

COMPETENCIES OF THE SCHOOL DIRECTOR: PERSPECTIVES OF THE PROJECT COORDINATORS

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Abstract

School, as an organization, has been going through deep changes over the past years, concerning managing processes. These changes require new competences, especially from those members who are in leading positions, such as the school director. The publishing of the Law-Decree n. °75/2008 has instituted a management model in public schools centered on the director.

We intend to focus on the fundamental relevance of this new *manager* at schools, since he has to face new and difficult challenges every day. We also want to listen to project coordinators, in order to understand how they feel about these new managing competences, taking into account that the school director is the main character in the school organization and the creator of new dynamics and changes in public schools in Portugal.

Facing these issues, we have defined as objectives for the present research: - To analyze the relations between school board and the project coordination; -To identify the competences of the school director most valued by project coordinators; - To analyze the perspectives of the project coordinators over the way the school director can influence the development of projects at school.

We have chosen a mixed research methodology, in order to achieve the stated objectives, and used the interview and the questionnaire, as data gathering methods, and statistical analysis, as well as content analysis, as data analysis techniques.

Both instruments for collecting data applied to public school teachers who play the role of project coordinators, in the district of Porto. We applied the questionnaire to 50 teachers and the semi-structured interview to 4 teachers in the same county.

The study results indicate that the project coordinators accept the vital importance of the school director and value his competences of leadership, communication, sharing and flexibility

Keywords: competence, school director, project, school management.

1 INTRODUCTION

In these times when the changes are consolidating, we need to direct a careful look at the role and functions of the school director, facing the new challenges presented daily. Therefore, we consider that the theme of school management deserves to be studied and deepened, namely in the direct implications with the internal dynamics of the School organization and with the actors of the educational scenario.

Among these actors we selected project coordinators, due to their proximity to different forms of work, and processes of building meaningful and functional knowledge - the projects (Cortêsão, Leite & Pacheco, 2002)[1]. Added to this is our conviction that the school can only find effective educational responses in this scenario of current complexity, the "one-size-fits-all ready-to-wear curriculum" expressed by Formosinho (1987)[2], and if it allows the implementation of mechanisms of pedagogical dynamism and strategies of innovation (Benavente, 1995)[3], of which projects in a school context can be an example.

From the perspective of a specific group - the project coordinators - it was our intention to understand their feelings regarding the competencies of the director as the central figure of the educational organization and the main generator of dynamics of action and change. In this sense, we establish as a guideline of this study the following question:

What are the competencies of the director most valued by the project coordinators?

Based on the assumption that the coordinators are, among others, co-authors of the overall management project of a school, we want to know their perceptions relative to the role of the director and the influence he exerts in the development of the projects they coordinate. Thus, we set as objectives of the present study the following:

- To characterize the relations between direction and coordination of projects;
- Identify the competencies of the director most valued by the project coordinators;
- Understand the perspectives of project coordinators on how the director can influence project development / coordination.

In the assumption that management is decision making, is organization, is direction, we will assume throughout this work that director and manager are the same person, when we refer to the figure that manages the school or grouping of schools, aiming to analyse the exercise of their competencies.

The coordinator of school projects has the important role of contributing to the quality of student learning, managing and maximizing the potential of this educational practice: the project in a school context.

The director is expected to create, within a framework of shared management, conditions for an effective performance of the project coordinator, in a school context that currently has much more possibilities to optimize global resources and promote partnerships with the community.

2 METHODOLOGY

Considering the research objectives, the work developed follows a mixed methodology, combining the quantitative and the qualitative aspect: at the same time that quantifies opinions, it was tried to deepen the knowledge of the reality under study, through the collection of ideas and experiences of the subjects.

As data collection instruments, the questionnaire survey and the interview were used. For the treatment of the data, we used the statistical analysis (using the application of statistical data treatment dados SPSS - Statistical Package for Social Sciences -, version 21.0) and analysis of content, respectively.

In the present study, for the questionnaire survey, we used a sample for convenience "Made up of individuals who are easily accessible and meet specific inclusion criteria" (Fortin, 2009, p. 321)[4]: along with accessibility (the subjects were chosen according to the ease of the contacts to be made), we took into account the availability of participants (we count on their voluntary participation, given that some subjects, to whom the invitation to participate in the study was addressed, did not express willingness or availability).

In addition, the following criteria were also considered: teachers teaching in the Porto district, in public schools, and among these, those who hold the position of project coordinator.

To collect data by interview, a sampling procedure was developed which was adequate to the characteristics, following some previously established parameters: a sample of four public school teachers from the Porto district was selected, with the position of project coordinator.

Participants in the quantitative study were teachers from various disciplinary areas, project coordinators, and taught in public schools in the Porto district. A total of 70 questionnaires were applied, and the rate of return was approximately 71%, corresponding to 50 questionnaires.

Among the 50 respondents, teachers who teach at different levels of education, predominantly in the 2nd and 3rd cycles (28.0% and 36.0%, respectively), the majority are female (70.0%). All of the respondents have as common denominator, in their teaching practice, the performance of a coordinating position of a project (100.0%), and may also accumulate other positions (i.e. class director, department coordinator).

Half of those auscultated (50.0%) are between 40 and 49 years of age, with a bachelor's degree (58.0%) as the highest academic degree. With regard to length of service, it is found that this is a bimodal sample in which the categories "11 to 15 years" and "16 to 20 years" present the highest percentages, each with 22.0%, and also the category "21 to 25 years", which is also very representative, with 18.0%

As far as the professional category is concerned, the majority of respondents teachers belong to a school (74.0%), inserted in a public school grouping (100.0%), whose location is in the Porto district (100.0%). Also to be noted that the vast majority of the groups have a male director (68.0%).

In turn, at the time of the interview, the interviewees had ages ranging from 32 (CP2) to 54 (CP1). Two of the interviewees teach in public schools in a semi-urban context, and two in schools located in an urban context.

As for the academic degree, two of the interviewees are licensed, and two are masters. One is a Portuguese Language teacher, one is from Physical-Chemistry and two teaches Foreign Language. With the exception of interviewee CP2 (Pedagogical Zone Board), all interviewees belong to the school / grouping board.

3 RESULTS

The data collected point to the importance attributed to the role of the director and the crucial role he plays in school organization. It was recognized by everyone (respondents and interviewed) that the director should be, besides a good manager, a good leader, which influences (Chiavenato, 2004)[5] and encourages school teams towards quality (Azevedo, 2003)[6], fostering active collaboration and involvement of all actors (Whitaker, 2000)[7]. It should create a good climate and be an "inspirer of projects and initiatives" (Santos Guerra, 2003, 43)[8].

The data obtained also converge in the influence that the director exerts in the coordination of projects, as well as in the general assumption that projects are relevant in a school context, recognizing their educational utility.

In the category "Personal and professional data of the director" and among the sociodemographic variables, it should be noted that the generality of the respondent teachers did not give special emphasis to aspects such as gender or the level of education in which the director exercised his practice, as well as the age that a director must have, although a significant part of the sample has revealed that this must be in the age group from 40 to 49 years denoting the need for a certain experience and knowledge. Regarding the length of service the director must have, we can't forget that more than half of the respondents find suitable a reasonable length of service: "10 to 20 years" (24%) or "20 to 30 years" (30%), corroborating the idea previously expressed regarding age. In all of these data, we highlight the item that concerns training in school management and administration area, which was unanimously considered essential and of greater relevance, so that a director can run the charge.

In the category "Relationship between director, teachers and intermediate management", through questionnaires, we could verify a high consensus on the importance attributed to the capacity of a director to motivate and involve teams, valuing the work of teachers, consequently promoting the implementation of projects and recognizing the action of the coordinator. In other respects, revealing a moderate level of consensus, decisions and the ability to manage and negotiate conflicts. Significant correlations between the following factors were also possible: the motivation and the involvement of teams with the sharing of decisions; the importance of listening to teachers and intermediate managers (such as project coordinators) with the management and negotiation of conflicts

Regarding the "director's competencies", the low standard deviations in the items relative to the competencies that a director must possess lead us to believe that there is a consolidated opinion that conveys to us the relevance of the abilities of teamwork, leadership, communication, and management of human and material resources, factors that facilitate the implementation of projects. We can also perceive a strong correlation between the capacity of entrepreneurship and the creativity and innovation of a director.

The interviews allowed us to deepen the perceptions regarding the most valued competences, emphasizing the importance given to the capacity of leadership while "Creative capacity to arouse in others the desire to follow a path, to participate in a common work, to reach certain goals and to achieve this will in realization" (Teixeira 1995: 60)[9]. In this field, in the context of school organization, the director plays a crucial role of leadership and, consequently, it should promote concerted strategies of action and stimulate the individual and collective commitment in the accomplishment of projects of work (Nóvoa, 1992)[10].

At this point, deserve reference the opinions of an interviewee who believes that the director should have the capacity for "dynamism, audacity and sensitivity" (CP4) and another that says that the director must be "ethically irreproachable, with an accurate sense of justice" (CP1).

Consequently, the school director must be a good leader, who encourages work teams, which learns to be flexible, to negotiate, to trust and continuously improve the quality of education (Azevedo, 2003). A director who defines strategies, plans, manages resources and solves problems, using techniques such as competitiveness and innovation (Chiavenato, 2004)[5].

In synthesis, "knowing how to manage an organization requires new skills and abilities from those who are supposed to do so" (Bexiga, 2009: 101)[11], realizing that in today's School, it's the director who plays this role, and should pursue his action on quality issues (CP1), to "a school with quality assurance" (Vicente, 2004, p.10)[12].

In the category "Director's duties", the questionnaires showed a clear agreement on the functions of executor of powers provided for in the law and of deliberations of the General Council, as well as the guidelines of the central body. Respondents give more importance to the role of pedagogical manager, project promoter or consensus builder rather than business manager. Could this positioning due to teachers still show some resistance to the application of business logic to the school context? We can also refer to the strong correlations found in this category between entrepreneurship capacity and the capacity to build consensus, as well as the function of executor of powers provided by law with the function of executor of deliberations of the General Council. Thus, in order to implement changes within the School organization, while recognizing that the director must conform to the superior guidelines, it is recognized as fundamental that this directive figure is not a simple representative of the government, but is capable of designing his own pathways for the school (Lima, 1996)[13], differentiating by initiative and innovation, with influence in the collective action of the actors of Education.

The perceptions verified through the interviews allowed complementing the analysis carried out through the surveys. The interviewees emphasized that a director should be a promoter and project facilitator (CP3), creating conditions for them to be implemented by the right teachers (CP4). The director must promote the construction of consensus, in a dialogical and informed manner, and not achieving such consensus by force of authority (CP1) or is at risk his contribution to the promotion of the participation of the different elements of the community in the implementation of projects, taking into account rational and coherent pedagogical and business management.

With regard to the category "Relevant and up-to-date information and knowledge that a director must possess", we can verify a high consensus among opinions with low standard deviations. These results reveal that the teachers interviewed are favorable and consider important the knowledge of the school environment by the director, and his participation or knowledge of the projects that regulate school life, such as the Educational Project, the School / Cluster Curriculum Project, the Annual and Multi-Year Plan of Activities, , as well as the follow-up of the other projects developed. There are strong correlations between the construction / knowledge of the Educational Project and the construction / knowledge of the School / Group Curricular Project, the need for knowledge / construction of the School / Group Curricular Project and the knowledge / construction of the Internal Regulation, as well as knowledge of the Annual / Multi-Year Plan of Activities and the knowledge / monitoring of the projects developed in the school environment.

The perceptions verified through interview confirmed and deepened the analysis based on the application of the surveys, having all the interviewees referred to the extreme importance of knowledge of the surrounding environment at various levels, enhancing the contribution at an economic level, in the dissemination and raising of human resources in the educational community, for a solid project implementation.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The creation of a top-notch single figure of educational institutions, the director, arises together with the attempt to attribute more autonomy to schools, with the consequent increase of responsibility and challenge.

Starting from the perspective of the project coordinators, we tried to draw a proficiency profile of the director, as the central figure of the educational organization and the main generator of dynamics of action and change, in the school context.

The study allowed gauging the perceptions of the coordinators in relation to the competencies of the director, in the various categories of analysis, in their relation to the dynamics, namely the development of projects in a school context.

The most valued aspects lie in the need for specialized training of the director and in his capacity for leadership, communication, and sharing with his followers.

In this final moment of reflection, it is our desire that this study allows to arouse interest for future investigations, to assess the relevance of our grounds and the conclusions concerning the importance of the central role played by the school director.

We obtained the general impression that the teachers covered by this study are enthusiastically involved in the coordination of projects, trying to overcome the obstacles that the new management model has not yet moved out of the way.

I say that the direction of a school should be like an apple that helps to mature who is around. It is a silent, constant, effective, beneficial influence that creates relationships and a dynamic that helps growth, helps development (Santos Guerra, 2011, p.5)[14].

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