


School leadership in adverse contexts

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ABSTRACT

Two qualitative methods (semi-structured interviews and field research) were used to analyze the work developed by thirty-one elementary school directors from the municipal school system of Ribeirão Preto in the state of São Paulo. The result of this work reinforces the essential role of these professionals for the proper functioning of schools, while at the same time pointing out challenges that permeate the work developed by them and, not infrequently, inhibit the ability of these leaders to act successfully. These results also draw attention to the importance of developing school leaders with attributions that go far beyond administrative issues. The transformation in the role of principals implies preparing professionals capable of establishing direction for the school, developing the team, configuring a successful organizational culture, managing the educational program and the school's resources, as well as establishing a positive relationship with the external context. It is evident that in order to enable the formation of school leaders in this perspective, it is necessary that the political and technical actors that make up the education networks understand the importance of allocating efforts both to the professional development of principals and to enable adequate working conditions. Based on the evidence on the subject, this paper presents seven recommendations to support public managers in the professional development of school principals, as well as a checklist with questions to support analyses about the conditions in which they operate.

Keywords: School Leadership, Principals, Professional Development, Elementary Education, Municipal Schools of Ribeirão Preto.

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INTRODUCTION

Despite the vast literature on school leadership developed in the last forty decades in the field of research on school effectiveness, in the Brazilian context the view of principals as leaders has been little explored both from an academic and political point of view. This situation has shown signs of change, particularly after the resolution of the National Education Council with the Competence Matrix of School Directors, approved in 2022.

This paper presents the results of the investigation conducted during the postdoctoral research of one of the authors of this article on the performance of principals of the municipal school system of Ribeirão Preto (SP), mapping the attributions present in the daily life of these professionals and identifying to what extent they converge to the development of principals as educational leaders capable of positively influencing the functioning of schools and the successful trajectory of their students.

Through qualitative research supported by the methods of semi-structured interview and field research, this article presents the findings of the investigation, as well as a set of factors aimed at the professional development of principals. The objective of this article is to contribute to the training and performance of school leaders from a competency view, considering to what extent the context and processes that guide the functioning of schools enable or hinder the development of these professionals.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Since the 60s, after the set of studies that resulted in the Equality of Educational Opportunity, widely known as the Coleman Report (Coleman et al., 1972), several studies have been developed seeking to identify possible relationships between the performance achieved by students and the various characteristics of schools. These studies have advanced significantly due to improvements in the field of statistical analysis, which have allowed the observation of a greater number of variables and samples, as well as the adoption of systematic evaluations of educational results over long periods. These studies focused on mapping what was happening within each school and how these actions related to student learning outcomes.

These studies identified common elements in schools considered effective, such as an organized environment, the existence of teachers committed to curriculum planning, intellectually challenging teaching, high expectations about the school trajectory of all students, the use of time in academic interactions to the detriment of exclusively administrative activities, the appropriate use of incentives and the presence of a school leadership actively involved in the functioning of the school (Brookover et al., 1978; Teddlie & Stringfield, 1993; Teddlie & Reynolds 2003). In relation to this last element, several studies indicate that school leadership is the second most relevant factor on the



academic performance of students, and it is very rare for schools to improve their educational results without the presence of effective leadership (Leithwood & Duke, 1988).

These findings have influenced several other studies in relation to the way school leadership is configured (Sammons 1999; Reynolds & Teddlie 2000; Leithwood et al., 2006) who, in turn, pointed to common factors, such as i) objective and consistent action, capable of solving problems and establishing a course for school organization, ii) participatory, capable of ensuring the involvement of other people in the functioning of the school; and iii) pedagogical, capable of defining learning objectives and supervising teaching, promoting a collaborative and committed learning environment.

The concept of leadership identified in these studies points to a structure characterized by interactions and composed of four central components: relational, political, with common goals, and intentional. In this sense, the concept of leadership is closely linked to the ability to influence and aggregate people (Brazer; Bauer; Johnson, 2019).

Such a perspective on the role of school leadership culminated in the concept of "transformational leadership", which implies the ability of the school principal to create a sense of commitment to the organization's objectives. Transformational school leadership is capable of: i) building a common vision for the school; ii) establish common objectives; iii) to promote intellectual stimulation;

iv) offer individualized support; v) model best practices and organizational values; vi) demonstrate high expectations in relation to the performance of the team and students; vii) create a productive organizational culture; viii) develop structures to foster participatory decision-making (Leithwood & Duke, 1998).

In the current context, marked by new demands in relation to the role of schools, school leadership becomes even more complex in terms of managing people, resources and results, which implies the need for training that appropriately trains these leaders to lead with the various demands that exist in school organizations. Such a perspective has motivated the definition of necessary competencies for those who wish to pursue a career as a school principal.

Several countries have developed conceptual frameworks with the necessary competencies for school leadership, as is the case of Chile, with the Framework for Good School Management and Leadership (MINEDUC, 2015), which defines the practices, skills and knowledge for leadership development, as well as other organizations such as the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA, 2008), which defines a set of competencies to support the professional development and performance of school leaders, gathered in the document Standards for School Leaders. It is also worth noting the work of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (OECD, 2008), in developing studies on the importance of school leadership,



providing tools for the improvement of this career with modules involving: i) building distributive leadership, ii) developing skills for effective school leadership, iii) building school leadership and career attractiveness, iv) (re)definition of roles and responsibilities of school leadership.

All these productions have in common the look at the development of skills that enable the training of professionals trained to perform the role of school leadership. This perspective seeks to overcome a shallower understanding of pointing out only specific activities to be carried out for a more comprehensive view, which focuses on the knowledge and skills necessary for a professional and motivating performance, in line with the sense of leadership under discussion.

In Brazil, the debate on the role of school leadership has begun to gain clearer contours, despite the little visibility it has historically received both in terms of public policies and in the field of academic studies. Considering that the country has about 180 thousand schools, 81% of which are public, with a significant variety in relation to size, number of shifts, number and complexity of modalities and stages offered, it is essential to investigate to what extent school principals are prepared to occupy this function and what processes exist to support them in service.

That said, the question that arises is how to ensure the effective functioning of this complex and diversified school ecosystem, at the same time that the figure of the school principal is still of low relevance in discussions about the quality of learning in Brazil. This scenario required the construction of a common national base of the school principal's competencies, indicating, for example, the knowledge and practices required for the exercise of the function. This came to occur in 2021, with the advent of the School Principal's Competence Matrix prepared by the National Council of Education (CNE) (BRASIL, 2021), and forwarded to the Ministry of Education. This CNE initiative, together with the requirements set out in the new FUNDEB (Fund for the Maintenance and Development of Basic Education and the Valorization of Education Professionals) and in the National Education Plan itself from 2014 to 2024, has contributed to spreading the importance of school leadership in the student learning process and the need to improve selection processes. training and monitoring of directors based on competencies.

METHODOLOGY

The research used two qualitative methods: semi-structured interviews with the 31 principals of Elementary Education of the municipal school network of Ribeirão Preto and field research in nine schools. The deepening of the qualitative methodology allowed, over a year of research, to investigate the perspective of the principals themselves in relation to their attributions and the challenges faced in the exercise of the function. During individual interviews with all 31 directors of the network, held in August and September 2022, questions were raised about the training of these directors, how long they have been in the position, the selection process they went through to occupy



the position, their attributions and work routine, as well as the relationship with other education professionals, with the secretariat, with the students and their guardians. In addition, two interviews were also conducted with employees of the secretariat who work directly with the principals in the elementary education division and an interview with the municipal secretary of education.

The interviews were conducted online through the Zoom platform, recorded after authorization from the interviewees and followed a semi-structured script of questions. After each interview, the ethics protocol was sent, attesting to the commitment not to disclose the identity of the interviewee and not to bring names and information that allow the identification of the school in direct quotes. All interviews were transcribed and coded according to the following categories:

1. Professional career
 - a. Training
 - b. Time in office
 - c. Access to the position
 - d. Motivation for Driving
2. Director's role
 - a. Duties of the position
3. Management
 - a. Resource management
 - b. People management: relationship with the family
 - c. People management: relationship with the team

Regarding the field research, the nine schools were selected based on criteria observed during the interviews. This selection sought to build a diverse sample of schools, therefore, principals with more and less time in the position were identified, principals who had held the position of vice president before assuming the position and others who did not, older and younger principals, smaller and larger schools, schools in the city center and on the outskirts. In this selection, issues related to the topics that each principal showed greater interest were also taken into account, for example, those who focused most of their time on addressing issues of violence, others who focused on the relationship with the team, or the influence of the family, on the challenges in student learning, on the management of resources and on the impact caused by the social vulnerability of students and the community in which they are inserted.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The data collected show that different paths led these teachers to school management, but that, in general, the trajectory did not include experiences specifically designed to prepare them for the management position. The absence of a more structured prior knowledge about the function,



added to a lack of in-service training, contributes to creating a situation in which it is not known for sure what the expectations of these professionals are.

The investigation points to a poorly structured routine in terms of the organization of demands, with overlapping activities and the execution of many tasks throughout the day, mostly focused on operational and administrative issues, such as taking care of finances and organizing funds; taking care of outsourced workers; monitor building works and maintenance and even take over the classroom in the absence of teachers. In general, despite reporting on the importance of the teaching and learning processes, there was no evidence of the allocation of time in the principals' routine so that they have instructional initiatives, such as monitoring the performance of teachers more closely, getting involved in teaching strategies, formulating pedagogical interventions, among others.

No specific examples or evidence were reported that there are frequent and planned moments in the principals' agenda to deal with pedagogical and strategic issues of the school, in addition to the moments established by the Secretariat, such as Class Council and Collective Teaching Work meetings, in which topics of different natures make up the agenda.

It is worth emphasizing that, throughout the survey, principals frequently argue about the importance of learning, indicating it as the main objective to be achieved. In this sense, the study does not question the intention shown by the interviewees to ensure quality education, nor does it question the commitment of these professionals to the function, but rather sought to observe how and at what times the principals effectively carry out activities aimed at this objective.

The descriptions made throughout the interviews, as well as the observation carried out in the field, allow us to identify that, in addition to the posture of commitment to learning and awareness of its importance, in general the principals did not demonstrate mastery of the level of general proficiency of the classes or the greatest challenges in terms of learning, as well as the pedagogical strategies in place to overcome gaps. Thus, there is insufficient evidence that the instructional perspective (on curriculum and teaching practices) is part of the principals' routine in a systematic and permanent way.

Thus, based on the results of this research, but also taking into account the evidence obtained and recommendations of the doctoral work entitled "School effectiveness, leadership and learning in Brazilian state schools: a multivariate panel analysis" (SIQUEIRA E SILVA, 2020) and also the Opinion of the National Council of Education (CNE) entitled "National Common Base of School Principal's Competencies (BNC-Academic Director)" (BRAZIL, 2021), seven recommendations were prepared to support public managers in the professional development of principals, in addition to a set of issues that can contribute to technicians and decision-makers analyzing the extent to which their structures and practices are aligned with the recommendations suggested here.



1. **Skills.** Describe the role of principals as school leaders, focusing not on the attributions widely established in the regulations, but rather on the expectations and competencies necessary for those who wish to pursue the career.
2. **Training.** Organize well-planned training moments with explicit objectives related to the professional development of directors as managers and leaders, which lead to the improvement of the central responsibilities of the school board.
3. **Collaboration.** Enable and foster spaces for exchange among the group of directors, encouraging collaborative work, exchange of good practices and team spirit.
4. **Support.** Properly train the technical team of the secretariat responsible for monitoring the work of the school board, ensuring that they are highly prepared professionals who understand the function.
5. **Evaluation.** To build processes for monitoring and evaluating principals in line with the description of the attributions and competencies established by the network and that allow their full development.
6. **Selection.** Establish director selection processes based on technical criteria aligned with the attributions and competencies defined by the network for the function.
7. **Appreciation.** Develop a culture of valuing school leadership that involves both the secretariat and the school community.

Complementary questions are presented below with the objective of offering a checklist that allows public managers, responsible for the development of school leadership, to analyze whether their structures and practices are aligned with the aforementioned recommendations:

1. Describe the duties of school principals, highlighting the expectations of the function as well as the skills necessary for those who wish to pursue the career;
2. Organize well-planned training moments with explicit objectives, which lead to the improvement of the core competencies of school management and the successful execution of responsibilities on a daily basis;
3. Enable and foster spaces for exchange among the group of directors, encouraging collaborative work, team spirit, intellectual development and the sharing of good practices for the exercise of the function;
4. Adequately train the technical team of the secretariat responsible for monitoring the work of the school board, ensuring that they are highly prepared professionals who understand the function;
5. Build processes for monitoring and evaluating principals in line with the description of the attributions and competencies established by the network that contribute to the continuous development of professionals in the function;



6. Establish selection processes for the position of director guided by technical criteria aligned with the attributions and competencies defined by the network for the function; Develop a culture of valuing school leadership that involves both the secretariat and the school community.

CONCLUSION

It is concluded that the adverse context, both in intra-school terms (school operational issues, limitations on the management of the teaching team and its teaching strategies) and extra-school (engagement and socioeconomic situation of the students' families), and the absence of an understanding of the responsibilities of the principal with the management of learning significantly preclude the performance of principals as school leaders.

This characteristic absence of the group of directors as a whole and not as something specific to one or another professional raises the hypothesis that, more than a question of the directors' engagement with the function, it may be the reflection of a system that does not, in fact, attribute such functions to the directors and does not prepare them. In this sense, it is questioned, therefore, to what extent the institutional arrangement in which public schools operate favors a concentrated action on teaching issues. In other words, to inquire how instruments and repertoire are offered for principals to deal with instructional issues, and if there is clarity and incentives for acting in this area. Guiding the training and performance of these professionals by a vision of competencies is an important step to reformat a profile that is mostly administrative towards one of leadership. However, in order for this leadership to find an environment conducive to development, it is necessary to discuss the context and processes that guide the functioning of schools as a whole, and to adjust the attributions of principals. In this sense, this article helps public managers to understand the relevance of this function, redefining the role of principals towards a vision of leadership and promoting professional development actions that enhance the qualification of principals and, in turn, the successful functioning of schools. In addition to the practical contribution, the results of this study also offer evidence to foster the field of research on school leadership in developing country contexts, a topic that is still incipient in Brazilian academia.

It is known that the performance of a well-prepared school leadership has the potential to influence the learning result of students; However, this action will only materialize when it is encouraged by an institutional arrangement that enables the perspective of principals as learning-oriented leaders. This study did not address the characteristics of this arrangement and the reasons that hinder the development of the necessary competencies and a view of principals as school leaders. Therefore, further research in this direction may contribute to broadening the analysis by exploring



the extent to which the current arrangement restricts the potential of directors and, in turn, the exercise of leadership.

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