

School principals as key actors in the implementation of educational policies: perspectives from the Integral Education Program (PEI) in São Paulo State, Brazil

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Abstract

The article analyzes the role of school principals in implementing the Integral Education Program (PEI) in São Paulo (Brazil). The primary assumption was that school principals have a fundamental role in implementing educational policies locally, as they are positioned as mediators of the interests of the public education system and the community where they work. Interviews and on-site observations were carried out in four PEI schools in the State of São Paulo. We analyzed the role of school principals in the adherence process of teachers, students, and families to the program. The data demonstrated that school principals' strong adherence to the policy was decisive for its implementation locally. The principals led the other school actors to vote in favor of the program, acting as sense-makers.

Keywords: Brazil, educational policy implementation, school leadership, school principals, sensemaking

Résumé

L'article analyse le rôle des cheffes d'établissement dans la mise en œuvre du Programme d'Éducation Intégrale (PEI) à São Paulo (Brésil). Nous partons de l'hypothèse que les cheffes d'établissement jouent un rôle fondamental dans la mise en œuvre des politiques éducatives au niveau local, en raison de leur position en tant que médiatrices entre les impératifs du système éducatif d'une part et les acteurs/trices de l'école de l'autre. Des entretiens et des observations *in situ* ont été réalisés dans quatre écoles PEI de l'État de São Paulo. Nous avons analysé le rôle des quatre cheffes d'établissement dans le processus d'adhésion des enseignant-es, des élèves et des familles au programme. Les résultats montrent que la forte adhésion des cheffes d'établissement à la politique a été décisive pour sa mise en œuvre sur le plan local. Les directrices ont mobilisé les autres acteurs/trices scolaires pour adhérer au programme, agissant en tant que productrices de sens.

Mots-clés : Brésil, chef-fes d'établissement, leadership en éducation, mise en œuvre des politiques éducatives, production de sens

INTRODUCTION

Dealing with the question of how educational policies are implemented requires an in-depth study of the dynamics of educational institutions and the strategies of the players who operate within them on a day-to-day basis. Some of these actors have a “front-line” position, to use Michael Lipsky’s (1980) expression, in the sense that they are in direct contact with school users, notably students and their parents. In this case, it’s mainly teachers. Others have a more managerial and organizational role. These include school principals. These actors, whose central role in the implementation of educational policies and reforms has been demonstrated by research (Coburn, 2005; Datnow & Park, 2009; Lessard, *et al.*, 2008), can be described as “intermediaries” in the sense that their role is to build the link between public authorities on the one hand, and the school community for which they are responsible on the other.

If we accept, following Lessard & Carpentier (2015), to consider the implementation of a reform in education as the collective response of an institution to an impulse for change emanating from public action, it becomes central to study how school principals manage - or fail - to contribute to this impulse for change. How do they manage to mobilize teachers around new practices? What strategies do they use to overcome the path dependency inherent in all institutions? How do they limit the effects of loose coupling, which Weick (1976) defined as one of the structuring characteristics of educational institutions? And finally, how do they give meaning to reforms in such a way as to mobilize teachers around new cognitive and normative frameworks?

These questions are not only of scientific interest. They are also of practical interest, as they can inform us about the modes of governance and mobilization of educational communities capable of bringing about change. Thus, by studying the role of school principals in the implementation of the Integral Education Program (PEI), we wish to show how a policy designed to improve the quality of education can only really be effective if the actors manage to give it meaning in the specific context of their action (Felouzis, 2021).

We begin by presenting the international literature on school principals as key actors of change in the context of reform. In the second part, we describe the context of the PEI reform in Brazil and the methodological elements of data production and empirical analysis. In the third part, we produce analyses of the empirical results to describe the different strategies used by school principals to mobilize their school’s educational community around the reform. Finally, the discussion of the results theorizes the strategies of school principals within educational organizations and their role as sense-makers.

1. PROBLEM AND RESEARCH QUESTION

At present, school principals are recognized as key actors in educational processes. They are responsible for organizing the school setting, so it is conducive to teaching, learning, and student's development. Their daily choices, decisions, and priorities have the potential to affect thousands of students and families. According to Leithwood, et al. (2017), "Using several different sources of evidence, we have argued over the past 10 years that among the wide array of school conditions influencing students, leadership is second only to classroom instruction [...]" (p. 1).

Among the various reasons why the role of school principals is crucial, we emphasize their strategic position in the educational process. At the same time, they respond to the education system, and act in the context of their schools, occupying a mediating role between these extremes. Therefore, school principals are middle managers (Barrère, 2006; Lima, 2019; Oliveira & Abrucio, 2018), since "[they are] connected to the highest level – in this case, bodies representing the Public Sector (Municipal and State Secretariats of Education) – and, also, the school institution and all the actors that are there – management team, teachers, students, families, and the local community" (Lima, 2019, p. 95, free translation).

This mediation position has even greater implications in the context of neoliberal logic and new public management¹ measures adopted in education systems. In this context, the school principals are accountable for the results of schools, dealing with significant external pressure. As stated by Gather Thurler, et al. (2017),

The association between evaluation and autonomisation tends to bring out new requirements for accountability and quality control, which contribute to constructing more tightly objectified tests in which institutions - and those who run them - can be judged more crudely and harder. These judgments, fair or unfair, can also reflect or overlook the difficulties in the local context. This leads not only to an increase in the responsibilities of the directors but above all to a more complex nature of their roles: their political function (building and defending local arrangements) sometimes comes into conflict with their managerial function (obtaining the best figures at the best cost). (p. 13, free translation)

The objective of this study is to analyze the influence of Brazilian school principals on the local implementation of educational policies, considering their strategic position as mediators. In

¹ [1]"The New Public Management (NPM) is a doctrine of reference to orient and configure numerous reforms introduced in public administrations and sectors in North America, Anglo-Saxon countries, and continental Europe. It designates a significant movement aimed at the in-depth reorganization of administrative systems by transferring management methods reserved to private firms and implementing managerial instruments, such as a culture of results, performance measurement, contracting, accountability, and customer approach." (Demazière, *et al.*, 2013, p. 6, free translation).

Global South² countries, and particularly in Brazil, school principals have not received the same attention from academia and policymakers as other school actors (teachers, students, and families).

Studies indicate that little research on school management focuses on the practices of school principals in Brazil (Oliveira & Vasquez-Menezes, 2018; Simielli, 2022). Lück (2017) states that,

(...) Today, there is a need to consider that the development of knowledge and the training of professionals specialized in educational management, capable of implementing and operating the necessary transformations of education systems and schools, are a priority, as it is a fundamental condition for the essential qualitative leap in Brazilian education. (p. 179, free translation).

For the research purpose, we will benefit from the sociology of public action applied to education, an approach that considers the interaction between actors. According to Hassenteufel (2011), the concept of the state as the center of public policy production gives place to a conception of the collective construction of public action through the interaction of different actors at different levels. In addition, Porto de Oliveira and Hassenteufel (2021) state that “to explain the ‘State in action’, the sociology of public action attaches importance to analytical elements that involve the role of ideas, knowledge, institutions, interests, instruments, individuals, and gender.” (p. 16, free translation).

Thus, it is possible to comprehend the implementation process as a construction mediated by the actors involved, based on how they adhere to the directives, interpret them, and communicate them to others. Mazeaud and Nonjon (2021) state that school principals, as intermediary managers, can apply, mold, and give sense to the system’s guidelines according to their understanding, reference, and perspective.

Therefore, school principals are sense-makers (Coburn, 2005): “Principals draw on their own conceptions of what new policy ideas or approaches entail as they make decisions about what to bring in and emphasize, as they discuss approaches with teachers, and as they shape opportunities for teacher learning” (p. 501).

Spillane, et al. (2002) also argued that policy implementation is affected by individual cognition (local agents as sense-makers), situated cognition (situation and context), and the role of representations (ideas). According to the authors,

² “The phrase ‘Global South’ refers broadly to the regions of Latin America, Asia, Africa, and Oceania. It is one of a family of terms, including ‘Third World’ and ‘Periphery’ that denote regions outside Europe and North America, mostly (though not all) low-income and often politically or culturally marginalized. The use of the phrase Global South marks a shift from a central focus on development or cultural difference toward an emphasis on geopolitical relations of power.” (Dados & Connell, 2012, p.12)

What a policy means for implementing agents is constituted in the interaction of their existing cognitive structures (including knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes), their situation, and the policy signals. How the implementing agents understand the policy's message(s) about local behavior is defined in the interaction of these three dimensions. (p. 388)

The question of sense-making is, however, not independent of the principles of legitimacy used by school principals to construct this sense. Draelants and Revaz (2022) rightly emphasize the importance of this dimension in the construction of sense-making and in the capacity of educational institutions to produce change. In this context, the place given to the “pragmatic legitimacy” of change, that is to say, the fact that a change is legitimate from the professional point of view, is decisive because it largely conditions teachers' support for the current reforms.

The sense-making process can also be analyzed considering the current role that school principals exercise as leaders. It is a consensus in the educational field that principals are no longer simple administrators, such as the “cabinet principals” from the past. As the concepts evolve in the field of school administration, from administrators to managers and then educational leaders (Gunter, 2019), so does the practice. Oliveira and Menezes (2018) state that “the role of the school principal changes from a simple administrator to a democratic leader, who seeks to be an integrating figure of the school community and a conciliator of different opinions and expectations of this group” (p. 881, free translation).

In this sense, this study proposes to investigate the following research question: How do school principals implement an educational policy in Brazil? It is essential to understand the role of these actors in the actual implementation process that occurs in schools. Based on research carried out in four public schools in São Paulo State, we analyze the practices of four school principals in the context of implementing the Integral Education Program (Programa de Ensino Integral – PEI). The study analyzes the role of school principals in the adherence process of teachers, students, and families to the program.

2. METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH CONTEXT

The methodology used combines semi-structured interviews with school principals, and the unstructured observation of these professionals' working day. The choice for semi-structured interviews is part of a comprehensive approach, focused on investigating the social meanings individuals build about a research object (Matthey, 2005). The interviews were divided into the following sections: their daily work and challenges; the PEI Program implementation; and their role as school principals. To complement the interviews, we also observed one entire working day of the four school principals, aiming to understand their actual work and profiles. The observation enabled us to identify specific aspects of the principals' roles in PEI schools.

To analyze the data, we used thematic analysis, since the research did not intend to evaluate the practice of the school principals or the PEI Program. The objective of this analysis is to understand how school principals act in practice in the context of implementing an educational policy. The thematic analysis identifies all themes relevant to the research object, draws parallels between them, and provides an overview of significant trends in the studied phenomenon (Paillé & Mucchielli, 2012).

It is important to mention that in Brazil the administration of public education is shared between the administrative spheres. In general, the federal government is responsible for higher education and technical and financial support to the States; the States are responsible for elementary and secondary education; and municipalities are responsible for pre-school, primary education, and elementary education. The governance of the Brazilian educational system is complex and there are significant inequalities between different regions.

Moreover, most schools, especially in secondary education, run part-time. Problems related to this educational stage in the country involve different variables, such as poverty and demotivation (Salata, 2019). Many high school students have to work alongside their studies. According to Akkari, et al. (2018), a major challenge for Brazil is to ensure not only access to education but also the permanence of students at school. Thus, on the one hand, part-time schools are essential. On the other hand, full-time schools across the country have shown better academic results. As a result, federal and state programs have been focusing on their expansion.

For the research, fieldwork was done in four public schools implementing the PEI Program in São Paulo State (Campos Cardoso, 2023), where it was established in 2012 aiming to improve learning results and the integral development of students. The PEI proposes an extended school journey (seven or nine hours per day), as well as a different pedagogical proposal. According to the Education Plan of São Paulo State, the objective is to offer full-time education in at least 50% of public schools³. In 2023, the State counted 2315 high schools in the PEI Program out of 5300 in total⁴.

Pedagogical and structural differences exist between full-time and part-time schools. Comparing the curriculum matrices, the number of classes dedicated to the basic core (BNCC)⁵ is noticeable. In part-time schools, this quantity decreases throughout high school, whereas it remains almost stable in full-time schools. Furthermore, the schools' political-pedagogical project is reviewed based on the program proposal. Regarding structural differences, the work team structure is an interesting point. In part-time schools, there is a

³ *Meta 6, Plano Estadual de Educação de São Paulo* (2016). <https://www.al.sp.gov.br/repositorio/legislacao/lei/2016/lei-16279-08.07.2016.html>

⁴ Source: São Paulo State Secretariat of Education <https://www.educacao.sp.gov.br/>

⁵ The Base Nacional Comum Curricular (BNCC) (National Curricular Standards) is a normative document that defines the organic and progressive set of essential learning that all students must develop throughout the stages and modalities of basic education in Brazil. Source: Ministry of Education, free translation. <http://basenacionalcomum.mec.gov.br/>

higher turnover of teachers who often teach in different schools to complete their workloads. By contrast, in full-time schools, teachers are exclusively attached to a single school. Besides that, school principals have a greater influence on teachers' selection and dismissal processes in PEI schools. It is noteworthy that the principals highlighted an increase of teachers interested in working in the schools after the implementation of the program.

The criteria used for the selection of the PEI schools were to have a diverse group according to the following variables: the geographic location (central and peripheral areas), socioeconomic aspects (socioeconomic condition according to the INSE index⁶), size (number of students), and the academic results of students according to IDEB⁷ (Table 1). The PEI was designed to serve mainly disadvantaged neighborhoods. Although two selected schools are in central areas, all of them attend vulnerable students. Regarding the interviewees, all four school principals were women, from 40 to 53 years old, and predominantly white (just one self-declared brown⁸). They had 5-20 years of experience in school management at the time of the interviews and observation.

⁶ The Index of Socioeconomic Level of Basic Education Schools (INSE) is calculated by the National Institute of Educational Studies and Research Anísio Teixeira (INEP), based on questions to students about their family income, ownership of goods and hiring services by their families, in addition to the education level of their guardians.

⁷ Índice de Desenvolvimento da Educação Básica (IDEB) (Index of Basic Education Development). The IDEB is an indicator that combines the results of two concepts: school flow and assessment performance averages. It is calculated from school approval data (School Census) and performance averages (SAEB). The index scale is from 0 (worst result) to 10 (best result). <https://www.gov.br/inep/pt-br/areas-de-atuacao/pesquisas-estatisticas-e-indicadores/ideb>

⁸ The research borrows the concept of color or race used by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), responsible for the census of the Brazilian population. The IBGE research is based on self-declaration and has five categories: 'branco' (white), 'preto' (black), 'pardo' (brown), 'indígena' (indigenous), and 'amarelo' (yellow). The translation was done literally since there is no direct translation of each of the categories to English.

Table 1. Selected schools for the fieldwork⁹

Name	Neighborhood	INSE	N. of students	Score IDEB (2019)	Part of the PEI
School A	Central	5 (medium-high)	451	5.9 (elementary II) 5.2 (high school)	8 years
School B	Periphery	4 (medium-low)	267	5 (elementary II) 3.6 (high school)	3 years
School C	Central	5 (medium-high)	286	5 (elementary II)	3 years
School D	Periphery	4 (medium-low)	652	4.9 (elementary II) 4.1 (high school)	3 years

Source: Elaborated by Campos Cardoso (2023); Primary source: Qedu (2022)

3. RESULTS

3.1. Principals' profile and engagement in the policy implementation

The first interesting aspect observed in the research was the profile of the interviewed school principals. At some point in their careers as teachers, all interviewees left the classroom to integrate into the management team. As stated by Progin (2017),

[...] Becoming a principal most often corresponds to a voluntary professional retraining of teachers or trainers from different educational sectors brought to experience 'an upward personal mobility within a school and a changing public service' [...]. Many principals are, in fact, former teachers who wish to extend their involvement within the school organization. (p. 35, free translation)

From their work as teachers, the principals used to exert extra engagement outside the reach of their initial functions, whether by taking on projects beyond the classroom or by collaborating spontaneously with the school administration. Among their professional paths, there is a common willingness to seek new challenges, leave their comfort zone, and expand the impact of their work. The following statement illustrates this point:

⁹ To make data anonymous, the names of the schools were replaced with letters A, B, C, and D. The names of the professionals were replaced by their function plus a letter referring to the school where they worked, that is, Principal A, Principal B, Principal C, and Principal D. This is the nomenclature used in this study.

(Principal D) Being principal in a central school, in a small school, in a community¹⁰ where students read, that they have a father, that there is no shortage of food, that the slippers do not break to the point that I have to put clips on them all day long, it is very easy! It's the comfort zone. What has made me a principal today? Having come here and having seen so many problems I needed to be at the forefront, with a team, to be able to make the change. So, what is my social role? The role of change. If I'm not here at the front, studying, engaged, thinking, it won't happen.

Another point is the regulatory aspect of the PEI Program regarding school principals' work. The program proposes a specific organization for the school, with a chart of employees and their expected roles already defined. For this reason, the principals mentioned very similar attributions when explaining their daily work, since the functions proposed by the program frame them all. Therefore, the program has a rigid structure around work, as mentioned by Principal C, "(...) The program is already a ready-made model; it is not under discussion". She adds, "there is a [competencies] map, a ready, rigid, and not flexible document. It is ready from the Secretariat of Education".

Another important aspect is that from the outset, the PEI program had high adherence from the school principals interviewed. In all four cases, the schools transitioned full-time under their leadership. In three schools (B, C, and D), the professionals took the initiative to adhere to the program. In only one school (A), the proposal originated from the Regional Department of Education. Even so, when presented with the program, School Principal A embraced the idea right away, as she reports, "At first, when I was introduced to the program, I said, 'Wow! This model represents the dream of any educator. It is perfect; it cannot go wrong'. So, at first, I bought the idea." (Principal A).

The main motivations presented by the principals for adopting PEI in their schools were the needs observed in their school's communities and the possibility of obtaining better educational results. According to them, the extended school journey would prevent students from being on the streets and getting involved in harmful activities to their development. Furthermore, vulnerable students would have access to three meals a day. Finally, the principals believed the program's proposal could improve the quality of the education offered. Therefore, the school principals firmly adhered to the proposal of the educational policy in question, which significantly influenced how they acted for its implementation in their schools. As Barrère (2006) states, "even a distanced or reflective adherence can be associated with a concrete and practical commitment to implementing the reform" (p. 17). As we will see, they headed the process of letting the school community approve the program and act as true advocates of it locally.

¹⁰ In the educational sector in Brazil, the expression "school community" is largely used. This expression refers to the actors that are part of school dynamic (employees, teachers, students, and families) where a particular school is located (neighborhood). Therefore, in this research, "school community" can be understood as the actors participating in a particular school dynamic in a given location.

3.2. The PEI Program adherence process

At first, we assumed that one of the main challenges for school principals was precisely to find a balance between the demands of the educational system and the expectations of the school community, based on the idea that these two sides could be contradictory and bring difficulties to the principals' practice. In research realized by Parente (2017), for example, the author states that "this relationship of dependency between the principal and the higher instances often limits the school's organizational process, making the principal's work and decision-making difficult" (p. 262, free translation).

However, in this study, none of the school principals reported conflicts between school communities and central bodies when discussing their primary challenges in implementing the PEI program. While recognizing their role as mediators between these two edges of the system, they did not perceive it as a significant struggle in their professional practice. Instead, the primary challenge was the school's adherence to the program. Principals A, C, and D specifically highlighted the difficulty of garnering support from school actors to transition to full-time school. Although Principal B also identified the same challenge, she stressed the difficulty of doing it online during the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to the principals, their first endeavor was to convince teachers to embrace the program. As mentioned previously, it is common in Brazil for teachers to teach in different schools to complete their workloads, sometimes even accumulating positions in different education systems, such as state, municipal, and private. In the case of the PEI program, teachers must leave other functions to dedicate exclusively to the PEI school. Therefore, adherence to the program implies significant changes in teachers' professional circumstances.

The school principals used different strategies to get the teaching staff's support. Principal A motivated teachers to reflect on the community's needs, stating that the program would benefit the public served by the school. Similarly, Principal B mobilized reflections with teachers about their "mission" as educators and the need to prioritize students and families over their personal interests. The following statements present these ideas:

(Principal A) So, it was very, very tense for me for a while, but we managed, at first, to convince the teachers. And they embraced the cause. Most of them did not stay; they transferred to another school. However, they supported and voted in favor. Because they thought about the community, right? So, we support the project, we want this to happen for this community, but we cannot be here.

(Principal B) So, some chose to stay, others no (...) But this is a personal choice because I made it very clear to them. We cannot, at this moment, think about ourselves. We are going to reflect, think about our community, which is around us, and see what is favorable to them.

Regarding Principal C, she pointed out to teachers the advantages of being associated with a single school, not needing to accumulate positions, and earning 75% more¹¹. Finally, Principal D worked throughout the year to compose a School Council¹² that would approve the policy at the school. She stated that, since assuming the position, she brought the idea to the school actors, who initially voted against it. In this way, she began to strategically invite teachers who favored the program to the School Council:

(Principal C) The teachers understood that the school wanted and needed it, but they did not want it because they would lose their position (...) And it is tough sometimes when a teacher or even a parent or student sees only the micro, only their situation, not the collectivity, right? (...) So, one student abstained, four teachers did not want to, and the rest all wanted to. So, I saw that the teachers' group was the one that really did not want at all.

(Principal D) I walked into this school and said it would become a full-time school. (...) Then, at the first School Council, nobody wanted it. Then I started to play chess (...). I stepped back, set up a new School Council, put it up for them, and almost nobody volunteered to participate. Then I strategically chose who liked the program. (...) I set up the Council that I wanted. The last government opened the possibility of new PEI schools; I came with the knife and the cheese for my Council to approve. Then we managed to turn the school into full-time education.

In addition to teachers, school principals also needed to enlist the support of families and students to implement the PEI program. First, the principals worked to translate and communicate the concepts and proposals of the program in a way that families could understand. Second, they sought to emphasize among families and students that the program was an opportunity to recover the learning harmed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Besides, according to their perspective, the PEI would offer a better education to students, allowing them to develop their "life project" and have a tutor¹³. Finally, the third point mentioned by school principals was that students would have three meals a day, in a context in which many families experience food insecurity.

¹¹ Precisely because of the complete and exclusive dedication to a single school unit of the program and the additional and differentiated attributions, these professionals are entitled to the Full and Integral Dedication Bonus – GDPI, which corresponds to 75% of the respective base salary. Source: SEDUC-SP (2014). *Tutorial de Recursos Humanos, Programa Ensino Integral*, p. 9.

¹² The School Council, linked to the school management, is a collegiate body that must be elected annually in the first school month with a mandate until the following year. It has consultative, deliberative, supervisory, mobilizing, and pedagogical functions regarding the educational work at the school. The School Council comprises representatives from all segments of the school community, all with voting rights, except the President of the School Council (School Principal). The composition is 40% of teachers; 5% of education specialists (deputy principal, pedagogical coordinator); 5% of employees; 25% of students' legal guardians; 25% of regularly enrolled and frequent students. Source: Resolution SEDUC n° 19, 08/03/2022. Free translation.

¹³ In the PEI Program, students have a discipline called 'Projeto de vida' (Life Project) and receive tutoring from a specific teacher regarding their academic performance, personal development, and perspectives of future.

(Principal A) Convincing teachers and also convincing the parent community. Because these students were in here and, although the school climate was better [at the time], there was still a lot of drug trafficking. And these students in here all day long, it would end up disrupting this informal job they had, right? So, how was I going to convince this entire community to be here?

(Principal B) I said, so now is the time for us to try to fight, to present to the community what the integral education program is, how it will benefit the community, for working parents, for vulnerable children, for these children who stay on the street, the benefits of this program. (...) But we were in a pandemic. How would we bring the community together to ask for their adherence? (...) We created WhatsApp groups with all the parents of the school, separated by classroom. Then we put together a portfolio talking about the program (...) We made several videos talking about it, what it was, the advantages, the disadvantages, and what it could bring to the community.

(Principal C) During the pandemic, I saw my students who already had bad results, not attending school, not delivering activities, not having internet access. So, the indicators, which were not good, plummeted. That was the first challenge. And I saw the full-time program as an opportunity for the student to recover learning in both periods. (...) And with a full-time school, I explained to the parents: "Your child will have breakfast, lunch, and afternoon snacks". And we know that, unfortunately, some families do not offer even one meal a day for the student, right? So, I do have students who come to eat, but a good part of my students come to recover what the pandemic left behind.

(Principal D) The arrival of the integral education program is a watershed. (...) Why do I talk about the community? It is not just the student; (...) I must reach the student and the family because if I only get to the student, I do not have a return line; I really need these parents to be here. (...) It is where the PEI comes in. (...) Now, with this support from a whole team, the possibilities, the chance of talking to the parents, of the most problematic student, with the most absent family, increases.

Through PEI's adherence process, it is possible to note that the engagement of school principals is fundamental to local policy implementation. In the analyzed cases, the principals acted as advocates of the PEI Program in their schools, leading other school actors to vote in favor of it. An essential point to underline is that, in the case of this specific policy, the school principal's consent is mandatory to transform the school into a full-time program. Thus, principals adhere to the policy from the outset. It is important to notice, however, that for policies whose implementation is mandatory, the challenges mentioned by school principals may be different, as well as how they act to implement it.

4. DISCUSSION

In addition to the challenges faced by school principals in the process of implementing the PEI program, the model has limitations that are important to consider. Firstly, the implementation of the program requires structural conditions, which are not always met in practice, such as adapted buildings, materials, and equipment (Vilas Boas & Abbiati, 2020), and which need more investments (Akkari, *et al.*, 2018). Secondly, it proposes a managerial model criticized for importing instruments from the private sector into public education (Giroto & Jacomini, 2019). Finally, the expansion of PEI schools culminates in a serious reorganization of the education system's offer. The extended school journey implies a decrease in the school enrollment, directing students who need to study part-time to nearby schools. In consequence, part-time schools can become overloaded, worsening teaching conditions. For this reason, the program can increase educational inequalities, turning PEI schools into “bubbles of excellence” (Nakamoto & Bryan, 2022).

In this study, however, this criticism was not present in the speech of the school principals interviewed. Their perspectives on the program are mostly positive, and even at an early stage of the implementation process, the principals point to improvements in the schools. Principal C's statement serves as an illustration:

(Principal C) The PEI is criticized for having this corporate vision. However, you need some of this organizational chart aspect when you have a vision for results. There is participatory democratic management, when the principal gives the opportunity to all segments to give their opinion and speak. But there is a sieve of what is technical because there is no point in saying, “Ah, school meals have to be like this. Education has to be like that”, but it is important to have the technical educational view of the people who studied for this; otherwise, it will not work, right?

Thus, in the case of the PEI implementation, the impact of school principals' engagement was significant. The adherence process was an illustration of how principals led the school actors to approve the policy at the local level using different strategies. All schools became full-time in the direction of the interviewed professionals. As stated by Mazeaud & Nonjon (2021), intermediary agents have the power to influence the outcomes of public action.

It was possible to observe that the principals acted in favor of the policy due to a strong belief that it would benefit the communities they serve. As stated by Demazière, *et al.* (2013),

Indeed, professionals – or at least some of them – can be for themselves actors in the introduction of a change defined exogenously [...]; they can accompany the changes, adhere to them more or less critically, and participate in self-constraint mechanisms [...]; they can also find in their own beliefs and ideologies convergences with particular goals of NPM [new public management] widely considered as evident or unquestionable, such as the centrality of the user or academic success [...]. (p. 11, free translation)

The premises of the program align with the principals' personal and professional values. Hence, the sense principals build around the policy is fundamental for them to support and implement it locally. Demazière, et al. (2013) point out that

This does not mean, on the contrary, that they have converted to the reforms, but at least that they adhere to their general orientations (academic success, importance of the students), and find a space to develop concrete initiatives to mobilize teachers [...]. (p. 15, free translation)

In this regard, the principals built a collective sense of the PEI program in their schools. As illustrated, they communicated and mediated the comprehension of the program with each school actor. Regarding the teaching staff, they mobilized their "mission" as educators to serve the community where they work. In addition, they mentioned the possibility of being associated with a single school and earning a better salary. For families and students, the principals mobilized access to quality education, in addition to the physical and food security offered by PEI schools. In this way, they obtained communities to approve the program.

In the case of the PEI Program implementation, we can notice how school principals exercised leadership, which is related to influence (Brest, 2011; Bush, 2022). According to Bush (2022), leadership is associated with motivating people to pursue a common goal based on values and a vision for the school. Precisely, the principals exerted influence over school actors based on values, their mission, interests, and a common objective.

The change in the role of principals was also verified, in which the actual practice of these professionals shifts from "cabinet principals" to participatory principals, from authoritarianism to listening, from a punitive to a dialogic posture, from just administrative to more relational work. School principals' leadership is exercised in their relationships with all school actors. As Principal B mentions:

The principal is the one who must be engaged with the process; he has to be participative, he has to have a broad vision, he has to be everywhere (...) He has to belong, be in the middle of everyone, establish a dialogue, and talk to others. So, I see this difference (...) Before education was different, society was another one, there was hierarchy and power. (...) I am above you, so I treat you however I want. It was by power. Today we see that you get much more through dialogue.

Therefore, it is evident that school principals, through their leadership, successfully built a collective sense to implement the PEI Program in their schools. Even though we have not accessed how teachers and other school actors built meaning around the program, in the end, they approved it. This exemplifies the pivotal role principals play as mediators. Their commitment to the policy proved indispensable for effective implementation. Hence,

analyzing the practices of school principals is crucial for comprehending the dynamics of local educational policy implementation.

CONCLUSION

The results of this article show the importance of cognitive dimensions in the implementation of educational reforms. The work of the school principals as “sense-makers” is here determined to make this implementation effective, highlighting their role as leaders in getting teachers to adhere to a new organization of teaching. Another aspect of this policy, highlighted by our research, is the dimension of the interests of teachers, whose salaries and working conditions are improved by their inclusion in the PEI program. The congruence of these two dimensions – ideas and interests – produces a positive dynamic and enables effective change at the institutional level.

However, it is pertinent to question the future of the PEI reform. New, more extensive empirical research is needed to understand the principles of variation in the implementation of this policy in a variety of contexts. At the outset of this article, we emphasized the strong militant dimension of school principals, convinced a priori by a reform in line with their ideals of quality education. Yet, as in many countries, debates and tensions around educational issues are important in Brazil (Akkari, *et al.*, 2018). Assuming this policy is extended to a larger number of schools, will all school principals be convinced the program offers a quality education indeed? Will they act in the same way? Will they play their role as sense-makers with the same conviction? In other words, and to put this question in theoretical terms, what role do personal and professional ideologies play in the ability of actors to produce meaning around an educational reform?

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