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Navigating Challenges in Brazilian Public Schools
Leadership: A Comprehensive Analysis and Global Insights

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Monografia apresentada à Escola de Políticas
Públicas e Governo da Fundação Getúlio Vargas,
como requisito para obtenção do título de Bacharel
em Administração Pública

Área de concentração: Administração Pública

Orientadora: Dra. Tatiana Soster

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Abstract

The paper focuses on the challenges public school leaders face in Brazil, as they attempt to improve the quality of education. It discusses the legal and policy frameworks in Brazil, highlights challenges faced by school leaders, and draws on international literature to provide insights and comparisons. This topic is relevant, for many different approaches have found that leadership is one of the most influential aspects in the performance of students. Our study is among a few Latin American studies on school leadership, and even fewer on school leadership in Brazil. To promote the discussion nationally, we bridge the substantial body of research in Anglo-American countries. By shedding light on these challenges, our study contributes to the ongoing discourse on educational reform in Brazil and emphasises the need for comprehensive policy changes and investment in leadership development.

Keywords: Public School Management, School Leadership, School Principals, Education Quality, Challenges, Brazil, International Perspectives, Policy Recommendations.

Resumo

O artigo concentra-se nos desafios enfrentados pelos líderes de escolas públicas no Brasil ao tentarem aprimorar a qualidade da educação. Ele discute o enquadramento legal no Brasil, destaca os desafios enfrentados pelos líderes escolares e recorre à literatura internacional para fornecer insights e comparações. Esse tema é relevante, pois diversas abordagens identificaram que a liderança é um dos aspectos mais influentes no desempenho dos estudantes. Nosso estudo está entre poucos sobre liderança escolar na América Latina e ainda menos no Brasil. Para promover a discussão em âmbito nacional, conectamos o considerável corpo de pesquisa em países anglo-americanos. Ao destacar esses desafios, nosso estudo contribui para o contínuo debate sobre a reforma educacional no Brasil e enfatiza a necessidade de mudanças abrangentes de políticas e investimentos no desenvolvimento da liderança.

Palavras-chave: Gestão Escolar Pública, Liderança Escolar, Diretores Escolares, Qualidade da Educação, Desafios, Brasil, Perspectivas Internacionais, Recomendações de Políticas.

Introduction

Education is an essential subject which urges analysis, presenting a yearning need for constant improvement. Public school leaders play a critical role in improving the quality of education, but they often face numerous challenges in their efforts. This article explores the key obstacles these frontline administrators face as they strive to enhance the educational experience.

The Link Between Management and Student Performance

While there is limited research on school leadership, multiple authors argue for the impact of principals' leadership on students' learning (ALMEIDA; RAMALHO; ARAUJO JUNIOR, 2017; SIMIELLI, 2022a). Several other authors offer compelling empirical evidence to support this widely acknowledged notion (BUSH, 2022).

A study in the Victorian region of Australia found a diversity in how the principals' effectiveness influences student performance. A standard deviation change in principal effectiveness can impact from 8.8% to 16.4% of student outcomes, depending on grade level and whether the subject is English or Mathematics. They obtained this result after controlling for variables such as gender, Students from a non-English speaking background, Indigenous students and socio-economic status of parents. Additionally, the research team examined similar studies conducted in regions such as British Columbia in Canada, North Carolina, Florida, and Texas in the United States. On average, these comparative studies suggest that principals can impact student performance comparably to the influence of individual teachers in enhancing academic outcomes (HELAL; COELLI, 2016).

The above result is from an approach more commonly used in the field of economics, with a strictly quantitative approach. Meanwhile, we can also find similar results in the field of education, with a more qualitative evaluation of leadership. Oliveira and Carvalho (2018), for example, create an index by asking the teachers whether their principals are motivational, trustworthy, innovative, respectful and others. Then, they use the standardised test result of "Prova Brasil" in mathematics of fifth graders in Brazilian public schools to measure student outcomes. They assert that after controlling socioeconomic characteristics, the principal leadership combined with the selection criteria for school principals (technical criteria combined or not with an election) fosters an improved institutional climate that would explain around 20% of the variation in student outcome.

Leithwood and Mascall (2009) proposed an estimation of the impact of collective or distributed leadership on key teacher-related variables and school achievement. Student performance data in language and mathematics were averaged over three years. The findings indicated that collective leadership accounted for a substantial portion of the variation in school achievement across different institutions. Notably, higher-performing schools attributed a more significant degree of leadership influence to all school members and other stakeholders. The study revealed that collective leadership had noteworthy direct effects on all teaching variables and accounted for a substantial proportion (20%) of the variation in school results after adjusting for socioeconomic background. When considered simultaneously, socioeconomic level explained 6.8% of the variation, leadership explained 4.6%, and their combined impact explained an additional 3.5%, contributing to a total of 14.9% of the variability in student outcomes.

It is important to mention that the mechanisms through which the principal effectiveness makes this difference still need to be clarified. Dhuey and Smith (2014) find that effectiveness is not associated with experience, in disagreement with previous studies (EBERTS, STONE, 1988; CLARK et al., 2009 apud HELAL; COELLI, 2016). Robinson (2007) argues that certain types of school leadership have higher impacts on outcomes and they should focus on the core business of teaching and learning. Branch et al. (2012) discovered that the influence of principal quality is more pronounced in schools with high levels of poverty. They support the hypothesis that a primary channel for principal influence is the attraction and retention of high-quality teachers.

Silva (2020) focused on the leadership-related characteristics that could be identified in the Saeb questionnaires answered by teachers and principals. These characteristics were then synthesised into twelve indicators for principals and eleven for teachers and used multiple regressions based on the Ordinary Least Squares model. They found an increase of 12 points in both the Saeb scores for Portuguese and Mathematics if school leadership engages in various activities, such as organising training for the team, developing the school's pedagogical and political project, participating in the class assignment process, discussing measures with teachers to improve teaching and learning, exchanging information with directors from other schools, and being informed about the Saeb results in their school, municipality, and

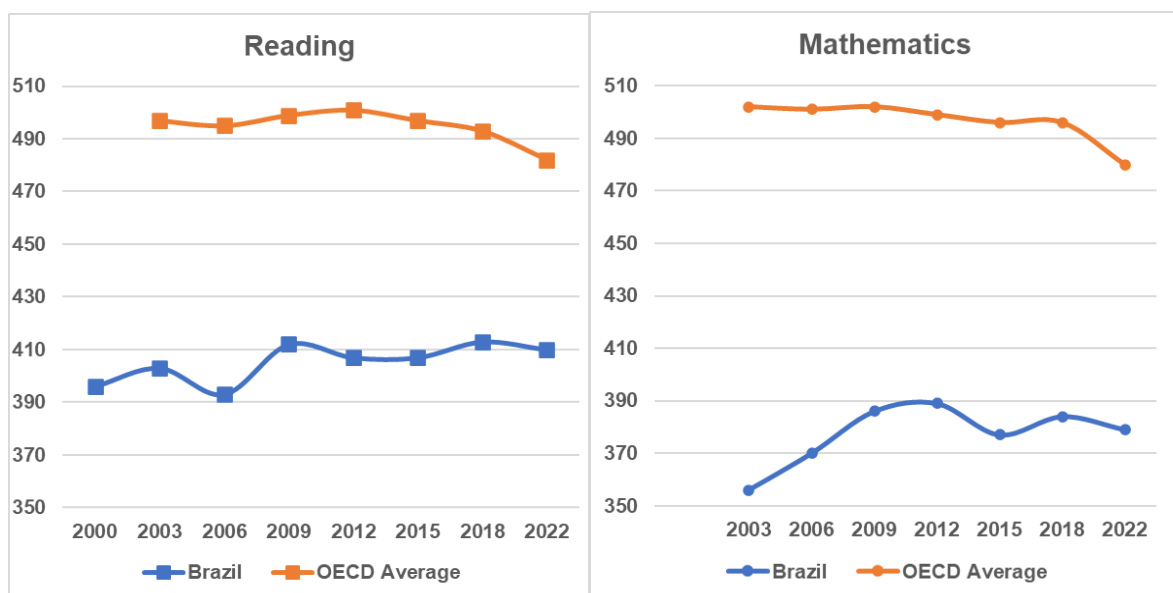
state. Ideally, the student is expected to acquire 18 points on the SAEB per academic year in elementary school.

In summary, school leadership as a central aspect of education quality is broadly accepted and demonstrated through various means. Nonetheless, we still must figure out and prove how this phenomenon happens.

Current Brazilian Student Performance

Before intervening to better the quality of education, it is vital to measure the current situation. One of the most common ways to assess it is through the Program of International Student Assessment - Pisa. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development - OECD postponed the assessment of 2021 to 2022. In the last edition, Brazil was below the average of developed countries in reading, mathematics, and Science. We also see no significant change in performance after 2009 (OECD, 2023). In the previous edition, while the OECD average was 13%, 43% of students in Brazil scored below the minimum proficiency level in all three subjects. (ORGANISATION FOR ECONOMIC CO-OPERATION AND DEVELOPMENT, 2019).

Figure 1 - Trends in performance in reading and mathematics for Brazil

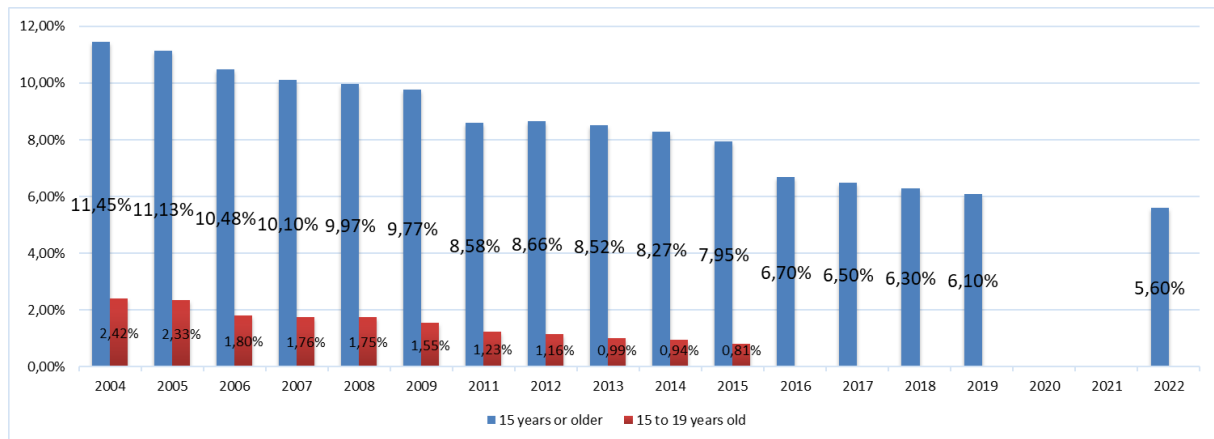


Source: Compiled by the author with data from OECD, PISA 2022 Database

Figure 1 illustrates that results have been stable over more than a decade with only small and mostly non-significant variations.

The persistent failure in eradicating illiteracy over the years is evident when examining the provided graph (Graph 1) showcasing data from 2004 to 2022. However, it is worth noting that data for the younger population (aged 15 to 19) is only available until 2015 due to modifications in the census methodology.

Graph 1 - Long-Term Trends in Illiteracy of Population Aged 15 and Above (2004-2022)



Source: Compiled by the author with data from SIDRA IBGE | PNAD & PNADCA

The graph illustrates a long-term very slow decline trend in illiteracy rates among individuals aged 15 and 19 in Brazil. The importance of this data lies in its direct connection to the education sector, as it reflects the effectiveness (or lack thereof) of educational policies and possibly school management practices over time. We also present a broader cut of the population (15 and above) because even though it's not as good as the other indicator to analyse the impact of basic education, it allows us to analyse data for more recent years (2016-2022). We also don't have any data for the years 2020 and 2021. It is not farfetched to imply that this happened because of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is interesting to see that even after this immensely challenging period for education, we still see a slight decline in illiteracy.

It is worth mentioning there is no similar data for numeracy, but we can expect the result to be even worse, following the trend observed in Figure 1. This limitation should be considered when interpreting the results, and it underscores the importance of maintaining consistent data collection practices for accurate trend analysis. Over the 18 years presented in the graph, there is still a notable gap between the desired goal of eradicating illiteracy and the reality on the ground. The graph indicates that while

progress has been made, more concerted efforts are required to achieve universal literacy among students. This would be only the first step towards education of quality.

The Importance of Education Quality

In its 26th article, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights determines that education is a Fundamental Right of all people, obligatory to be free of charge. (UNICEF, 1948). Guided by this declaration, the Brazilian Federal Constitution of 1988 sets education as an obligation of the State, establishing that it must be of quality and saying that the government will evaluate it. Concerning the organisation of education, it attributes different levels of management:

Art. 22 competes privately with the Union to legislate on

(...)XXIV - guidelines and bases of national education; (...)

Art. 23 It is the joint competence of the Union, the States, the Federal District, and the Municipalities:

(...)V - to provide the means of access to culture, education, science, technology, research, and innovation;

(...)Art. 24. It is incumbent upon the Union, the States, and the Federal District to legislate concurrently on:

(...) IX - education, culture, teaching, sports, science, technology, research, development, and innovation;

(...)Art. 30. It is incumbent upon the Municipalities:

(...)VI - to maintain early childhood education and elementary education programs, with the technical and financial cooperation of the Union and the States; (...)

Art. 211. (...) § 2 The Municipalities will act primarily in elementary and early childhood education. (BRASIL, 1988).

The Law of Guidelines and Bases - LDB, LAW No. 9,394, OF DECEMBER 20th, 1996, reinforces what was established by the Federal Constitution and details how

actions should be taken and managed. In regards to this article, suffice it to say what is determined for base education, as this is the object of our study:

Art. 14. The education systems will define the norms of democratic management of public education in base education according to their peculiarities and according to the following principles:

I - participation of education professionals in the elaboration of the school's pedagogical project;

II - involvement of school and local communities in school councils or equivalent.

Art. 15. The education systems will ensure progressive degrees of pedagogical, administrative and financial management autonomy to public basic education school units, in compliance with the general rules of public financial law.

(...) Art. 24. Base education, at the fundamental and secondary levels, will be organised according to the following same rules:

I - the minimum annual workload will be eight hundred hours for elementary and secondary education, distributed over a minimum of two hundred working days, excluding the time reserved for final exams, if any;

(...) VI - attendance control is the responsibility of the school, as provided for in its bylaws and the rules of a given education system; it requires a minimum attendance of seventy-five per cent of the total number of teaching hours for approval;

VII - it is up to each educational institution to issue transcripts, declaration of completion of series, and diplomas or certificates of completion of courses, with appropriate specifications.

(...) §2 The education systems will lay out education for young people and adults and regular night education, appropriate to the conditions of the student, under item VI of Art Fourth (BRASIL, 1996).

Still grounded in the legislation, we have the National Education Plan - PNE, LAW No. 13.005, of JUNE 25, 2014. The PNE includes in its article some goals to be met by 2024:

Art. 2nd The PNE guidelines are:

I - the eradication of illiteracy;

II - universalisation of school services;

III - overcoming educational inequalities, emphasising the promotion of citizenship and eradicating all forms of discrimination;

IV - improving the quality of education; (...)

VI - Promote the 'democratic management principle' of public education; (...)

VIII - establishment of a target for the application of public resources in education as a proportion of the Gross Domestic Product - GDP, which ensures that the need for expansion is met, with a standard of quality and equity;

IX - valuing education professionals;

X - Promoting respect for human rights, diversity, and socio-environmental sustainability principles" (BRASIL, 2014).

It also defines that municipalities must approve laws dealing with democratic management; favour pedagogical, financial, and administrative autonomy; and support schools, technically and financially. They should fully computerise the administration of public schools. Preparing frequent institutional assessment indicators on management processes is another requirement. Schools must ensure the participation of the school community in budget planning. They also need self-assessment using instruments that improve democratic management (BRASIL, 2014).

Despite all these regulations, few actions are currently addressing this concern with the quality of education effectively. There is also a very idealistic understanding of democratic management, lacking implementation tools.

Objectives

Our main goal is to describe the challenges faced by principals, coordinators and alike managers, specifically those of base public education, by conducting an in-depth analysis of existing literature on the subject. Other authors differentiate principals

from leadership. Although we recognize the importance of the distinction, in this paper, we use both terms indistinctively. Therefore, we are mostly referring to directive leadership.

The specific objectives are:

- Review International and National Literature: Conduct a comprehensive review of academic literature to understand the global academic consensus on the challenges of school management in the context of public education.
- Identify Common Themes: Identify and document common themes and challenges that public school leaders face in their efforts to improve the quality of education.
- Comparative Analysis: Analyse and compare the findings and insights from international literature with the specific context of Brazil to determine if there are similarities and differences in the challenges faced by Brazilian school leaders.
- Synthesise Theoretical Conclusions: Synthesise the information obtained from the international literature and contextual analysis to draw theoretical conclusions about the challenges of school management in Brazilian public education.
- Recommend Practical Interventions: Provide practical recommendations for policymakers and stakeholders to address these challenges and improve the quality of education.

Methodology

Examining the intricate interplay between national characteristics and their impact on school management necessitates a comprehensive and exploratory approach, as underscored by Moreira and Rocha (2018). This study, positioned as a preliminary exploration, plays a pivotal role in refining the research focus and formulating precise hypotheses.

Our research adopts a hypothetical-deductive method to scrutinise the challenges confronted by directive leaders in public schools. The study utilises a multifaceted research approach, conducting a comprehensive examination of existing research and theories related to managerial effort, leadership, and education in public schools in Brazil. Data sources encompass extensive bibliographic research on education management. A systematic review of relevant literature is conducted to

gather insights, theories, and empirical evidence related to challenges faced by public school leaders globally. The bibliographic collections of Fundação Getulio Vargas and the Google Scholar search engine are utilised to access a diverse range of scholarly works, ensuring a comprehensive exploration of existing literature on education management challenges.

The iterative selection and analysis process follows a structured approach. Initial attention is directed towards titles and synopsis for preliminary thematic screening, with subsequent in-depth reading prioritising the identification of explicit mentions of specific educational challenges. Subsequent selections are based on the clarity and relevance of information extracted, emphasising recent works to capture contemporary dynamics. A reflective approach is adopted to critically assess the contribution of each work, while a systematic review of cited sources is conducted to identify additional relevant literature, enhancing the breadth and depth of the analysis.

In Table 1, below, we present the first results found. Keywords such as "school leadership," "school management," "principal," and "challenges" are used to assess the international perspective, while "liderança escolar," "gestão escolar," "diretores," and "desafios" are employed for the domestic view. Some articles in Spanish are also reviewed, as they were cited in the articles of the first selection.

Table 1 - Keywords and results

	"principals" AND "challenges" AND "school leadership"	"diretores" AND "desafios" AND "gestão escolar"
Google Scholar	About 131,000 results	About 22,800 results
Google Scholar Review Articles	About 2,500 results	129 results
ACERVO ACADÊMICO FGV: BUSCA INTEGRADA	406 results	17 results

Source: Made by the author with results from the respective search engines.

Following the selection process, 35 works are present in this article's bibliography. The research includes a review of publications from authors collaborating with global organisations such as UNESCO and OECD. Table 2 gives more details on the referred works. It also shows works from Vaillant, an author who was cited by the organisation, but whose works mentioned carry no direct link to UNESCO. It also

highlights works published by Economic magazines, since it is not expected for them to relate to this theme, and many reviewers would not even consider them in their analyses.

Table 2 - Noteworthy works and their sources

Source	Work
Unesco	Vaillant and Zidán (2012); Vaillant (2015); UNESCO (2018); Bush (2022); Meyers (2022); Simielli (2022a)
OECD	Stoll and Temperley (2010); Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2019)
Economics	Branch et al. (2012); Dhuey and Smith (2014); Helal and Coelli (2016); Almeida et al. (2017)

Source: Made by the author

These reports and studies offer valuable insights and comparative data on education management and leadership across diverse global contexts.

Legal documents integral to education governance in Brazil, including the Brazilian Constitution, the Lei de Diretrizes e Bases da Educação Nacional (LDB), and the Plano Nacional de Educação (PNE), are examined. Our document analysis starts in 1948 with the Declaration of Human Rights and it ends in 2021, with the approval of the National Base Framework for School Principals. This legal and policy analysis provides a foundation for understanding the regulatory landscape shaping education in Brazil. Moreover, Quantitative data analysis is employed, incorporating reports and data from reputable organisations such as IBGE (SIDRA) and OECD (PISA). This data-driven approach allows for a historical assessment of student outcomes. The research goes beyond identifying challenges, aiming to provide practical policy recommendations based on the findings. These recommendations are intended to inform future interventions and strategies that can lead to tangible improvements in the quality of education.

Literature Review

Brazilian Historical Perspectives on Public School Management

The field of school administration research has evolved through three major phases: early works (1930-1980), critical perspective (1980-2000), and thematic

diversification (2000-present). However, Brazilian research on school management has been relatively limited in its representation within the international landscape, accounting for only 0.13% of the total research listed in Scopus from 1960 to 2018 (SIMIELLI, 2022b).

The authors identified 22 'Educational Administration - EA specialisation journals' included in the Scopus index (...) Each of these journals professed an espoused mission devoted to the publication of EA research, employed blind review procedures, and published in English. Our search criteria excluded books, book chapters, and conference papers in the belief that reliance on a large database of peer-reviewed journal articles would provide a more consistent result. Our search criteria explicitly excluded journals that focused primarily on education policy (e.g., Journal of Educational Policy) or higher education (e.g., Journal of Higher Education) (...) By drawing articles exclusively from journals that focus on "educational administration," it meant that we did not rely on a keyword search (HALLINGER, KOVACEVIC, 2019, pp. 335 - 369).

Although democratic management has not become prevalent in the daily operations of Brazilian educational institutions, it guides this field's research per the provisions of the Federal Constitution. Despite Brazil's significant contributions to studies on democratic management, there has been a lack of exchange and contact with global research currents in this area. Therefore, while Brazil has developed its own identity in research on school management, there is still a need for new theories and works that point to new directions (SOUZA, 2019).

The neoliberal perspective suggests that democratic management is based on decentralisation, but in reality, autonomy is often limited through regulation (CHAGAS; PEDROZA, 2013; SILVA, 2010).

Within the Brazilian context, educational policies have often suffered discontinuity and tensions between centralization and decentralisation. This constant reform and change have contributed to the challenges faced by school principals in effectively addressing issues within the education sector, including the long-delayed goal of eradicating illiteracy and achieving universal primary education (PEREIRA; SILVA, 2018; SAVIANI, 2008).

Public school leaders face several challenges when trying to improve the quality of education. There is an idealisation of the student based on the prevailing ideology in schools, often disregarding other forms of student learning within the educational

system. Even before embarking on formal schooling, children bring experiences and practical knowledge, which are drawn upon when engaging with formal learning processes, these aspects are frequently overlooked or dismissed in the planning of the curriculum. (PADILHA, 2003)

The dominance of educational networks has consequences related to bureaucratization and the centralization of the management system, common points of criticism among school administrators. They do not see relevance in the abundance of rules and procedures set by central authorities, and they do not perceive the Education Secretariat as an effective support point capable of resolving their demands. These limitations are largely attributed to the challenges posed by existing legislation and the influence of interest groups (SILVA, 2020).

This lack of freedom generates one significant challenge: the conflict between the interests of politicians in public administration, such as mayors and secretaries, and the frontline bureaucrats within schools, such as directors, vice directors, and coordinators. This conflict arises due to differing views on educational performance and the allocation of scarce resources, leading to a principal-agent conflict (ALMEIDA; RAMALHO; ARAUJO JUNIOR, 2017; SILVA, 2010).

In managing these conflicts, school leaders must strike a balance. Conflict, when well-managed, can serve as the foundation for a democratic order, encouraging respect for diverse perspectives. However, the management of a school is a political process where there also exists a distinct type of conflict centred on power struggles within the school community, which poses an additional challenge for school leaders. This power-driven conflict aims to establish and maintain control over others (Souza, 2012).

Chispino (2007) emphasises that such conflicts can escalate and, when not addressed appropriately, may even lead to violence. The process of universalizing education has brought together diverse cultures in the same school environment, necessitating adaptations to address these new conflicts. From a Weberian perspective, a principal's authority is derived from the recognition and compliance of those they lead. However, this authority can be eroded by "informal institutions" within the school community (Souza, 2012). Silva (2020) conducted semi-structured interviews with former state education secretaries and researchers related to the topic. The findings from these interviews suggest that in Brazil, the work of school principals

is characterised by a lack of autonomy, difficulty in managing the team, influences from external interest groups, and the impact of legislation that significantly restricts their actions.

As a response to these challenges, school leaders are encouraged to move towards a democratic management model that decentralises decision-making. However, the implementation of democratic management can be hindered by regulatory constraints (Chagas, Pedroza, 2013; Silva, 2010).

A democratic management model, inspired by Paulo Freire, emphasises emancipatory education, driven by the involvement of all stakeholders in the educational and management project (FREIRE; FREIRE, 1995). Strengthening the autonomy of schools is considered one of the most important aspects of management improvement. More autonomous units are ideal for training critical citizens, in which the preparation of teaching staff, collaborative work, and the school climate are responsible for the results obtained (BRITO; SIVERES; CUNHA, 2019; CHAGAS; PEDROZA, 2013; DELGADO et al., 2021).

Educational policies are subject to external evaluations and may align with new management and technical requirements driven by international or multilateral organisations. Public school leaders often have to navigate the expectations and demands of these external influences while striving to improve the quality of education. The focus on meeting external standards and requirements can sometimes overshadow local needs and priorities, making it challenging for school leaders to develop and implement the most effective strategies for their specific context. Balancing the pressures from political and policy influences with the unique needs of their schools and communities can be a significant challenge for public school leaders (NETO; CASTRO, 2011; PASCHOALINO, 2018).

The prevailing characteristics of school management culture in Brazil, marked by strong hierarchy, centralization, and a significant power distance, influenced by national culture, warrant further in-depth studies. Understanding how these characteristics may hinder progress in democratic management and the autonomy of schools is essential for shaping the future direction of educational leadership in Brazil (MOREIRA, ROCHA, 2018).

School Leadership Studies

Exploring international literature to gain insights into effective management practices is also valuable. Countries vary in their responses to similar educational challenges, giving rise to the field of comparative education. This field emerged to foster a universal education system and understand the dynamics of educational development. The overarching goal was to enable policymakers to enhance the human condition through these educational systems (BATISTA, PEREIRA, 2020).

“the education system assumes the responsibility of addressing issues deemed fundamental to the emerging modern Western society, by disseminating scientific knowledge, training workers on the industrial mode of production, and educating citizens of the nation State regarding constituting a national identity” (BATISTA, PEREIRA, 2020).

In the international literature, a historical dichotomy has emerged, with some scholars prioritising the study of management while others emphasise the significance of administration. However, there has been a discernible shift in emphasis towards the discourse on leadership, with an overwhelming consensus emerging in its favour (BUSH, 2022). Effective school principals exhibit a strong inclination towards growth and improvement and possess a diverse set of competencies (LEITHWOOD; SUN, 2012; NAIDOO, 2019).

School leaders face a contradiction between legal frameworks that value participation and democratic processes and the managerial demands placed on them. Neoliberal political projects, with their various manifestations, have incorporated the global discourse on education. They centralise management on the sole leadership of the principal, emphasising goals, objectives, and results. This represents a setback in the development of norms for democratic management. Under these normative guidelines, the role of school councils in organising and managing public schools diminishes, reducing them to bureaucratic instruments rather than active participants. (BATISTA, PEREIRA, 2020).

There is an expectation for school leaders to foster participatory decision-making processes that involve various stakeholders, such as teachers, students, parents, and community members. On the other hand, school leaders must also meet

the managerial demands of accountability, efficiency, and effectiveness. Balancing these demands can be complex as school leaders strive to create an environment that values democratic processes while ensuring compliance with legal and managerial requirements. It requires finding a middle ground where both participatory decision-making and effective management practices can coexist and nourish improvement in education quality (NETO; CASTRO, 2011; PASCHOALINO, 2018; SILVA, 2020).

Successful principals are crucial in prioritising performance, participating in instructional decision-making, creating conducive learning environments, monitoring student progress, coordinating instructional programs, and supporting teachers. They combine structural, political, educational, and symbolic leadership with vision and management efficiency to effectively lead school improvement (MEYERS, 2022).

In general, the most challenging schools are in underprivileged neighbourhoods. They face additional difficulties, such as low community support, an unsafe environment, and high absenteeism. These school leaders struggle to attract and retain qualified teachers and lack the means to influence classroom instructional practices effectively. Turnaround schools require principals to inspire students and staff, raise expectations, build teams, and make crucial decisions (MEYERS, 2022).

Data-driven decision-making and strategic planning are essential in turnaround situations, where principals utilise data to drive administrative and instructional decisions (MEYERS, 2022; VIEIRA, 2007). While there is a considerable understanding of successful leadership practices, the challenge lies in incorporating these lessons into practice. A study conducted by Pereira and Silva (2018) with 26 principals from the Brazilian Federal District revealed that the most commonly cited elements for successful management include participation and dialogue (46%), human and material resources (26%), and professional engagement (26%). These results indicate a focus on leadership skills needed to promote improvements while acknowledging the importance of resources (PEREIRA; SILVA, 2018).

Research suggests that differences in student performance cannot be solely attributed to educational spending. Rather, success is associated with factors such as leadership, teacher recruitment, professional development, and support for students with learning difficulties. The perspective on school leadership in Latin America, as discussed by Vaillant (2015), is characterised by a diverse landscape of educational systems with differences in organisation, enrolment, public-private sector distribution,

and urban-rural dynamics. These differences make it challenging to address leadership issues uniformly across the region. The region faces a lack of empirical evidence on educational leadership, with limited research on the roles and responsibilities of school principals and their support for teacher performance in the classroom.

There is a scarcity of research that organises the primary characteristics and responsibilities of principals and insufficient investigation into how school leaders can efficiently enhance teacher performance in the classroom. From the little research available, the author draws some conclusions. In many Latin American countries, school leadership is closely associated with the roles of school principals. Often they find themselves primarily engaged in administrative tasks rather than providing all the educational leadership that would be required. Decentralisation of education policies varies among countries, impacting the implementation of educational policies and leadership strategies. (Vaillant, 2015).

Additionally, there is little structural distinction between institutions dedicated to teaching and those specific to school leadership within the region. Chile serves as an example of a country actively working to enhance educational leadership. It has established criteria for training and evaluating school principals, focusing on leadership, curriculum management, resource allocation, and organisational climate (Vaillant, 2015).

In effective schools, principals play a crucial role in promoting student success through various strategies and actions. They prioritise academic performance by selecting effective teaching methods, materials, and activities. They actively participate in instructional decision-making and take responsibility for these choices (Meyers, 2022).

Creating an organised and conducive learning environment within the school is another vital aspect. Principals consistently monitor student progress, assess outcomes, and align course content and objectives across different grade levels. They provide support to teachers by effectively communicating goals and procedures. These practices contribute to student success in effective schools (Meyers, 2022).

Effective school leaders combine various leadership principles, including structural leadership (clear goal-setting), political leadership (building alliances), educational leadership (professional development and instructional improvement),

symbolic leadership (inspiration and presence), and distributed leadership (empowering others to lead). Additionally, they intentionally create conditions to identify and develop teacher leaders (Meyers, 2022).

Leaders create a scenario of uncertainty for the teachers when sharing international goals without plans on how to achieve them (VAILLANT, ZIDÁN, 2016). Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins (2008) argue that school leaders exert their most significant influence on teaching and learning indirectly by affecting staff motivation, commitment, and working conditions. This contradicts the notion that school leaders should primarily focus on enhancing staff curriculum knowledge. The evidence suggests that school leaders have limited direct influence on staff curriculum knowledge but can substantially impact staff motivation, commitment, and beliefs about their working conditions. Leaders should work to enhance their direct contributions to staff capacities while recognising the critical role of motivation, commitment, and working conditions. Overall, this highlights the importance of emotional understanding in successful leadership.

Vaillant and Zidán (2016) categorise the following as the most important challenges faced by school leadership:

- Build a professional learning community at school
- Integrate basic knowledge and skills into a broad and balanced curriculum
- Consistently ensure good teaching and learning
- Strategically manage resources and the environment
- Develop projects and partnerships beyond school

Okaya (2015) investigates the effectiveness of public primary school boards in urban low socioeconomic settings, using the Kibera slum in Kenya as a case study. He advocates for the Invitational Education Theory. The Invitational Education Theory is a philosophy and approach that emphasises creating positive and inviting environments to foster learning, growth, and development. The education sector faces challenges such as infrastructural inequities, teacher welfare issues, teacher shortages, and mismanagement of funds. Poverty is a major hindrance to quality education, leading to increased school dropout rates. Initiatives like free primary education and school feeding programs improve enrolment but don't guarantee quality education for children from poor backgrounds.

Teacher effectiveness, school climate, and leadership styles impact education quality, but school-based management is often overlooked. Since the 1980s, school boards have been used in Kenya to increase accountability, boost achievement, and involve the community. However, their effectiveness in slums, like Kibera, is unknown, and empirical research is limited. Results suggest that, despite challenges, school boards can positively impact outcomes with capacity development and collaboration. Further research is needed on decision-making processes and the role of the head teacher in low socioeconomic areas (OKAYA, 2015).

There's an urgent need for comprehensive research on school leader job descriptions, their effectiveness, and the applicability of leadership models globally. Current literature often overlooks local contexts. Further research can validate or challenge the idea of universal leadership styles and a generic list of competencies for school leaders. Despite this, commonalities highlight key issues, including the need for greater recognition of school leadership's importance. It's crucial to develop robust policies for leader selection, recruitment, training, and supervision, considering school leadership an integral part of education reforms. Addressing these challenges requires promoting research, knowledge sharing, and facilitating global discussions on school leadership, fostering regional and international cooperation for exchanging experiences and implementing best practices (UNESCO, 2018).

In summary, there is a consensus in academic literature regarding the importance of effective leadership in addressing the challenges faced by school principals in improving education quality. This consensus emphasises aligning visions, employing fundamental leadership practices, and strategically tackling the needs of challenging schools and turnaround situations.

Leadership Goals in Brazil

The Common National Competency Framework for School Principals (BRASIL, 2021) is a guideline approved by the National Education Committee which awaits the homologation of the Ministry of Education. It was drawn after researching 53 federal entities and realising that most of them are similar. However, these legislations usually list attributions and responsibilities but forget to address the skills necessary to be a good principal. After reviewing international reports and academic articles, they reached 27 competencies that are expected from a school principal. Those competencies are reflected in the following tasks:

- Lead school management
- Engage the community
- Implement and coordinate democratic management
- Take responsibility for the school organisation
- Develop strategic and systemic view
- Focus on teaching and learning experiences
- Lead the pedagogical planning
- Support the teachers, students and parents
- Coordinate curriculum management and evaluation methodologies
- Promote an atmosphere conducive to education development
- Coordinate administrative activities
- Care for the physical property of the school
- Coordinate workgroups
- Manage the financial resources
- Take care and support people
- Self-develop professional and personally
- Communicate properly and manage conflicts

This framework is important because it is a step towards the modernization of the national approach to education. This aligns more closely with the international trends in school management administration and leadership. Another step in the right direction was the Law of the Base Education Maintenance and Development Fund in which the transfers are conditioned to the selection of school management through technical criteria evaluation (accompanied or not by election) (BRASIL, 2020).

Discussion

In 2008 the OECD was already prioritising school leadership to achieve school improvement, with works like "Improving School Leadership, Volume 1: Policy and Practice" and "Improving School Leadership, Volume 2: Case Studies on System Leadership". They used these productions to create a toolkit that helps policymakers and other stakeholders self-evaluate and improve. The document published in 2009 was translated into French and Spanish, but not Portuguese (STOLL, TEMPERLEY, 2010). This may show a lack of interest in the matter, a lack of opportunity to participate or both from the Brazilian government and local civil society.

There exists an extensive body of literature on school leadership; nevertheless, the majority of it pertains to OECD countries, as the exploration of this subject in the developing world remains limited (UNESCO, 2018). The authors remain open to the possibility that the literature on other countries is only not available in English. However, as we've already demonstrated in our methodology section, the content range in Portuguese is much more narrow than in English.

The regional reviews underscore an additional challenge in developing and implementing effective school leadership reform — the lack of pertinent information and data. Urgent attention is needed at the national, regional, and global levels to establish robust information systems that can bridge the knowledge gap. (UNESCO, 2018) The following table is a step towards closing this gap, as it tries to compile thematics that affect the principals' routine, both in Brazil and the world.

Table 3 - Common challenges and the works that refer to them

Lack of acknowledgement of the local circumstances or ideological interference	PADILHA, 2003; NETO, CASTRO, 2011; PASCHOALINO, 2018; VAILLANT, 2015; UNESCO, 2018.
Principal-agent conflict	ALMEIDA, RAMALHO, JUNIOR, 2017; SILVA, 2010; NETO, CASTRO, 2011; PASCHOALINO, 2018.
Lack of autonomy and need for decentralisation	CHAGAS, PEDROZA, 2013; SILVA, 2010; VAILLANT, 2015.
Violence and well-being	CHRISPINO, 2007; MEYERS, 2022; OKAYA, 2015.
Distribute the power and own the responsibility	NETO, CASTRO, 2011; PASCHOALINO, 2018; MEYERS, 2022.
Lack of preparation to lead	MEYERS, 2022; PEREIRA, SILVA, 2018; VAILLANT, ZIDÁN, 2016.
Lack of empirical evidence	VAILLANT, 2015; OKAYA, 2015; UNESCO, 2018.
Discontinuity	PEREIRA, SILVA, 2018; SAVIANI, 2008.
Absenteeism and dropout	MEYERS, 2022; OKAYA, 2015.
Teacher attraction and management	MEYERS, 2022; OKAYA, 2015.

Career and selection criteria	VAILLANT, 2015; UNESCO, 2018.
Politics and power struggles	SOUZA, 2012.
Too much time spent on the wrong tasks	VAILLANT, 2015.
Physical conditions of the school	OKAYA, 2015.
Mismanagement of funds	OKAYA, 2015.

Source: Made by the author

The two most mentioned challenges are intrinsically connected, since one of the reasons for the principal-agent conflict to arise may be the lack of acknowledgement of the local circumstances. Legislators and high-level bureaucrats often don't know the peculiarities of all the regions they impact. The policy design must be made considering the range of its effects. When they fail to do that, frontline bureaucrats such as the school leadership may find themselves trying to fulfil absurd requirements.

Those two points also strengthen the claims of a need for more decentralisation of the policies and autonomy to the local leadership. With more power in their hands, the leadership can evaluate and change what they believe needs to be improved, adapting to the specificities and making the solution more prone to be effective.

Although the discontinuity issue could also benefit from decentralisation, it needs a better thought solution, since the discontinuity of the decentralisation is also a problem, which leaves the school as a whole in uncertainty about what is expected from them. The involvement of society as a whole in discussions before implementation is a good way to give legitimacy to the policy and make it more resilient. Nonetheless, this is a political matter, and organised groups will try to mobilise social unrest and change to the model they consider more suitable.

This brings us to the fifth point. The power struggle is not exclusive to legislation and regulation. We will find this kind of struggle between the secretariat and the leadership, the teachers and the leadership, the teachers and the students, the other staff and the leadership, among many other pairs. The leadership must be taught on how to manage these conflicts, since they are the central figures that must join all the stakeholders and promote consensus, without succumbing to their ego.

As challenging as the above problems may seem, those are the ones we already know how to solve, but still couldn't practise. The following issues are worse since we still lack an understanding of how to solve them. Violence and well-being, for one, will have very different solutions depending on whom you ask. During the review of the literature, we found countless models of leadership, with differences and similarities, many of which claim they can solve the following problems but with not have enough data to support their claim.

The lack of leadership competencies and the fear of distributing power are two sides of the same coin. Naturally, principals would micromanage if they can be held responsible for the mistakes and inefficiencies of their school. But if they acquire the necessary skills, they will be able to delegate, guide and supervise properly. Although we lack the data to make an assertive claim, it is possible that even their schedule could be more manageable, with enough time for pedagogical and administrative chores, if they were successful in implementing distributed leadership or democratic management.

The next points are even more controversial, therefore they demand consistent evidence to be discussed in the regulatory arena. But as seen before, different authors (VAILLANT, 2015; UNESCO, 2018) argue for the separation between teaching and leading careers. This would at least diminish the power struggle inside the schools, since a teacher aspiring to be principal would first need to pass the test of specific knowledge. The possibility of teacher attraction, management and firing would go against the mindset of most of the public servants, being aligned with the new public management theory. So maybe this should be treated less as a challenge and more as a defining characteristic of public education. The leadership is bestowed with finding out how to guarantee this does not impact negatively on education quality.

Then we have the characteristics that are most related to low socioeconomic background: Physical conditions of the school, absenteeism and dropout. Many schools already have programs to deal with absenteeism. This is where the role of a leader is most prominent since the best way to ensure that students go to class is to provide an attractive environment. This includes motivating teachers, parents and the students themselves. This motivation can have different meanings depending on the region, the profile of the parents and the provided infrastructure.

This leads to the most obvious challenge: The physical condition of the schools. Although not the only, and in many cases not even the worst problem, budget constraints are still relevant and must be addressed when talking about challenges the leadership faces. FUNDEB among many programs try to extenuate this problem. Civil society must be engaged in ensuring that education is always the government's priority, regardless of political hindrances.

Finally, but at the core of most of our problems is the lack of empirical evidence. We still are very incipient in the academic research about school management focused on leadership. Simielli (2022b), for example, found only 2 articles that reflect upon the daily routine of principals. This represents 5% of 6% of the sample of articles on school management produced between 1989 and 2019 in Brazil. There is no good data on the first goal of the PNE, and no data at all in numeracy trends. More research must be conducted in the area, especially research that provides primary data so that authors and policymakers can build upon it.

Conclusion

The challenges identified among the national and international literature on school leadership are aligned. Studies from various countries have highlighted common issues faced by school leaders, including the necessity to look at local specifics and educational leadership, the importance of involving stakeholders, and the impact of leadership on student outcomes. By comparing these global insights, we can identify best practices and potential solutions that may be applicable in the Brazilian context.

The challenges identified in our research have significant implications for the Brazilian education system. Policymakers can use this information to develop targeted policies that address the specific needs of public school leaders. For instance, recognizing the importance of leadership in improving education quality can lead to policies that prioritise leadership development and training. Moreover, acknowledging the tension between administrative tasks and educational leadership can prompt structural changes in the roles and responsibilities of school leaders.

The broader implications of our study extend to the Brazilian education system as a whole. By recognizing the pivotal role of school leaders and the challenges they face, we can work toward a more effective and equitable education system in Brazil. Our study has essential contributions to school management research in Brazil. The

research carries out a global comparative analysis. Bridging the knowledge developed in the main Brazilian approach (towards democratic management) with the international one, enriching the understanding of the challenges school leaders face in Brazil.

Furthermore, the research highlights the importance of investing in leadership development and proposes practical measures to help leaders overcome their obstacles, such as improving the application of educational policies and encouraging collaboration between leaders. We recognize that this research is not enough to point out any findings as an absolute fact. It is, instead, the first step towards directions that must be explored to achieve the education improvement that society needs and deserves. The following recommendations must be submitted to the policy design, and only with the support of better data will they be able to make a positive impact. Still, the solutions must be considered, for change is imperative and urgent in the Brazilian educational systems.

Recommendations

- Improve the implementation of the National Education Plan (PNE) and advocate for greater decentralisation of policies, enhancing autonomy for local leadership.
- Empower local leadership to assess, adapt, and enhance solutions tailored to the specific needs and circumstances of their regions.
- Foster collaboration and dialogue among school leaders, emphasising the importance of consensus-building and avoiding succumbing to personal ego.
- Acknowledge the complexity of issues such as violence and well-being, recognizing that solutions may vary based on perspectives. Strongly encourage interdisciplinary research and collaboration to develop effective strategies.
- Explore the potential benefits of separating teaching and leadership careers to optimise the overall education system.
- Provide adequate resources and support for schools, with a particular emphasis on advocating for funding to ensure proper implementation of recommended measures.
- Promote and support academic research in school management and leadership, with a strong emphasis on generating primary data. Encourage the creation of a more robust knowledge base for authors and policymakers through the collection of firsthand information.

To enhance the professional development of public school leaders, we suggest:

- Promote quarterly meetings between leaders to discuss, showcase, and stimulate best practices.
- Offer targeted training programs focusing on leadership skills, curriculum development, and community engagement.
- Create mentorship programs connecting experienced school leaders with those in need of guidance.

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