STABILITY IN EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP – AN IMPORTANT DIMENSION TO ENHANCE EDUCATIONAL RESULTS IN PUBLIC MUNICIPAL SCHOOLS.

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Abstract: This research analyzes the experience of managing four Southern Brazilian cities whose Municipal Secretaries of Education remained for two terms at the helm of municipal education. It was found that these public administrators were able to advance in their practice and obtained better results when compared with other public administrators who remained only one term. Building a team and implementing changes in the educational sector is a slow and complex process that requires time to be successful and resists political changes that occur with each new election process. Building an evaluation culture in the cities of Castro and Serranópolis do Iguaçu is an example of the kind of more permanent change, and it is one of the key points of this research.

Keywords: stability in management, municipal education, process of change

Introduction

A study of public city education in the Southern Brazilian region showed that cities whose Municipal Education Secretaries (SME, acronym in Portuguese) provided stable leadership for more than one term presented a diversity of projects and a certain level of innovation in their management. This is an indicator that continuity in office allows for the development of a team and for maintaining projects and innovative actions. The study was part of a larger research project that looked into the management of education in municipalities of Southern Brazil. Five cities were studied in each of the three states; the data collection process included a two day visit, interviews with the superintendents of the schools and with the principals, and data regarding teacher qualifications and work conditions.

Hargreaves and Fink (2007) based on an analysis of the change process in secondary schools in Canada established seven principles of sustainable leadership and educational change. These principles are (a) depth, (b) endurance, (c) breadth, (d) justice, (e) diversity, (f) resourcefulness, and (g) conservation. The principle of depth is related to the idea that change and learning should be deep in order to be sustainable and durable. The second principle, endurance, should promote deep and lasting educational change. These changes are circulated by implying the principle of amplitude. Sustainable leadership is socially just. It does not cause damage; in contrast, it promotes social well-being through the dissemination of knowledge. Sustainable leadership promotes diversity, not by standardizing, but by creating cohesion in diverse networks. Resourcefulness in sustainable leadership develops human and material resources, and “renews the energy of the people” (p. 25). “Sustainable leadership honors and learns from the best of the past to create an even better future” (Hargreaves & Fink, p. 25). In conclusion, the authors emphasize that change and sustainable educational leadership has three dimensions: depth, breadth, and duration.

These principles help educators to understand the processes of change that seem to occur in the cities where management remains stable for a longer period. The principle of endurance argues that in order for changes to be established, they need to be introduced over a longer term. Hargreaves and Fink (2007) argue, “Schools and school districts cannot
institutionalize their efforts for improvements over time without a high degree of stability or continuity in leadership” (p. 60).

The Brazilian public leaders in education, in this case the people who play the role of SME (Secretary of Municipal Education) today, have a more political than technical profile. The security of their tenure then depends on political criteria and not necessarily on technical competence or quality management. The SME is politically chosen by the mayor. Recent studies have shown that SMEs are more prepared in terms of professional training and level of expertise, but their profile appears to be more political and less technical (Castro, 2013). This association between public management in education and public government has caused a disruption of educational policies at all levels of public education – municipal, state, and federal – because when there is a change in government, and especially change in the party in power, there are changes in educational policy.

Research conducted by Hargreaves and Fink (2007) in schools in North America indicated that leaders who are doing a good job in schools should remain in office for at least five years, “if you want your improvements to survive after their departure” (p. 61). They argue that “standout leaders should anticipate less successions at any period of their careers, such that leaders remain in specific schools for enough time to ensure that the effects of their leadership will last” (p. 61). These principles also apply to the management of the school because the principals who have been democratically chosen remain for a maximum of four years in office. A study by Drabach and Freitas (2012) discussing the profile of the principals in Brazilian schools built from data collected with questionnaires by Souza (2007) found that: … more than half of the principals in Brazilian schools (53%) work in the role for less than 4 years. This is a significant finding since the turnover of principals in this position is an important element in the democratization of school management. (p. 16)

The lack of training for principals and turnover has led to a low level of professionalism of school principals. One teacher said, “I am a teacher, Now, I will be the principal.” When he starts to learn about the law and have a little more experience, he leaves, and another person will take the job restarting the whole process. Not always, the benefits of participation outweigh the lack of change in leadership. These strategies are important when we experience the growing politicization of the position of educational manager.

Empirical data about the SMEs indicated that building a work team, an educational proposal, and its implementation requires time (Santos, 2012). The discontinuity of policies and programs that are imposed by governments is a problem that has been faced by Brazilian public education at municipal, state, and federal levels. It occurs with new elections by replacing the people in charge of public education management. It happens to the principal of the school and the Minister of Education as well. In each case, they form a new team; new alliances and programs are organized; all causing policy changes and discontinuities leading to endless new beginnings. This process is cyclical in our educational system and makes it ineffective and unproductive in achieving results and objectives. Stability in management and developing a work team can be an effective strategy of action that makes the system more productive and accomplishes more lasting and meaningful change in education on all levels.
Findings

This study shows that in the cities of Serranópolis do Iguacu, Piratini, Castro, and Westphalia, where their SMEs remained for a long period of time in managing municipal education, there were positive effects in educational management. In Serranópolis, the SME acted for two terms, that is, for 8 years; the result was positive because the municipality achieved the best Index of Development of Brazilian Education [IDEB] (the Brazilian indicator of quality in education; it is a combination of results from a Brazilian exam, children’s age, and grade level). In the city of Piratini, the SME remained for two terms, but the results were not as clear. The Secretary of Education instituted a variety of projects and proactive actions in the city, but the educational results were not as clear as in Serranópolis do Iguacu. In the municipality of Castro, the SME terms ran from 2005-2009 and 2009-2011, and he stepped down in March 2011. Castro had a very innovative project which included creating their own evaluation system, a kindergarten school blog, and several innovative projects. Westphalia developed a new pedagogical project with the help of José Pacheco, a Portuguese educator, who founded the Escola da Ponte (Bridge School). The data relating to the experiences of the four cities listed above is presented below.

City 1 – Serranópolis do Iguacu

The administration of the Municipal Department of Education has been held by the same SME since 2005. During this time, there was consistency in the projects that were implemented, such as the projects focused on teacher education. This city has only one school that offers pre-school education for about 120 children and elementary school for approximately 300 students. All teachers who work in education were selected through a public examination. Most of the teachers have a higher education diploma, and during high school, they had a special focus on teaching having attended a teaching school, and 90% of the teachers already had some kind of post-graduate course after graduation. City hall has been concerned; therefore, it invested in teacher training. This distinction affects student evaluations. In 2009, the city received the best IDEB result among the initial grades of elementary education in the state of Paraná.

The numerous projects developed in the city that are worth mentioning include the following:

- The Evaluation of Educational Achievement Project which has been carried out in the city since 2002. Among its goals were to identify the gaps in student learning individually and in classes to propose new content for effective teaching. This project, according to the team of professionals interviewed in the city, has shown excellent results and has been carried out by the association of municipalities in western Paraná. Based on the results of the evaluation conducted with students, courses have been offered for teachers in areas where students had difficulties.

- The Reviewing Knowledge Project launched in 2007 includes revision, fixing, expanding, and sharing knowledge in the Portuguese language and mathematics. It is applied to students from the 2nd to 5th grades. Its objectives are to review and determine the basic content of the grade and evaluate the learning development of each class to offer challenges that contribute in a motivating way to internalizing knowledge.

- The project Knowing Our City has been in effect since 2005. It is applied to teachers and students from kindergarten to the 5th grade. It aims to develop a record of historical and geographical aspects of the municipality to help
students, teachers, and the general community develop their own social and historical identity.

The educational development was considered to be very good by the Secretary of Education. The following items were cited as positive progress: (a) Most of the public employees had completed an undergraduate degree on public management at the Federal Institute of Paraná. (b) The city has an illiteracy rate of less than 4% and among these are generally the “Brasilguaios,” immigrants from Paraguay. (c) The investment in education involved 32% of the budget of City Hall in 2011, while by law the minimum value is 25% of the total. This situation is explained by the commitment and involvement of the mayor. (d) Another difference is the good relationship with the community and parents mentioned by the principal of the municipal school. (e) The local education system offered special computer and chess classes to students in the 4th and 5th grades. These classes were offered in alternate periods. (f) Programs in the cultural area were opened not only to students but to the community with workshops in guitar, keyboard, violin and chorus.

The formation of a work team within the city that has been developing over time, the construction of a local identity through projects aiming to support and document the history of the city which incorporated two neighborhoods of an old city, the constant effort of student assessments followed by teacher training were the points identified in the tests as weak. The results obtained in recent evaluations (IDEB) were shown to be above the national average and have progressed significantly in recent years. Between 2005 and 2009 the city scored 7.2, the highest among the state public schools. In 2011, the municipal school did not participate in the evaluation process due to the small number of students. In the years when the test was performed, the result was significantly higher than that of the entire public network in the state of Paraná, 5.3 and well above the national average (4.6) for the evaluation of the initial grades.

City 2 – Westphalia

The city is small, well-organized, and has 34 working teachers: all with a university degree and 47.1% with a post-graduate course. Four have only training in secondary education. Of these, two are still students seeking a higher education degree. The majority of the teachers work twenty hours per week, only 8 teachers work full time.

The city had a difficult time with adolescent students who found school useless. They lacked motivation and interest in learning. These problems have been evident since 2006, but the stability in the management of education led to the development of a special program to deal with the situation. The most pressing issue discussed by SME was the lack of student motivation to learn. To solve this problem, they invited Professor José Pacheco of Portugal’s Escola da Ponte (Bridge School) to assist the group in addressing this issue. This rather innovative proposal appears to be geared to helping teachers teach and resolve issues based on research. Students and teachers then learn to deal with the issue of a lack of student motivation. In conversations with teachers, it became very clear that teachers do not know what to do to ensure the students’ attention to obtain results and satisfaction with their work. It is a question of how to make good, creative, and challenging work for students and how to make the work relevant for the teacher and the students.

The Bridge School (Escola da Ponte) is an innovative experience created in the seventies in Portugal. It works freely without classes or groups by age. Students come together for emotional reasons and
pursue work in areas of interest. According to Pacheco, the founder of the school:

Indeed, it is the students who decide. And the teachers are there, attentive, and available. When we understand that each child is a unique and unrepeatable, that it would be wrong to imagine the coincidence of levels of development. We can conclude that it is not inevitable to measure the pace of the students according to the pace of a manual or according to the homogenization operated by lesson plans aimed at a hypothetical average student. And we move to another school organization, a different relationship between the various groups that constitute the educational team (parents, teachers, students, staff), another way to reflect practices. There was a shift from instructional objectives to broader goals of education. This project suggests a school model that is no longer the sum of activities of school time, teachers and students juxtaposed. (Interview with José Pacheco; translated by author from the original Portuguese.)

This experience considers the development of a more autonomous individual capable of pursuing knowledge with more autonomy and interest. Maybe this option is valid for the challenge faced by the teachers of Westphalia. The math teacher says

Well, what frustrates us the most is not the salary but problems with students. The teacher prepares to give a wonderful class and has some unmotivated students who do not use a notebook: they look tired, do not care, grumble.... (Interview with director and teacher)

The unmotivated students are a minority in a class of 25-27 students, but they all affect the pace of the class. The group seems to be older students in their teens and their behavior raises many issues: from the nature of the student’s behavior accustomed to the internet with easy and immediate responses to the curriculum. What is really necessary is help the student learn to have a better and more meaningful life through knowledge.

The other teacher says

... the problem is figuring out what really matters to students, and until we discover something, except academic content, this is a generation of typing, push a button, and get an immediate answer without worrying where and how they…it does not matter. ‘I want an immediate response; I do not want to put too much effort into it; I push the button and I want the answer.’ I’ll explain then: ‘No, no, now I’ve turned over a new leaf, and now I wonder if pushing another button how it is going to work.’ (Interview with principal and teacher)

The math teacher cares if it is important to teach polynomials and the Bhaskara’s formula, which she missed in the Faculty of Physics, and then when the students are working in the city and are unable to do simple percentage calculations, or to calculate the area to buy tiles, in sum, practical issues, they will be responsible. The teacher presents the ‘question of concern’ with the lack of prospects these young people have. Because the work in school is not a source of satisfaction for this youth, they do not feel the need to be prepared for a job. However, the knowledge they acquired in school can help with this issue and give new meaning to knowledge. The teachers seem to be making the issue of teaching about how to make schoolwork attractive for young people.

Teachers seek meaning and purpose in their work and achieving an outcome, especially with teenage students, has been a challenge for the city of Westphalia. The stability of the SME enabled the development of an innovative project with the help of Prof. José Pacheco for teachers and students to
find meaning in their joint tasks learning/teaching. Educational outcomes in Westphalia attest that there was an improvement in local education test scores with the 2011 results indicating an IDEB above 6.0. In 2009, the city did not have enough students to apply the test. The results for the final grades of elementary education tended to decrease from 2007 to 2011, despite attempts to overcome the difficulties of involving pre-teen and teenage students. The project with Prof. Pacheco was being implemented in 2012, and the results in terms of school performance have not yet been observed.

City 3 – Piratini

The municipal administration of education has been held by the same secretary since 2006, thus exhibiting stability in the leadership of municipal administration. The interviews indicated that there is a link to a political party allied to a practice and knowledge of the area: combining both traditional and political perspectives as identified in a previous study. It should be mentioned that in recent years the municipal education has shown significant changes. New programs are being implemented, and agreements made with the State Government and the Union allowed for the significant advancement of teaching. Among these, is the work done jointly with the Economic Development Department and Gaucho Program of Quality and Productivity. This connection allowed for the use of management tools in planning municipal education and using strategic planning. Piratini was one of five cities in the state that obtained special support and resources from national programs for early childhood education.

The administration made a number of goals and programs with the aim of improving the conditions and levels of education in the county. Among these measures, it is worth mentioning the implementation of a career plan aimed at improving the conditions of education. As already mentioned, most teachers work a 20 hour work week in accordance with the provisions of the plan, and of these, sixteen hours should be devoted to teaching in the classroom. Four hours per week are devoted to professional development. The municipal teachers who were interviewed commented that despite the limitations of the plan, they felt valued in comparison, for example, with the neighboring municipality of Pelotas, which had no career plan.

The Secretary of Municipal of Education prepared a new plan for computer education to enable teachers to work with computers. Therefore, a Municipal Technology Center was created with 23 computers. The courses in the digital area were offered first to the administration, support staff, and afterwards, students made their first contact with the computers. This situation allowed Piratini to be one of three cities in the state that was part of the Digital City project, but the city is still in 71st position in the ranking of digital cities and the site of city itself is not considered up to date despite their participation in this project. There are computer labs in fourteen schools with Pro-Info (a national program for technological education). The Active School program, which takes a closer look at the educational use of computers, has also been developed. Linked to digital education, the “tele-community center” establishment was designed to attend to an average of eighty people per day.

Due to the large territory of the county, school transportation constitutes a major problem for the administration of education. The SME commented that the fleet has been updated, as well as the consequent regulation of transport. Currently, City Hall owns thirty-one vehicles: five microbuses, fourteen vans, twelve buses, and still need to rent two minibuses, six vans, and eight buses. Because the county is very big, student
transportation amounts to 6000 km per day, representing a huge investment for the city.

An analysis of the data collected and the interviews showed an improvement in the condition of education in recent years with the implementation of various projects and programs aimed at advancing the municipal school. The stable conditions in the administration of the Department of Education allowed for advances in educational programs, but these advances have not yet been reflected in the results of educational achievement.

City 4 – Castro

The person who held the position of SME in the city until March 2011 had been President of UNDIME (Union of Executives of Municipal Education) in Paraná state and the national UNDIME, but stepped away from the position of SME to engage in a consulting firm. The current mayor is being subjected to a series of complaints and cases for administrative impropriety, and perhaps this is one of the factors for the resignation from the SME. The current SME is a teacher, and he believes his role is to continue the projects started by the previous administration because at the time, there is no atmosphere or resources for new investments.

The previous administration seems to have been very active, and there are several projects underway coordinated by the municipal staff: early childhood education, the inclusion project, continuing education, and the internal assessment project called IDEC, and the Educational Development Index of the city of Castro. That city was the only one that presented its own evaluation system in the sample of municipalities studied in the main investigation from where these data were drawn. This system was established in 2008 with the goal of providing subsidies for making decisions about the learning process of students. “In practice, the evaluation process is external to the school [and] provides information for the effective improvement in the quality of education” (presentation on IDEC provided by the SME during a visit in April 2012). The evaluation system of the municipality of Castro, formulated in 2008, was consolidated by Law 7058/2008 establishing two annual assessments to measure student learning outcomes. There was an improvement in the IDEB results in Castro with the implementation of IDEC. In 2009, the municipal IDEB was 5.6, surpassing the 2007 IDEB of 4.9. The practice of evaluation student achievement led with to a culture of assessment in which the results are used to monitor the quality of education and guide the actions of teachers and principals. Educational outcomes show that Castro still performs below the average of Paraná, but in general, it has improved its performance up until 2009 and in 2011, it has maintained a similar pattern. There is a collective effort to change the practices of the classroom depending on the results of the IDEC.

The application of IDEC occurs twice a year from the 3rd to 5th grades making evaluation a common practice and a resource for planning in the classroom. The intentions of SMED in Castro, according to those responsible, were not to rank students and schools but to provide diagnostic possibilities for teachers. In an interview with the principal of a public school, she said that initially there were student awards, and the students with the best results won bicycles. However, now the results are used for diagnostic purposes. The IDEC offers a snapshot of the situation so that they know where they stand in the context of local schools.

The development of IDEC led to a revision of the curriculum, and a booklet was developed with the descriptors of curriculum adapted from the descriptors of the Prova Brazil (Brazil Exam). Thus, the realization of IDEC reveals the inductive
nature of the curricular policies in order to generate a narrowing of the curriculum (Sousa, 2009). This system allows for the identification of different levels of proficiency and eliminates the random student responses.

During the visit to a municipal school in Castro, the teaching staff performed tests with students in the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grades. Each coordinator worked with a group establishing proficiency levels in reading and math. These individual student results were subsequently discussed with teachers to generate corrective measures within the classroom. The regular application of IDEB has led to improved educational outcomes in the city indicating that IDEC has helped to build a more accurate diagnosis of development needs and student learning.

In a later interview with the principal, it was found that the activities of continuing education should also be reflected in planning and action in the classroom. Each activity performed was documented in a book in the form of a report in which the activities are described, and there is a summarized copy of the material. In the second part, each participating teacher made a comment on this activity. The teaching staff monitored the planning by individual teachers.

The Early Childhood Education Project, besides the “Babyteca” (baby library), has a blog where experiences are presented in videos. The blog and the video project really seemed to be quite innovative. Early childhood teachers receive exactly the same pay as elementary school teachers.

The continuing education of teachers is now dealing with the issue of eighty teachers who need to complete 1300 hours of complementary training at the University of Ponta Grossa. This whole program is coordinated by an advisor to the Secretary. These teachers are part of the nearly 40,000 teachers in the state of Paraná who graduated from Vizivali and whose degrees were not recognized at the state level. Ultimately, there are many projects and a diversity and dynamism in the Municipal Education Department. Despite the fact that the Secretary of Education withdrew from the administration of the Department of Education, there continues to be a synergy and innovative influence on municipal education.

**Conclusions**

The data analyzed indicate that the stability of public city management can be a factor in the improvement of public city education. In the cases analyzed, especially in Serranópolis do Iguaçu and Castro, there has been a breakthrough in innovative projects and results. The creation of a team and the maturation of an educational proposal require time and working together, overcoming difficulties, changes in mentality, and developing an innovative culture. In Serranópolis do Iguaçu and Castro, a culture of evaluation leading to positive results has gradually been built up. In Westphalia, the stability of management enables city hall to advance from the diagnosis to the implementation of a project in search of a solution to the problem. In Piratini, the diversity of projects is perhaps the clearest result of management continuity. Finding stability in management can lead to a rich journey of deep and lasting change in the quality of education.

**References**


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