that “Once the Management Plan has been validated by the central level, it will be the basis for monitoring the work carried out by the school throughout the year” (MULTIRIO, 2018b, our translation).

In this study we focused on the analysis of the stages corresponding to diagnosis, self-evaluation and final registration of the plan, considering the work of school principals based on their perceptions, particularly with regard to the characterization of the management plan, the relationship established with school communities, and with the Coordinating Body and Municipal Education Department agents involved in the process. Our initial intention was to analyze the school principals’ perception of management plan implementation, following the preceding steps at their schools related to diagnosis, self-evaluation and submission of the final text of the plan by them to the Municipal Education Department for analysis, assessment and considerations. Implementation was planned to start in the second half of 2018. However, this step was postponed, with no provision for continuing the process, due to the dismissal of the Education Secretary in July 2018.

The field of this research: schools and school principals

Our field research began between September and October 2018, with visits to two elementary schools belonging to the Rio de Janeiro municipal public education system, according to the criteria established as set forth below.

The Rio de Janeiro municipal public education system is considered to be the largest municipal school system in Latin America. According to the Municipal Education Department official website, at the time of our research it was comprised of 1,539 school units, integrated into 11 Regional Education Coordinating Bodies, according to their coverage areas. These bodies, which are the intermediaries of education management, articulate the policies between the macro level of management (Municipal Education Department) and the schools. In 2018, according to data from the School Census, the municipal system had

146,556 students enrolled in Kindergartens, 471,361 in Elementary Schools, 26,097 in Youth and Adult Education and 15,987 in Special Education.

As mentioned earlier, with regard to the methodology, first of all we conducted a bibliographic search and analysis of official documents in electronic format, these being primary sources, referring to municipal laws, ordinances, resolutions, normative instructions and official information on the selection and appointment of directors and the management plan via the Municipal Education Department's electronic portals.

Subsequently, semi-structured interviews were conducted with female principals from two schools. The principals were selected based on pre-defined criteria that matched the characteristics of the schools in which they held office and their professional profiles. The schools were selected and paired from Regional Education Coordinating Bodies located in different parts of the city. At the time of the research the schools catered for the final years of elementary school level. Each school had a total of 600 to 800 students enrolled who fell into bracket 3 or 4 of the average socioeconomic level².

The filters used for selecting and comparing the school principals were length of service in the education system and length of experience in school management, so that one of the principals selected had greater length of service and experience, while the other had less length of experience in the system and only recent experience in school management.

At the time, three visits were made to each of the schools to seek information about the sociodemographic profiles of the principals, to understand their perceptions of the management plan, the diagnosis and self-evaluation process, their role and that of the other agents involved in the process, focusing on the perspectives of school democratization, the goals and proposals established.

For purposes of data organization, Box 1 summarizes the information on the schools, hereafter referred to as School A and School B. In addition to the data on total enrollment and socioeconomic level retrieved from the *Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais Anísio Teixeira/Ministério da Educação* [Ministry of Education/National Institute for Study and Research], information on student performance was also added, considering that this dimension of the school is focused on in the diagnosis stage. We also added information obtained during the interviews about the progress of the schools' political pedagogical

² The initial intention was to select two schools falling into the same socioeconomic level brackets (bracket 3 or 4), based on the Elementary Education School Socioeconomic Level Indicator developed by the Ministry of Education/National Institute for Study and Research. However, not all the criteria were compatible. As such, two schools were selected that had brackets close the average socioeconomic level, but their brackets were different.

projects, taking into account that this participatory planning instrument, developed under the leadership of the school management team, can be considered a proxy for the relationship between school organization and democratic management established by the principal. It can also be assumed that this instrument would provide support during the management plan preparation meetings.

BOX 1 – SCHOOL CHARACTERISTICS

CHARACTERISTICS	SCHOOL A	SCHOOL B
REGIONAL COORDINATING BODY	8 th	7 th
TOTAL STUDENTS ENROLLED	645	798
STUDENT SOCIOECONOMIC LEVEL	4	3
POLITICAL PEDAGOGICAL PROJECT	READY	BEING BUILT
ELEMENTARY EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT INDEX – FINAL YEARS OF ELEMENTARY EDUCATION	5.2	4.8

SOURCE: National Institute for Study and Research/Ministry of Education and information collected during the semi-structured interviews

We visited the schools to conduct the interviews in the second half of 2018, at which time the principals were supposed to have started implementing their management plans, following assessment by the Municipal Education Department, as mentioned earlier. However, the sending back of the plans to the schools had been delayed due to the dismissal of the Municipal Education Secretary in July 2018.

As can be seen in Box 2, the two schools are run by White women in the 30 to 50 age range and who took postgraduate courses in teacher training subjects.

BOX 2 – PROFILES OF THE SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

PERFIS DAS DIRETORAS	DIRETORA DA ESCOLA A	DIRETORA DA ESCOLA B
SELF-REPORTED RACE/SKIN COLOR	WHITE	WHITE
AGE RANGE	40-50 YEARS	30-40 YEARS
HIGHEST ACADEMIC QUALIFICATIONS	POSTGRADUATE COURSE IN EDUCATION	POSTGRADUATE COURSE IN HISTORY
LENGTH OF SERVICE IN THE SYSTEM	23 YEARS	6 YEARS
LENGTH OF TIME IN SCHOOL MANAGEMENT	16 YEARS	1 YEAR

SOURCE: National Institute for Study and Research/Ministry of Education and information collected during the semi-structured interviews

The interviews revealed that the principals of the two schools have different professional and academic backgrounds, but have always worked in the field of education. The principal of School A has been a teacher employed by the Rio de Janeiro City government for 23 years, originally to teach in the early years of elementary school. She has been a classroom teacher, a Pedagogical Coordinator for 4 years in another school in the system, and for 3 years in the school where she is now in her third term of office as principal. She took a degree in Pedagogy and has taken postgraduate courses in the areas of Supervision, Educational Guidance and Psychopedagogy. She was a member of the School Principals' Committee of the 8th Regional Education Coordinating Body for two years. She believes that principals are the leaders who should be at the fore of school management "*primarily in favor of students remaining at school, learning and improving their performance*". She recalled that her teacher training and career have contributed to developing changes in the school.

I started here as Pedagogical Coordinator in a school with a high failure rate, we have been working gradually, working with teachers, studying [...] as the school principal I have never forgotten this pedagogical side of myself.

The principal of School B is a history teacher who has been teaching in the final years of elementary school for six years. Before joining the Rio de Janeiro municipal education system, she was a military officer for 4 years, working in the area of education, focusing on military history. After this period she took a competitive examination and worked for 4 years as a classroom teacher in another school in the municipal education system, until she was invited by the Regional Education Coordinating Body to intervene at a school that needed changes. According to her, the invitation was mediated by the principal of the school where she worked, because that principal recognized that she had the ability to intervene and bring about changes in a school that at that time "*was facing the dismissal of the management team, had daily episodes of violence among students and frequent complaints from the neighborhood*". She acknowledges that her military ethos, still impregnated in her actions at that time, may have contributed to the invitation.

If you had seen me wearing civilian clothes.... I looked like a military officer, I wore my hair in a bun. Because where I worked, when I was a military officer, I was the only woman. So, because of that, you become a very serious person in the way you deal with things.

The interviews revealed that elements linked to the principals' profiles appear to influence their relationship with school supervisors and school community, the conception of the management plan, the distance or closeness to the norms in conducting the process, and the proposals presented to achieve the goals set. Below, we highlight these points, noting the protagonism of the principals who have different interpretations of the processes of preparing the management plan and the priorities that should be contained in it.

The management plan as perceived by the school principals

The diagnosis and self-evaluation stages were assisted by two supervisors, sent to the schools by the Regional Education Coordinating Body. As for the role of these actors, in the perception of the principal of School A, *“their role is to help us, and help this school not to fail in the pedagogical or administrative areas. The supervisor also contributes to this”*. In this sense, they would be jointly responsible for the process. However, she attributed a secondary and almost inexpressive role to these agents, because the supervisors, according to her, *“only observed what the school was doing and sometimes took the proposals we made as suggestions to present to other schools”*. The principal of School B has a more hierarchical perception and a more “productive” dialogue with the supervisors, especially the pedagogical supervisor, with whom the school had more permanent contact, as she revealed:

If we're discussing ideas, if we're talking about people, then we sit down, look at the chart containing the results and discuss what we can improve, what is essential, what is not. Besides, I look at things from the school's point of view, while he looks at them from the point of view of the Regional Education Coordinating Body.

In contrast to the “uneasiness” observed in some principals, due to the presence of supervisors in the schools, she understands that

there is a hierarchy of command and you follow it, and you have to listen. So you learn to deal with this issue of supervision. Someone who is observing, who is saying, you know: That's not how this should be...

The different perceptions and relationships established between the school principals and the agents responsible for the supervision of school diagnosis and self-evaluation, which are stages of the management plan, reveal, as stated by Lima & D'Ascenzi (2013), that the assimilation of guidelines and norms is shaped according to the values, experiences and cognitive dimensions of the implementing agents in local contexts.

According to the Resolution that provides for the selection of school principals, the school principal in office “shall coordinate the process of building a management project, **together with the school community**, which shall be implemented in the first year of their office”. This guideline is in line with the principle of democratic management and also seems to be intended to promote constant integration between school, family and community, as provided for in the Municipal Education Department guidelines and orientations. The Self-Evaluation Kit emphasizes the participation of the school community and, to this end, recommends that meetings be held with different segments in order to carry out diagnosis and self-evaluation, using the tools and methodologies suggested. According to the principal of School A, the meetings were attended by teachers and representatives of the school community - the School Community Council. For her, “*the role of the Council is to work together with the management team to ensure that the school develops its pedagogical and administrative aspects...*”. At School B, the meetings were attended exclusively by teachers. The principal noted that families are very distant from the school environment and find it hard to go to the school, as she said. “*The problem is the community getting to the school. It is very difficult. Because the community lives far from the school and that means there are costs involved for them to come here*”. When asked about the organization and functioning of the School Community Council, she replied, “*Oh, the Council? That is a process that is still being built*”.

Regarding the characterization of the management plan, the principal of School A considers that, although tools for preparing a strategic plan have been presented, building the management plan “*has similarities with building the Political Pedagogical Project. You can see in it the school we are, the school that... doesn't, the school we were, the one we are and the one we want to be, but using other words*”.

It is her understanding that “*the management plan will guide the principal's action plan*”. In this sense, she organized the meetings highlighting “*the school's vision, values and mission*”. According to her, the management plan focused on issues related to improving learning, tutoring and reducing age/grade mismatch. “*Here the focus is on the student and student learning*”. For the principal of School B, the Management Plan is “*based on dialogue. It is very dialogical. So: I speak, I listen to you, I think again, so that we can reach an operational pact*”.

She states that the pact aims to “*rebuild the pride of being part of here and not the shame of being part of this school, of a school that is not well spoken of*”.

Finally, regarding the goals and proposals presented in the management plan, the principal of School A briefly defined the result of the process coordinated at the school. “*The school’s proposal is to teach and for the student to learn. Nothing is hidden. The supervisor who has accompanied me since the beginning of the year saw our parallel recovery, it starts from the first day of class*”.

She informed that the performance and workflow indicators were analyzed in the meetings, as well as the community participation activities. She therefore states that “*the proposal is to improve the students’ performance, developing learning recovery projects to reduce concepts that are insufficient. Strengthening representativeness is important to achieve these goals*”. The principal of School B stated that the management plan focused on order, discipline, engagement and the well-being of students and teachers. She reported that she revived the school’s anthem, forgotten by the school community, and established as a priority the feeling of belonging:

In three years, either I work on belonging, on pride of being part of the school, or I work on the result. [...] The school has an anthem. So today the students sing the school anthem. They sang it at graduation. Before that was unthinkable!

As in the study by Ana Cristina Oliveira, Maria de Fátima Lima and Marina Oliveira (2018), the principals of the schools we studied, who are directly connected to the representatives of school communities who participated in the school diagnosis and self-evaluation, these being preliminary and constituent stages of the implementation of the management plan, presented different perceptions of the process. Based on their professional experiences, values and judgments, they changed procedures and made external regulation processes operational in different ways, and were able to modify the policy’s expected results and its objective.

Final considerations

This study brings to light the different perceptions and reactions of the school principals about the steps involved in preparing the management plan implemented by them. Their relationship with school communities, with the Regional Education Coordinating Body supervisors and their different ways of conducting the processes appear to be associated with training, values and experience. It can be seen that the principals were free to act and, therefore, use their discretion to define the priorities of school management, including use/non-use of educational indicators, from a bottom-up perspective.

It is important to highlight that it is in the administration of public education systems networks and schools, that is, in the formal structures of the public sector, in contact with citizens, that educational policies and programs are in fact implemented. Thus, school principals are the people who, in local contexts, make the connection between policy and citizens and who can enhance participatory processes in education. Therefore, although they are not exclusively responsible for school success, principals play an important role in the diagnosis, planning and management of public policies in the face of new educational challenges.

In this study we noted that the actions of principals, as guided by the management plan, may not correspond to solving problems involving the reduction of educational and school inequalities. Thus, this research seeks to contribute to broadening studies on policy implementation by analyzing the actions of education professionals in school contexts or in other dimensions of educational policy, in order to understand the restrictions, constraints and discretionary actions that influence the delivery of policy to citizens.

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