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ARTICLE

The impact of the management model on the principal's leadership: the Portuguese case

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ABSTRACT

The Principal is a central actor in schools and their formal leader. The public school management model (PSMM) influences his/her leadership style and behaviours. This study intended to analyse Principal's performance as a leader under the current PSMM, as well as the positive and negative aspects of the model. The data were collected through exploratory interviews with a random systematic sample of 30 Principals with a management experience of at least 4 years. The results showed that Principals seek to find a balance between their role as leaders and managers, privileging delegation and collegiality in team coordination, disagreeing with the current General Council configuration, and underlining the importance of values and ethics in school management. They demand more time for pedagogical management and monitoring, greater autonomy and less bureaucracy and denounce the lack of resources for the management of people, facilities, equipment and services.

KEYWORDS

public school management model; leadership; principal.

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O IMPACTO DO MODELO DE GESTÃO NA LIDERANÇA DOS DIRETORES: O CASO PORTUGUÊS

RESUMO

O Diretor é um ator central e o líder formal das escolas. O modelo de gestão de escolas públicas (MGEP) influencia seu estilo e comportamento de liderança. Este estudo teve como objetivo analisar o desempenho do Diretor como líder à luz do atual MGEP, bem como quais são os aspetos positivos e negativos do modelo. Os dados foram coletados por meio de entrevistas exploratórias em uma amostra sistemática aleatória de 30 Diretores, com experiência de, pelo menos, 4 anos. Os resultados mostraram que os Diretores procuram encontrar um equilíbrio entre o seu papel de líder e gestor, privilegiando a delegação e a colegialidade na coordenação da equipe, discordando da atual configuração do Conselho Geral e sublinhando a importância dos valores e da ética na gestão escolar. Eles exigem mais tempo para gestão e monitorização pedagógica, maior autonomia e menos burocracia, e denunciam a falta de recursos para a gestão de pessoas, instalações, equipamentos e serviços.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

modelo de gestão das escolas públicas; liderança; diretor.

EL IMPACTO DEL MODELO DE GESTIÓN EN EL LIDERAZGO DEL DIRECTOR: EL CASO PORTUGUÉS

RESUMEN

El Director es un actor central y el líder formal de las escuelas. El modelo de gestión de la escuela pública (MGEP) influye en su estilo y comportamiento de liderazgo. Este estudio tuvo como objetivo analizar el desempeño del Director como líder bajo el MGEP, así como cuáles son los aspectos positivos y negativos del modelo. Los datos se recopilieron mediante entrevistas exploratorias en una muestra sistemática aleatoria de 30 Directores, con una experiencia de gestión de al menos 4 años. Los resultados mostraron que los directores buscan encontrar un equilibrio entre su papel como líder y gerente, privilegiando la delegación y la colegialidad en la coordinación del equipo, en desacuerdo con la configuración actual del Consejo General y subrayando la importancia de los valores y la ética en la gestión escolar. Ellos exigen más tiempo para el manejo y monitoreo pedagógico, mayor autonomía y menos burocracia y denuncian la falta de recursos para el manejo de personas, instalaciones, equipos y servicios.

PALABRAS CLAVE

modelo de gestión de escuelas públicas; liderazgo; director.

INTRODUCTION

The organizational structure of the Portuguese Public School is ruled by Decree-Law No. 75/2008 of April 22nd, as amended by Decree-Law No. 137/2012 of July 2nd. This law proposes the figure of the school Principal as the formal leader of the school organization and reinforces the importance of leadership in improving the quality and effectiveness of education. The school Principal emerges as a lone and powerful leader who is changing the way one views school leadership and how it works (Delgado, Romão and Diogo, 2018). As a result, there is greater verticalization of internal management, more concentrated power and a less participatory school culture (Bexiga, 2010; Lima, 2011b; 2018).

The importance attached to the school Principal as the organization's top leader alters the terms and models of collegiate leadership and management that have existed for decades. Collegiality implies the elimination of hierarchies, promoting horizontal rather than vertical communication. All teachers should be involved in the decision-making process, and leadership is based on professional experience and wisdom rather than formal authority (Hargreaves, 1998; Bush and Middlewood, 2005). Decision-making results from a negotiation process in which the values and goals shared by teachers lead to consensus (Bush, 2006).

The collegiate approach has the advantages of involving teachers in decision-making and, consequently, in the more effective implementation of the measures since, by being responsible for them, teachers feel more drawn towards their introduction. However, given the need for a negotiation process, several disadvantages to collegiality have been pointed out, namely lack of time for decision-making and a difficulty in reaching consensus (Barreto, 2002). It also seems that the Principal's level of responsibility and accountability required by the current school administration model could lead to less collegiality in decision-making (Carvalho, 2017).

Based on this problematic concerned with the Principals' role in schools, we decided to look for answers for two research questions: what do school Principals think and do on the basis of the current Public School Management Model (PSMM)?; and what are the positive and negative aspects of the PSMM in the Principals' point of view?

For the analysis of the first research question, we used the approach of Costa and Castanheira (2015, p. 27-28), who have presented six dimensions of analysis of the relationship between being a manager and being a leader in a school context:

- the distinction between leadership and management;
- dispersed and distributed leadership;
- collegiality of teachers and leadership;
- transformational leadership and innovation;
- pedagogical leadership and school outcomes;
- school leadership, values and ethics.

CURRENT MODEL OF MANAGEMENT OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN PORTUGAL

Decree-Law 75/2008 of April 22nd has three objectives: to intensify the involvement of families and the community in schools; to strengthen school leadership; and to reinforce school autonomy.

The first aims to achieve more participation of families and communities in schools by opening the latter to the first. The legislator intends that the school's governing body should include people representing teaching staff, non-teaching staff, parents and/or education tutors, students, local authorities and representatives of scientific, cultural, social and economic organisations (Bexiga, 2009).

The second objective is pursued by establishing direction, administration and management boards, represented by the General Council, the Principal, the Pedagogical Council and the Administrative Council. The republishing of Decree-Law No. 75/2008 of April 22nd by Decree-Law No. 137/2012 of July 2nd modifies the powers of the General Council regarding the evaluation process of the teacher's performance and its appeals. However, the General Council kept a small role in defining school policy, and this demobilization contributed to its devaluation in the educational community and before the Ministry of Education (Martins and Macedo, 2017).

The third objective appears in Article 8 of the law, where schools' autonomy is considered in terms of decision-making related to subjects, such as in pedagogical organization, curriculum organization, human resources management, school social action and strategic, patrimonial, administrative and financial management. The implementation of autonomy aims to free the central services and give the school a stronger and more personalized management. However, municipalities attract schools to the orbit "of their political party games, while, essentially, they remain dependent on the central bodies of the Ministry of Education" (Silva and Sá, 2017, p. 78).

LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT IN THE SCHOOL CONTEXT

Leadership is a concept well known and studied by social and human sciences, which receives special attention in the context of Organizational Theory. Chiavenato (2007) considers leadership to be necessary in all types of human organization, in that the leader is someone who must know human nature and how to guide people by having an interpersonal influence through the process of human communication in order to achieve specific goals. Therefore, a leader should have clear aims and the ability to be a role model, developing and motivating people (Delgado, Romão and Diogo, 2018). On the other hand, management definition involves the processes of planning, organisation, coordination, and control of resources and activities, aiming to achieve objectives in an effective and efficient way (Carvalho, 2018). These two concepts overlap mainly in that they deal both with people and achieving objectives.

Costa and Castanheira (2015) agree with other authors (e.g., Earley and Weindling, 2004; Bush and Middlewood, 2005) in arguing that leadership

and management should have equal emphasis for an organization to be successful. Earley and Weindling (2004) distinguish leadership from management, with the former tending to be more proactive, more educational and aimed at problem solving, and the latter more focused on planning, organization and execution as regards the use of resources and the performance of activities.

Dispersed leadership is related to the different levels of the school organization, i.e., the existence of various sectors or group leaders (Weick, 1976). Distributed leadership in school organizations means that leaders depend on other people who are members of the institution to perform their duties, either because activities overlap or because their obligations complement each other (Gronn, 2002).

Today, it seems acceptable that school management be guided by democratic procedures, equal opportunities, autonomy, and the participation of all those involved in the educational processes (Barroso, 2005; Costa and Castanheira, 2015; Lima and Sá, 2017). In schools, decision-making power must be democratically assigned and exercised, since school autonomy “is not the autonomy of teachers, or the autonomy of parents, or the autonomy of managers” (Barroso, 2005, p. 109). It is built precisely “at the confluence of various logics and interests (political, management, professional and pedagogical), so that it is necessary to know how to manage, integrate and negotiate” (Barroso, 2005, p. 109). As such, teachers’ collegiality implies the recognition of leadership as a peer-to-peer, supportive, collaborative process, with collective decision-making particularly on strategic issues (Woods and Woods, 2012).

In the school context, transformational leadership has a strong emphasis on empowerment (Burns, 1978), understood as influence distributed throughout the organization, namely among members who can inspire colleagues to develop their capacity to reach the organization’s objectives (Leithwood and Jantzi, 2005). Transformational leadership is related to processes of innovation and organizational change, where a charismatic leader motivates followers, introducing changes in their attitudes, in order to inspire them to achieve goals with the support of values and ideals (Antonakis, Avolio and Sivasubramaniam, 2003; Avolio *et al.*, 2004; Bass *et al.*, 2003).

Pedagogical leadership aims at improving the teaching and learning processes, emphasizing students’ acquisition of knowledge and monitoring, with particular attention to curriculum supervision and teaching practices effectiveness (Costa and Castanheira, 2015).

Finally, the relation of school leadership to values and ethics can be analysed in the context of school management by focusing on concepts such as efficiency, consumption, competitive advantages and added value creation, which are proper to a business logic and raise ethical questions (Bottery, 2014). For example, the school Principals’ decisions deal with ethical principles related to professional codes of conduct, performance standards, professional ethics, ethics of community and personal ethics (Baptista, 2005; Shapiro and Stefkovich, 2005). Another important ethical aspect is school evaluation based on students’ results, where Principals have to decide on what conditions they want to provide students with in light of the school’s position in national rankings (Castanheira, 2013). The schools’ scrutiny or

control by families and stakeholders increases through heterogeneous processes of evaluation and accountability, especially as regards measurable academic results (Afonso, 2018). Therefore, school decisions, as well as the processes of management and leadership, imply a complex choice of values whose ethical dimension is always and necessarily present (Costa and Castanheira, 2015).

METHOD

Data were collected through exploratory interviews conducted with 30 Principals. These were chosen by a random systematic approach, with $k = 4$, in order to obtain a sample from the 132 school clusters of Porto's district, which were ranked by size as measured by the number of schools in each cluster. These 30 Principals should have at least four years of management experience. All participants signed an informed consent, and their collaboration was completely voluntary, as required for the ethical approval of the study by the universities involved. The anonymity and confidentiality of interviews were ensured as per Law 58/2019 of August 8th on Personal Data Protection and Guarantee of Digital Rights in Portugal.

The interview script, besides sociodemographic information, included the following questions:

- What are the most important lessons you have learned during your career in management over the last 10 years, as regards the work of a Principal in a school or school cluster within the scope of Decree-Law No. 75/2008 of April 22nd;
- What “pitfalls” have you encountered under the current model that you would like to warn a new Principal about when he starts managing?;
- What are the main problems you have encountered in the current management model?;
- What factors can, in your view, contribute to overcoming the problems and pitfalls identified?;
- What parameters do you associate with positive results in managing a school or school cluster?;
- What changes in the current management model could contribute to better management of public institutions of pre-primary, primary and secondary education?

Although respondent gender was not a stratification criteria of the random sample, it was found that 10 respondents were female (F) and 20 male (M), and that their mean age was very similar (M - 54.28; standard deviation — SD = 6; 22 / F - 54.67; SD = 5.05), as well as their average years of service (M - 8.8; SD = 2.02 / F - 8.4; SD = 2.59). The highest academic backgrounds of these Principals were as follows: Bachelor's Degree (1); Public Management Training Program — FORGEP (1); Postgraduation in Management and School Administration (18); Master's in School Administration (8); and Doctorate in School Administration (2). The schools' or school clusters' average size was 1,606.27 students (SD = 753.45), with a minimum of 80 and a maximum of 3,300 students.

The Principals were contacted to have interviews arranged, which would last an average of 30 minutes, and agreed to have them recorded. The interviews were fully transcribed, and each researcher performed a content analysis of the interview texts based on the six dimensions of Costa and Castanheira (2015), for the purpose of this paper.

Researchers cross-analyzed the chosen sentences for each category until there was unanimous consensus.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Firstly, we present the results of the six-dimension analysis of Costa and Castanheira (2015), concerned with what school Principals think and do on the basis of the current PSMM. Then, we describe their assessment of the PSMM in terms of positive and negative aspects, as well as their evaluation of the model's implementation. Throughout the analysis, we offer quotes taken from the participants' responses in order to illustrate their ideas. The Principals are identified by letters and numbers to ensure anonymity. Naturally, the interviews produced a much larger number of statements than those presented here as illustration.

MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

The school Principals raised many concerns about management issues. They mentioned financial problems, in that "the budget is very small and a large part goes to water, electricity or consumables" (PR2); therefore, "the projects are difficult to implement" (PR1). Aiming at good financial management, they invoked the need for financial and accounting literacy, since "a Principal who does not have accounting knowledge is distressed and depends on administrative services" (PM3). They also referred to problems relating to hiring and evaluating staff because, as mentioned by PM10, "we lack an effective evaluation system that assesses the merits of those who effectively work for the school's success, [...], and another tricky issue is hiring staff". Planning is equally a problem since "goals and objectives must be defined; there are no favourable winds if there is no course" (PR1).

Several statements also indicated leadership concerns, such as those related to staff training (teachers and staff), given that "training is essential for teaching and non-teaching staff" (IT3). The Principals were also concerned with conflict management, where "it is necessary to be careful in one's approach and have a lot of patience" (IT2), which requires the practice of active listening "because people have many personal problems today, and we have to contextualize everything and try to understand the problems and the people" (JC4). A "good human resources management is needed..." in order to obtain "better educational results and contribute to the success of students" (JC4). To be a "good human resources manager" (PM12), the Principal must take a holistic approach: "Leadership must focus on the vision of the school as an ever-present whole" (PM5).

We conclude that all the interviewed Principals perceive their position in the school or school cluster as being characterized by the need to possess knowledge and experience as leaders and as managers. This need is accentuated in light of the

increased and concentrated power that the Principal has at the school, as mentioned by Bexiga (2010) and Lima (2011b; 2018). It seems that the Principals present a system thinking (Shaked and Schechter, 2017) based on their multidimensional view of problems and try to influence the school community directly and indirectly. Some are still in the process of learning, but all are aware of their own difficulties and what can be done to overcome some limitations.

DISPERSED AND DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP

Schools have different levels of organization, which allows for dispersed leadership through internal and external stakeholders. Intermediate leaders are considered to be very important in most of the answers, as explained by PM11, “because they are the ones who then transmit our message to colleagues”. However, it is emphasized that they “need to have power” and, therefore, “it is important that the Principal reinforce the role of the intermediate leaders, encouraging them to perform their functions” (FD2). Regarding the external environment, there is difficulty in reconciling the positions of the central government, the municipalities, unions and associations of parents and guardians “who also want to have more active participation, even with regard to curriculum management” (IT1). Here, we are referring to “negative external influences that diminish the role of education in school” (LR1) and a “paradigm shift: 15 years ago, the power of change was with teachers and now it is with partners or other stakeholders” (IT1).

The difficulties involved in reconciling divergent perspectives are also manifested in the General Council, making its articulation with the Principal problematic because “the people in the General Council do not view themselves as an integral part of the organization, looking like something external” (LR2). In this context, the Principal has great responsibility: “he/she must be accountable to local authorities, the Ministry of Education, those in charge of education, the General Inspection of Education and Science and the General Council” (IT1). This ambiguous dependence on the General Council, whose approval the Principal depends on and which is responsible for defining the strategic direction of the school’s activity, devalues the administration and management carried out by him/her (Martins and Macedo, 2017). Likewise, there is leadership distributed according to common duties and tasks, which leads the Principal to trust other people in the school administration, betting on their “training and involvement” (PR1): “I tried to train people, including the coordinators’ department, so that they could work with colleagues using their own dynamics, and, therefore, I don’t have to worry about that” (PM2).

Delegating tasks involves forming cohesive teams, based on the autonomy of their coordinators:

I give them total autonomy so that they can choose the people who will be part of their team. And that makes people much more committed to their jobs. If we can do that, we will not only create a school that has several strong middle leaders, but we will also invest a lot in commitment — and that, of all the strategies I could describe, is what I feel has the most potential. (JQ2)

COLLEGIABILITY OF TEACHERS AND LEADERSHIP

There is a complementarity between collegiality and leadership when it comes to decision-making. The participation of all actors involved in the educational processes can be as important as the decision-making capacity of the Principal, where each assumes their own responsibilities. Defining schools as “spaces for participation” (PM5), most of the Principals emphasized team work: “I don’t work much as a single Principal, which is what the legislation suggests, but as a team” (LR2), because “without my team, I don’t exist” (PM6). Another Principal stated: “I don’t work here as a Principal. We are a team. I have a meeting every Monday at school, to share, plan the week, provide services, solve problems and make decisions” (PM9). It seems that decision-making still results from a negotiation process based on participation and teamwork (Bush, 2006; Woods and Woods, 2012), contradicting the fear that the school administration model could lead to less collegiality in management (Carvalho, 2017).

Despite the evolution of the legal model of school management, there were those who claimed to have felt “no difference”:

I am the same. I listen to my colleagues, the team I work with, the executive team. In the language of the school community, it seems that nothing has changed. People say: ‘I go to the Council’. Everyone knows that I am the Principal, but they often say that they’ll go to the Council. Therefore, we seek to maintain democratic participation by the entire community and by all administrative and management bodies, each fulfilling its competences, seeking to articulate them in a healthy manner. (VD2)

The vast majority of the interviewed Principals declared to exercise democratic leadership, although they emphasized that “the responsibility for the decision always lies with the Principal, whereas before it lay with the organ” (LR1). This is because, “despite having a team and delegating competencies, we are responsible for everything and cannot supervise everything” (PM14). And they admitted to not always resorting to consultation, because “there are times when decisions must be made and not all subjects need to be discussed, right?” (IT2).

TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND INNOVATION

Transformational leadership refers to how a Principal can innovate in his/her actions and processes in order to empower the school community and inspire colleagues to develop their skills and competences towards the planned objectives. Because Principals understand that “they have to go a little further to succeed” and that “the school must be entrepreneurial”, they advocate “a strategic vision of the future shared by the Principal and the teachers, which must go beyond what is expected” (VD1). Part of this effort to transform the team members is based on a reinforcement of the feeling of belonging, “because people do not go to the school cluster, people are the school cluster” (PD2). However, Lima (2018) warns against the risks of emulating business organizations, leading the public school away from its specificities, and alienating its ethical, political and moral responsibilities.

Excessive bureaucracy, repetitive work on computer platforms, and direct supervision inevitably produce poorer school management.

PEDAGOGICAL LEADERSHIP AND SCHOOL RESULTS

Pedagogical leadership is important in achieving schools' objectives, which are essentially related to the students' study and learning processes and to the teachers' teaching processes. By affirming that schools "should be bold, especially in the curricular area" (RV1), the Principals emphasized the importance of the organizational climate: "Positive results come from a good work environment. You have to start there. The school must have a good working environment" (PM8). Teachers "need to feel comfortable and well, working creatively with children" (LR1). In addition, some Principals highlighted the relational-affective element: "You have to like the students [...], they need to feel that I'm here working for them. If they feel that, they study with more pleasure" (PD2).

Like other Principals, one stated that "the first parameter I associate with positive results is the school's ability to have an identity, a pedagogical singularity. In each school, dynamic ways of working on projects that lead students to success can be found" (PM1). The implementation of project methodologies, a "very close relationship with the community" (PM8), "the tutorial regime that we have here, the monitoring of the student at the affective level" (JQ1) are some of the ways pointed out by the Principals to reach positive results.

Despite declarations such as that "pedagogical issues are at the centre of my management and leadership, which has to do with the success of our students", the Principals confessed that their time "is largely absorbed by management actions" (PM2). "I would like to have more time for the pedagogical part, as a Principal", says PM2. They also mentioned another important condition, the impossibility of "hiring teachers and non-teaching staff, of defining their educational project and having their own resources for that negotiated directly with the Ministry of Education. Now, if I have to manage and I cannot hire, I am conditioned and in a problematic situation" (LR1). Consequently, we can conclude that the Principal's leadership should take into account several logics and interests at the political, managerial and professional levels, but never forgetting the pedagogical issues (Barroso, 2005).

LEADERSHIP, VALUES AND ETHICS AT SCHOOLS

The relationship between school leadership and values and ethics can be analyzed in the context of school management. The Principals claim that these issues arise mainly in

pedagogical management, in the relationship with students, as an ethical imperative, understanding that all students count as unique and unrepeatable children; in the relationship with teachers, do not confuse the vast majority of good teachers with the small, though impressive, part of the mediocre ones. (FD1)

Additionally, in terms of professional codes of conduct, "the Principal makes decisions that are often not what each person wants for himself" and "we are popular

or not, depending on the benefits we offer. And, sometimes, the benefits that people want are not suitable for the institution and the students" (PM14).

Ethical requirements are also present in the integration of children, adolescents and young people from other countries who "run away from living conditions, violence etc. [...], in addition to those we have in Special Education" (VD1), aimed at responding to families and stakeholders by embodying processes of evaluation and accountability (Afonso, 2018). In the school environment, more sharply than in other types of organizations, the ethical dimension is always present in decision-making (Costa and Castanheira, 2015).

APPRAISAL OF THE MODEL

The Principals presented several negative and positive aspects of the current school administration model. We also found in the Principals' statements that many of them have a positive opinion but also have reservations concerning certain dimensions of the design and implementation of the model.

One of the negative aspects is the lack of school autonomy. The Principals considered that "the autonomy we have achieved over the past thirty years has been small or none" (PM12), despite autonomy contracts: "I have an autonomy contract, but I don't know what it is for, with so many limitations" (PM9). Still regarding these contracts, a Principal exemplified: "Nothing of what was asked of the Ministry to implement certain projects, that was in the autonomy contract, was authorized and, therefore, schools do not strictly have any autonomy" (LR2).

As authority is centralized in Lisbon, the relationship that is developed with the Ministry of Education is a problem. Schools have to contact Lisbon directly, "but the megastructure that has been created in Lisbon is not adaptable to our needs. We appeal to Lisbon: either they don't answer us, or when they do, they give us different answers for calls made on different days" (PM7).

This lack of power by the Principal transforms "this one-person body into a kind of fallacy. It is no use being a one-person body if the skills and decision-making are not real" (PM1). The Principals demanded the possibility of choosing the members of the Pedagogical Council, as was the case in the previous management model, so as to allow the previously validated action plan to be executed. They also demanded the possibility of choosing teachers and non-teaching staff whom they can trust and who identify themselves with the educational project: "We manage human resources that we do not choose" (PM3).

The Principal has total responsibility without the necessary means and autonomy: "I don't feel like a prisoner of the Ministry, but sometimes I have a hard time getting out of the bonds that the Ministry throws at us" (VD1). An exercise that is, however, always subject to superior hierarchical control, namely via inspection: "We have to comply with the regulations" (VD1). In this model, the Principal is responsible for everything: "We often think it is all about the team, but the team works and only one person is accountable" (PM8).

These narratives allow us to conclude that the implementation of school autonomy is a work-in-progress that is far from completed, since the school lacks more proper, personalized and independent management. As Silva and Sá (2017)

noted, the school remains generally dependent on the Ministry of Education. Lima (2018) affirms that school democracy is reduced to a minimum and school autonomy is mainly rhetorical within a technocratic or autocratic management. Nevertheless, some Principals consider there to be a discrepancy between responsibility and decision authority or autonomy, in that sometimes “we know what is wrong and we have no authority to correct it” (PM13). Responsibility is heightened in the absence of specialized support in the legal and accounting areas, which Principals do not master and which frequently oblige them to “to consult other expert technicians personally in order to make decisions” (JC4). In another statement, a Principal admits that “almost every day we are faced with serious problems to solve. Responsibility for all actions is placed on the Principal, when we are not trained to do so” (PM12).

One of the interviewees said that schools do not have people in the administrative area prepared for certain issues, “and now, with public accounting for education, we lack, for example, an official accountant” (PM2). In short, schools need technical staff specialized in school administration, “because if we all agree that schools need to have psychologists, social mediators, social workers, why is the administrative area forgotten?” (PM7).

Lack of resources is another issue that makes decision-making difficult, namely in the management of teaching and non-teaching human resources as well as of credit, finances, equipment and buildings. The relationship with the City Council takes on added importance, particularly in terms of school maintenance, if we consider that “the Ministry of Education is always cutting money and schools are starting to degrade” (PM9).

The manifested difficulties are associated with more workload and bureaucracy, such as filling online platforms, which consumes too much time, duplicates tasks and simultaneously constitutes a means of controlling the functioning of schools: “The paperwork still exists, there is still a lot of bureaucracy. We have a lot of bureaucratic work that give us little leeway to regulate ourselves beyond what we get every day by circulars or dispatches” (RV1).

The size of organic units is also a problem. The creation of school clusters and mega school clusters prevents getting to know colleagues, students, and the detailed operation of all buildings that make up the organic unit:

If schools have fewer students, if classes are smaller, they get better results, they can work better. I think schools with three, four thousand students are dehumanized. I don't believe the results of this clustering can be superior to those of a smaller school with 800, 1 thousand, or 1,200 students. (PM12)

Another Principal stated that if the cluster is too big “the Principal will be a person who is in an office and nobody will know him. He will only send dispatches” (PM9).

The positive aspects are related to the new role of stakeholders in school activities and to a general agreement with the current administration model, the application of which, it is argued, depends very much on the Principal's psychological characteristics, i.e., on the way he/she likes to use his/her powers. However, there

are concerns with the risk of intrusion by the City Hall in the Principal's election, and some Principals reported problems with internal and external stakeholders, which are translated into the role and functioning of the General Council.

Among the stakeholders, local authority is fundamental:

It is a very important partner for our projects and to the schools. They supervise preschool and elementary school, but they still very much collaborate with the other study cycles and have teaching as a priority. The relationship with the Principals is very good. Virtually, everything we ask from them they collaborate with. (PM14)

In the same sense, another Principal declared that, in this model, the "school is not an island and its interconnection with the community is important, with very present parents and local authorities. It does not surprise me that these people have an active voice in the election of the Principal" (PR2).

However, Principals also expressed concerns with the risk of some kind of intrusion by the City Hall in respect to the Principal's election, "because in some situations there are intrusions of the municipality in the electoral process regarding issues that are parallel to and outside of the school's concern, and which later bring major constraints to its functioning" (PM2).

Some Principals mentioned problems with the competences of the General Council, particularly the election of the Principal. In terms of democracy, the model is justified by concentrating in one board the representativeness of an entire local community. However,

the people who are normally part of this body, the General Council, have few attributions and even little scientific competence in terms of job readiness for the positions they hold, and so they may have problems in their assessments. Sometimes people are unprepared, but it's not their fault. It is the system that pushes them into this collegiate body, because it has to exist, and it doesn't reserve any fees or time to engage people in such roles. (JQ2)

Most Principals agreed with the current administration model, since it does not unconditionally determine their management practices. Despite being a single-person organ, in practice the exercise of the position does not prevent collegiality in decision-making, teamwork, and the search for a consensus:

Regardless of the model, what counts most is individual posture. I didn't notice much difference in any of the models. I always favoured consensus. I did not make decisions in any of the models without meeting with the other members of the board. I listen to opinions, and I always make decisions by consensus. There was never a need for voting. (PD1)

In the same sense, one respondent says: "I have delegated competencies to my team members. The challenge in this model results largely from the loss of collegiality. However, I make no decision without the consent of my colleagues. But no body works if you need to meet with everyone before" (FD2).

The decreed management model is seen as a generic framework for the exercise of power, and its results depend more on how decision-making is done within the model used than on the general, abstract and uniform rules that have been formulated in the political discourse of Decree-Law No. 137/2012 (Lima, 1996; 2011a).

However, the generic acceptance of the model coexists with some risks, which result from the concentration of power:

If things go wrong, if you go wrong with that person, everything goes wrong; when it goes well, a lot goes well. So, there are risks always when power is concentrated in one person. There are situations that have gone wrong, but roughly speaking, I think the experience has been very good. (JQ6)

The positive assessment of the experience with the application of the model led another Principal to defend the creation of a career for Principals (PM9). This step would mean a more conspicuous option towards professionalizing school management with a specific statute and performance assessment, which would represent a change on the current option, where school management is viewed as a temporary role.

CONCLUSION

We can conclude that the Principals interviewed in this study consider that being in their position presents many challenges for their roles as managers and leaders. They agree that being a leader is more than being only a manager. However, although they seem to use both dispersed and distributed leadership and try to accommodate, in their main decisions, the contributions of intermediary leaders and other internal and external stakeholders, they also complain about not having enough power, which is somewhat paradoxical. We suppose they associate their huge responsibility and the fact that they are the “face” of the school with the need to hold more power, even if they are going to use it in a democratic way.

Many Principals also presented a leadership style that revealed transformational and innovative characteristics. These can be seen in their willingness to improve other people’s skills and knowledge and in their absence of fear of experimenting with new solutions to the school’s problems at different levels, such as budgeting, buildings and equipment maintenance, human resources, partnerships, and even pedagogical issues. They have concerns about school being inclusive and supportive of ethical values. This is a positive sign that leads us to believe that these Principals have most likely been well chosen and that their work is generally recognized by the school community, even when they face many restrictions such as a low budget or lack of autonomy to hire competent human resources.

In general, Principals saw positive and negative aspects in the current school management model, but they were able to overcome its obstacles and deficiencies. They also proposed that a future model be based on scientific studies, as the one we are doing here, that take into account the ideas and experiences of the current managers of schools and school clusters.

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