

## Organizational Practices in High Performance Public Schools in Brazil

### Prácticas Organizativas en las Escuelas Públicas de Alto Rendimiento en Brasil

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This research aimed to point out and analyse the organizational practices of the principals in high performance public schools in Brazil, considering the Basic Education Development Index. A multiple case study was conducted in six schools in Volta Redonda, municipality of Rio de Janeiro, in a longitudinal research. It was concluded that in these schools the principals have worked in the same school for more than 20 years, and whose work is recognized by the community that elected him to the position. Principals act to ensure the best results for the students while assuming the responsibility for making critical management decisions. The principals are fully active in the management teams and encourage the participation of parents. The principal of the studied high performance schools unequivocally show that their focus is on the students and their learning, by following up academically all students and offering individualized attention to those with learning difficulties. Finally, it was found that in all the school units, there is a relationship of partnership, respect and cooperation with teachers. The results showed that the involvement and commitment of the school administrators is fundamental for high performance in learning and for the continuous improvement of school performance.

**Keywords:** Educational management; Educational administration; Public education; Educational administrators; Academic achievement.

Esta investigación busca identificar y analizar las prácticas organizativas de los directores de escuelas públicas de alto rendimiento en Brasil, considerando el Índice de Desarrollo de la Educación Básica. Se realizó un estudio de caso múltiple en seis escuelas en Volta Redonda (Río de Janeiro) en una investigación longitudinal. Se concluyó que en estas escuelas los directores han trabajado en la misma escuela más de 20 años, y su trabajo es reconocido por la comunidad. El director actúa para garantizar los mejores resultados para los estudiantes mientras asume la responsabilidad de la toma de decisiones de gestión críticas. Los directores participan activamente en los equipos de gestión y fomentan la participación de las familias. Los directores de las escuelas de alto rendimiento estudiadas muestran que se centran en los estudiantes y en su aprendizaje al realizar un seguimiento académico de todos los estudiantes y ofrecer atención individualizada a aquellos con dificultades de aprendizaje. En todas las escuelas existe una relación de respeto y cooperación con los maestros. Los resultados mostraron que la participación y el compromiso de los administradores de la escuela es fundamental para el alto rendimiento en el aprendizaje y para la mejora continua del rendimiento escolar.

**Palabras clave:** Gestión educacional; Administración de la educación; Enseñanza pública; Administrador de la educación; Rendimiento escolar.

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## 1. Literature review

The latest data from IBGE (2017) (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics) show that Brazil still has more than 13 million illiterate individuals aged 15 years or over. A number greater than the population of the city of São Paulo, and in this age range alone (15 years or more), represent 8.3% of the total population of the country.

Given the importance of education in the process of economic and social development, the quality of the services offered, especially by the public sector in Brazil, has led to considerable debate and efforts to better understand the phenomenon and the challenges arising from it. However, as several authors highlight (Fernandes, 2016; Gabrielli, 2016; Haddad, & Siqueira, 2015; Santos, 2015), the quality of education in public schools in Brazil is very low. The Brazilian system of school accountability has improved greatly in the last two decades. However, it still does not make clear what the responsibility of each educational actor or school principal is and we do not adequately monitor whether each agent is doing his job. Truthfully, improvements in the Brazilian system necessarily go through a more direct accountability (Machado, 2017; Pieri, 2018). Fortunately, there are already some initiatives that seek to make school administrators and teachers responsible for the performance results achieved by the educational institution, but they are incipient yet (Araújo, Leite, & Andriola, 2019).

Taking into account the importance of formal education for society and the construction of citizenship, in this research, the focus is on basic schooling. Especially, focusing on the organizational practices used by the directors of Brazilian public Schools. On the one hand, the arguments point out that the study of the organizational practices of a particular social group to explain their practice, routines and similarities in social life is not very productive, since the practices can be pseudo explicative (Fuller, 1989; Turner, 1994; Rouse, 2001). On the other hand, the researchers point out that the study of practices arises as an issue that must be discussed due to the epistemological diversity included in the term. At times, practices are considered tacit and sometimes as inarticulate competencies. The relevant is that the construct of practices is used to explain constancy or similarities between the routines of social groups. However, the conception of a practice can occur within a particular group or organization in which the subjects share their practices and their actions are appropriately considered responsible for the correct or wrong practice rules. It should be noted that not all practitioners are expected to have the same beliefs or perform exactly the same actions. Although certain actions are subject to sanctions while others are encouraged. In other words, what happens is a chain of actions that lead to an objectively recognizable end in its regularity (Barnes, 2001; Bourdieu, 1990; Pickering, 1998; Rouse, 1999; Schatzki, Cetina, & Savigny, 2001).

Organizational practices are manifested in the most diverse forms, from those governed by actions of reciprocity and cooperation to those based on coercion. In fact, as Santos and Alcadipani (2015) point out,

*The unfolding of human coexistence –or of social life as a whole, or of an organization in particular– involves multiple actions –always with open but organized ends– carried out by one or more persons in certain (one or more) ‘Scenarios’ where, in addition to other ‘human beings’, there are also material entities (non-human agents). (p. 82)*

In this case, the perception of what constitutes organizational practices can be unlimited. Thus, we point out that in this study we have adopted Schatzki's (2005, p. 471) approach,

which is, “practices are organized human activities” or, more specifically, “an organized and broad set of articulated interposed actions”. According to Schatzki (2005, p. 471), “a practice is organized by three phenomena: understandings of how to do things, rules, and teleoaffective structure”. Rules are the regulations, norms, and organizational guidelines. Understanding implies what to do, how to do, how to say and understand, as well as stimulate desired actions and attitudes in other members of the group. The teleoaffective structure refers from the group's projects to the emotions accepted by the participants.

This set of actions, however, does not occur in a vacuum. For Schatzki (2002, 2005), these practices are part of a network composed not only of practical links, but also of material arrangements. More importantly, it is this network that constitutes the very locus where organizations (human and nonhuman) act, relate, position themselves in relation to one another and gain meaning and identity. For this reason, the most diverse types of organizational practices can be found, from the most vertical and assumedly bureaucratic, to the most horizontal, which might simply be referred to as soft-bureaucracies (Misoczky, & Moraes, 2011).

Despite the debate regarding vertical (hegemonic) or horizontal (counterhegemonic) organizational practices, Certeau (2008) points out that organizing is recognized as a dynamic, complex and articulated process consisting of diversified practices, which is always vulnerable to the disarticulation and fragmentation. Therefore, no organization is static. This approach makes it possible to make progress in the study of the nature of organizational action, as the focus is not merely the description of what managers do as isolated actors, but rather how their ‘doings’ as practices, are articulated with the ‘doings’ of other practitioners, internal or external to the organization, that interfere in the daily organization.

Therefore, regarding the ‘arts of doing’ (Certeau, 2008), management is not the sole attribute of the manager, but rather a social construction in contexts inhabited by other practitioners within the environment. Thus, the study of organizational practices seeks to reveal the way in which people interact within social structures that are in continuous construction. From this perspective, as Schatzki (2006) explains, practice is considered to be spatially and temporally structured, and composed of seemingly common actions of social subjects, such as making decisions, supervising, performing tasks, among many others, in life in society.

In Brazil, there are already some studies on the administration of basic education schools that seek to identify how school administrators collaborate to improve students' learning performance. Analyzing the correlation between investment per student in basic education (2005-2015) and the results of the Basic Education Development Index, Moraes, Dias and Mariano (2017) showed that only three Brazilian states there is a correlation between improvement of student learning and increased investment per student. Meantime, the country, Brazil, cannot disseminate the best management practices found in these Brazilian states. The state of Rio de Janeiro tried to implement an Integrated School Management model. The goal was to disseminate the best practices identified in state schools. However, Pereira and others (2019) found that only administrative practices were established. Teachers' pedagogical practices in the classroom were not altered. Moraes, Menezes and Dias (2019), when carrying out the contextualized analysis, using the Indicator of Socioeconomic Level, show that the average efficiency of the schools is not only linked to the socioeconomic level of the

students. Efficiency is linked to the context in which the school is inserted. Researchers have found that schools in socioeconomically vulnerable settings receive fewer inputs from governments than schools in socioeconomically more favourable settings. In the same direction, Almeida (2017) points out that the socioeconomic level not only influences the student's school performance at the beginning of school life, but also influences throughout the school life.

On the other hand, Machado (2017) identified the production of inequalities of educational opportunities within the public education system, from the inequality of access to educational opportunities. According to Machado (2017), the organizational practices of high performance public schools to select their students result in that only students with a higher socioeconomic level are enrolled, which reinforces the stratification of the school system. Pieri (2018) emphasizes that Brazil needs to create more efficient management mechanisms and focus on the efforts and projects of basic education. School administrators should focus on disapprovals and dropout rates. In Brazil, the rates of disapproval are very high when compared to other countries. More than 35% of students repeated at least one year in basic education, compared to less than 15% in the OECD. School dropout rates are also very high (26%) compared to OECD (4%) and Latin American countries (14%) (Pieri, 2018).

Rosistolato, Prado and Martins (2018), when analyzing how school administrators in specific contexts receive the education policies defined at the federal level, have verified that education policy is often not fully understood by local managers. The misinterpretation of educational policy has generated two problems: the non-implementation or the production of alternative interpretations that lead to implementation divergent in relation to public policy. Researchers have found that public policy makers do not understand school realities, which leads schools to fail to meet students' learning goals due to the misleading definition of public policies focused on improving students' learning in basic education. School administrators are not heard in the process of dedication of public policies.

Araújo, Leite and Andriola (2019) point out that there are schools of excellence in Brazil. Mainly, these schools are located in municipalities of the poorest region of the country. The differential of these schools is that local governments have implemented accountability policies. School administrators are responsible for the results achieved by schools. Municipalities that have improved the performance of schools have adopted a permanent system of evaluation of basic education, orientation of work in the classroom and adoption of actions that may help managers and teachers to carry out their work. High-income schools adopt contextualized administrative and pedagogical practices according to the needs of students and in accordance with local government guidelines. On the other hand, the local government makes investments for the: acquisition of didactic material, technological goods, in the pedagogical and structural part of the schools, enabling innovations in pedagogical practices. The local government corroborates to increase the motivation of the teachers to carry out the teaching work and allows an increase of classroom practices due to the exchange between partner schools (Araújo, 2016).

In Latin America, some countries have stood out because of the improvement in the level of student learning. In Ecuador, for example, López and Loiza Sánchez (2017) show that in municipalities with a high poverty rate there are schools with high school performance.

The factors that lead students in poverty to achieve high learning performance are: the use of learning methods that combine student-centred teaching with traditional teaching methods and a high level of social-emotional commitment of teachers to students. In Chile, the results of the school system have been outstanding in Latin America. Chileans have achieved better and better learning. Donoso-Díaz and Benavides-Moreno (2018) analyzed the practices of school administrators in public schools and verified that all school dynamics are focused on these managers, in their vision of how to organize work practices in school. Although these practices have yielded positive results, the problem becomes complex and affects the dynamics of schools because many principals are temporary workers. A problem that is structural in Chilean education, despite the advances made over the last decades. Especially when there is already evidence, in high performance schools, that the sense of belonging of school administrators with their school's influences student performance (Quaresma, & Zamorano, 2016).

In Brazil, Santos Filho (2017) found that the stability of teachers in the same school results in commitment and continuity of work, which brings better results in school work. The commitment and continuity of the teacher's work in the same school are essential conditions for their involvement, participation and commitment to the elaboration and implementation of the school's educational project and, consequently, for the best scholastic performance of the students. In Mexico, Acevedo, Valenti and Aguiñaga (2017), found that teacher involvement, the level of commitment of teachers is one of the variables that has the greatest influence on students' performance results. Based on research carried out in Mexican schools, they also found that the involvement of the students' family with teachers and school administrators resulted in high student learning outcomes.

Indeed, as Balarin (2016) points out, based on a series of studies carried out in Peru, educational systems are complex and there is no way to indicate a single factor as responsible for the results of schools. Therefore, the need to understand that student learning is the result of dynamic interactions between the school's collective, the school community, the context; that is, culture, social, economic, institutional and political conditions. That is, even successful organizational practices that can lead to high school performance are often not easily replicable due to the set of factors makes the school unique. In other words, it is the school composition and its characteristics that affect organizational practices, pedagogical practices, and intra-school factors that affect student outcomes. This can also explain the different results achieved by schools that are within the same geographical and socioeconomic context, such as neighbouring schools with different performances. That is, the context, the educational policies, the educational systems themselves, and their constantly interacting organizational and pedagogical practices define the results of schools (Balarin, 2016; Rivas, 2015).

In fact, numerous researches point out that school administrators, that is, school leadership is the second variable that most influences student performance. However, these same researches suggest that these leadership and organizational practices defined by school administrators themselves should be combined with other policies both internal and external to the school in order to enhance student learning, including when student-centered leadership is involved (Botler, 2018; Guimaraes, & Valenzuela, 2016; Hurtado, 2016; López et al., 2018; Montecinos, Aravena, & Tagle, 2016; Robinson, 2019).

## **2. Method**

This is a longitudinal research with a qualitative approach. To achieve the proposed objectives, that is, to identify and analyze as organizational practices of the principles in high performance public schools in Brazil, it was used the cases studies as procedural strategy. According to Yin (2005), case studies can be used when we want to know 'how' and 'why' a certain phenomenon occurs. However, as here, the same study may contain more than one case, and when this occurs, the research is characterized as a multiple-case study. Each school is the object of an individual study, but the study as a whole encompasses several schools and thus uses a multiple case project. Stake (2000, 2013) points out that what is often expressed in one case may be very different from what is expressed in another, as each may have completely different relationships and situations, as well as aspects that are inherent in each. one individually.

Thus, the research is characterized as a multi-case study adopting an intensive and qualitative investigation to understand the object studied. The work also had an exploratory character, seeking to build a first approach on the set of beliefs, perceptions and explanations that, in a structured way, organize the knowledge of the actors involved in the processes of organizational change.

The municipality of Volta Redonda (Rio de Janeiro) was chosen for the study because several municipal schools managed to achieve and sustain high scores beginning with the first National Institute of Educational Studies and Research Anísio Teixeira (INEP) assessment. The schools that were investigated in this study, were intentionally selected because they achieve and sustain high performance, having as reference the Ideb. Thus, we attempt to identify the organizational practices in those schools that, possibly, have been ensured that high achievement.

Five municipal elementary schools, namely, Amazonas Municipal School, Damião Medeiros Municipal School, São Francisco de Assis Municipal School, Pará Municipal School and Palmares Municipal School (1st to 5th grade), were selected from the Municipality of Volta Redonda, based initially on the fact they reached the Basic Education Development Index expected targets over the period 2007 to 2013.

The Municipal Education Department of Volta Redonda (MEDVR) gave permission for the research to be carried out, provided that, in addition to the selected schools, the Municipal School Professor Antonietta Motta Bastos was included, in view of its excellent performance, although it had not achieved the target in 2013. The MEDVR requested that we seek to understand why the target had not been achieved. Thus, our sample came to consist of six schools.

The researchers use semi-structured interview and direct observation to collect the information needed to analyze school realities and their organisational practices. All information was collected with the consent obtained from the Municipal Education Department of Volta Redonda (MEDVR) and each of the participant (principals, vice principals, shift officers, educational counsellors, educational supervisors and teachers). For Patton (2002), the semi-structured interview, at least in the case study, is intended to allow the researcher to enter into the perspective of the other person in an attempt to try to access what is not easily observable. Thus, the semi-structured interview, rather than including numerous direct questions, consists of a kind of introduction to a conversation, so as not to cause the interviewee to withdraw and lose confidence, although the focus is

specific. Direct observation, as described by Triviños (1994), is not simply about looking, it is about observing, as a whole, something specific, paying attention to the characteristics to be highlighted. According to Patton (2002), this feature allows the researcher a direct experience with the research subjects and a greater orientation towards discovery, as it allows a broader view of the whole. One of the main advantages of direct observation, according to Patton (2002), is the knowledge provided by the researcher's direct experience with the context in which the research is performed. This strategy allows the researcher to perceive and know from the scene where the observed activities are developed, the activities themselves, the people who participate in these activities, to the meanings of what was observed from the perspective of the people being observed, as well as learn from the research subjects (members of the school community).

This strategy, in the field research, consisted in understanding the practicing subjects and experiencing in the school's daily routine. The intention was not only to go to school, but also to inhabit this space and give voice to the practicing subjects of their daily lives. Data collection, through the direct observation, allowed to obtain information, using the senses in the process of reaching certain aspects of reality, at first glance incomprehensible. According to Marconi and Lakatos (2002), it is a strategy of investigation, coming from Anthropology and it constitutes a fundamental strategy of research. It helps the researcher to obtain and identify evidence about goals that, sometimes, including the practitioners of organisational practices are unaware of, however, guide their behaviour. The direct observation plays an important role, since it forces the researcher to establish a direct contact with the studied reality.

Thus, after defining the cases to be analyzed, as well as the methodological strategy and the instruments to collect the required information, the fieldwork job was conducted in two stages: The first stage consisted of contacting the Municipal Education Department of Volta Redonda (MEDVR), in the beginning of 2015, for granting research authorization. After the authorization was granted, the second stage was the data collection in the schools, which were defined in two moments: 1) Interviews with principals, vice principals and shift officers; 2) interview with educational supervisors, educational counsellors and teachers. It is noteworthy, of course, that, during the entire data collection, direct observation (school routine) was performed.

After the data collection, the information was organized so that it was possible to identify dimensions, categories, trends, patterns, relationships, unravelling the meaning of the research findings so that they could be understood. In other words, content analysis was performed. According to Bardin (2011, p. 38), content analysis is understood as a set of techniques for analyzing communications to obtain, through systematic and objective procedures for describing the content of messages, indicators (quantitative or not) to allow the inference of knowledge concerning the conditions of production/reception of such messages. For the interpretation of the texts from the interviews, the content analysis process involves several steps that allow giving meaning to the collected data (Minayo, 2001). In this case, the methodology used for the interpretation of the texts, as previously highlighted, was the one developed by Bardin (2011) which is structured in three phases: pre-analysis; exploration of the collected material; and data processing.

In the pre-analysis, the material was organized with the objective of making it operational, systematizing the initial ideas. After this first contact reading, in the

interviews, the excerpts directly linked to the theme to be analyzed were selected. Then, with the definition from the experts, the categories of analysis were defined and indicators developed that could be identified in the interviews and excerpts of the interviews that were analyzed (Bardin, 2011). It is noteworthy that the definition of the interview excerpts was necessary due to both the amount of material collected and the fact that the interviews were semi-structured, which allowed the interviewees, many times, to talk about topics that were not directly linked to the research on the agenda. Finally, the dimensions, categories, trends, patterns, relationships identified in the interviews were compared with the researcher's notes, obtained from his observations of the organizational dynamics of each of the schools.

Finally, it is noteworthy that the research began in 2015, which was enough for adequate observation in the schools. Certainly, before the result of the last Basic Education Development Index (*Índice de Desenvolvimento da Educação Básica*) was released by INEP in September 2016 and September 2018. However, it was also possible to identify changes in the schools' results with the release of the results in 2016 and 2018.

### 3. Results

The schools were identified as E1 (São Francisco Municipal School), E2 (Damião Medeiros Municipal School), E3 (Antonieta Motta Bastos Municipal School), E4 (Pará Municipal School), E5 (Palmares Municipal School) and E6 (Amazonas Municipal School). Six principals, six deputy principals, six shift officers, four educational guidance officers and three educational supervisors were interviewed. It is emphasized that not all schools have educational guidance officers and supervisors.

The first characteristic common to these schools is that their leaders have been in the position for at least 10 years, and all, besides the school teachers, have previously held some other position in the same school, such as vice principal, supervisor or shift leader. On average, the current principals have been working in the same schools for more than 20 years, the shortest time being 16 years and the longest, 31 years. The same is true for other members the management team. As for teachers, they have been at the same school, on average, for about nine years. The longest serving for more than 20 years and the most recent, being recruited via a competitive selection processes, have served for at least two years.

To begin with, it is necessary to emphasize that three categories emerged during the interviews, and will be dealt with in this article: the process of choosing the principal; the process of choosing the organizational activities of the school and; commitment to students.

Beforehand, it was found that the process of choosing school principals in the Municipality of Volta Redonda takes place through elections held every three years. However, the candidate teams are formed for the most diverse reasons, whether due to dissatisfaction with the previous management or the encouragement of the teamwork and the school community.

*I was elected to the position. At the time, we professors were not satisfied with the principal. So, my colleague and I decided to stand and I ended up elected Principal.*  
(Principal E5)



*It was an electoral contest where the vast majority did not want the other teacher to be the principal, hence there was the election, we disputed the position, and at the time, thank God, I was elected with 94% of the votes of the parents and teachers. (General Principal E2)*

*Through election. I had already served as a pedagogical counsellor and at that time, in 2002, teachers, staff and parents encouraged my candidacy for the position. (General Principal E1)*

*I stood for the position with another teacher and entered as vice principal. At first I reluctantly accepted. Then, when my principal said she would not stay, that she had a family health problem, she had to leave, I assumed the headship and in the next elections, we formed new team and won again. (Principal E4)*

It is noted that, regardless of the reasons that led the principals to assume and remain in office, they pointed out the existence of a democratic process of choosing the team that should direct the school organization. According to the directors, the participation of employees, teachers and family members in the process of choosing the principal has a central importance for work at school. This type of process of choice provides legitimacy to the school administrator.

Affinity between both the team and the school community was also highlighted by the vice principals.

*I think I came to be vice principal because I knew the school community and the whole group well. We have been there for ten years and we were elected by the school community that knows our work and works together with us, in a good relationship, because we know what work needs to be done and why it has to be done and we talk to the community. (Vice Principal E6)*

*When we stand as candidates, we look for someone with a profile and we've known each other a long time, right? We taught together. We have been friends for a long time and worked together here for many years. We made single candidature, but it was an election process. And it was only because we had the support of the school community. If we hadn't, we wouldn't have been elected. (Vice Principal E3)*

*I was determined not to go back, but then I got so worried because our school is understaffed and they didn't put another teacher in to replace me. So, I thought, "At least I can help a little more." My intention is to stay just this year. But let's see. I've known this community for a long time, I'm part of it. People trust me, I feel responsible for the school and we work really well together. (Vice Principal E2)*

As noted, the school administrators are elected. According to Schatzki's (2005) approach, the election is a rule that regulates the functioning of the school. And it states there will only be access to the position of Principal through an electoral process, in which teachers, and educational supervisors and counsellors from the municipal education system can compete, provided they have at least five years' experience of teaching in any public education network, three years of as head of class, are working in the school unit, hold a university degree in the area of education, provided that the other component of the team, holds a graduate or postdoctoral degree in Pedagogy and/or Educational Management.

However, in this basic rule, the teleoaffective structure can already be noted, since in order to be implemented, the existence and objectives of the people involved in the practice and, above all, the emotions and feelings in the school community (the school's internal and external community) define the choice of Principal. According to the interviewees, affinity and integration with the school community are fundamental in the electoral process. Both the closeness of the community and their perception that a teamwork or does not have a feeling of commitment to the school and to the students is defining in the election. In other words, in executing the rule, both the understandings and the teleoaffective

structure, referred to by Schatzki (2005) and Santos and Alcadipani (2015), are present. They organize the practice, while it also encourages the actions of others, based on the understanding of their involvement with the school and the community, their commitment to implement the projects, and the emotions involved that are accepted and considered as legitimate in the school electoral process.

In other researches in Brazil, Ecuador, Chile and Mexico, it has also been shown that the commitment and involvement of school administrators are fundamental for the stability of the school and, mainly, for the improvement of students' outcomes (Acevedo, Valenti, & Aguiñaga, 2017; Donoso-Díaz, & Benavides-Moreno, 2018; Quaresma, & Zamorano, 2016; López, & Loaiza Sánchez, 2017; Santos Filho, 2017).

In fact, the election in the school community provides legitimacy to the school administrator. Perhaps this legitimacy will allow decision-making to concentrate on the school administrator, who has the trust of the community. This can be noted in the answers to the questions about how the decision-making process occurs in the organization of school activities.

*We do not think the same, of course, we disagree, but try to reach a consensus. Try to be as democratic as possible. Usually, any decision is screened by the team. That's when it's a decision that influences the whole school. But with decisions restricted to a particular shift, there are criteria for making decisions. Then we make independent decisions. But it is independent because it is already part of the routine or because we have experienced a similar situation. The Principal is a very flexible. So, you don't have to call her all the time to ask what to do. But if it's something that has never happened before, out of the routine, we'll call her. (Head of Shift E4)*

*Here, we try to decide everything with the management team and the teachers. When we decide about the school's budget, for example, we meet and discuss how it will be invested. I ask the teachers what they think should be done right away and what can be left for later. But I also show everyone what the school needs and I say what I think we need. But I discuss with them and ask what the group wants. However, as Principal, it is also part of my role to make decisions that may not please everyone. But we continue talking and I convince everyone. (Principal E5)*

*I hardly ever make the decision on my own, but when necessary, I do! We have a team meeting at least once a month and we try to decide things together. However, when something has to be decided, I decide and communicate it to the staff. (Principal E2)*

*Who's going to face the criticism? Everyone who decided? No! It's the Principal out there facing the music. So, it's not reasonable to ask permission to stop doing or do some things. The decisions that come from the Education Department, for example, also, have to be complied with. I do not argue whether we will comply or not. We will comply. But I discuss with the school community how we are going to do what we have been asked to do. (Principal E3)*

*We seek participatory management. So, we work together, in partnership, with the pedagogical counsellors, with the educational counsellor. Everyone follows everything closely and we discuss what is best for school with the school community and especially with the teachers. But that does not mean that I will shirk making a decision. If necessary, the last word is mine. The community, too, elected me for that reason: because it knows that I am not afraid to make a decision and I assume the consequences of my decisions. (Principal E6)*

The statements of a supervisor and an educational counsellor reinforce what was said by the principals and the head of shift.

*Usually, the principal has the final word. We have a monthly meeting to make decisions, but not everyone wants to or can participate. So, the one who decides, that calls the shots is the Principal. We have, or at least try to have, participatory*

*management. We know everything, but sometimes people don't want to participate in all the discussions. The principal always talks to us about the school's problems. She comes into the teachers' room and says, "This and that happened, and we're going to have to do this and that." Everyone agrees that the attitudes and decisions are appropriate for the situation. Of course, if there is an emergency, she goes, and takes her decision because you cannot wait. But I think people trust her. (Educational Supervisor E2).*

*Decisions are collective when possible. But if not, you cannot! So, the Principal goes ahead and decides. This, too, is her role, isn't it? (Educational Advisor E3)*

Centralized decision-making was also emphasized by heads of shift and vice principals.

*I think the general principal is very open to dialogue, she will listen to everyone and be open to ideas. But there are times when that's not appropriate and then she takes the decision and informs her decision. I also think people should want to participate more. But it's hard to get people involved. Many teachers work in two schools. You cannot get everyone together and debate. (Head of Shift E3)*

*She does not call the shots, we talk and decide, but you know how it is! In the end, she's responsible for the school, but we meet with the teachers when she's thinking about doing something different. (Head of Shift E6)*

*We always discuss things among ourselves, but she has the final word. But we have a good relationship, we always try to reach a consensus, but when we can't, we leave it to her, following the hierarchy, she decides, because she is going to have to answer to the Secretary of Education. (Vice Principal E6)*

In the interviewees' statements, the decision-making process within the organization of school activities was also seen to contribute to the good performance in IDEB. The statement from one of the Principals illustrates and summarizes what was expressed in the interviews.

*It's a cog, literally. The school is a cog. If the people don't walk straight, it breaks the dynamics of the school. And it cannot break, otherwise the IDEB score falls. So, everyone has to know everything about the IDEB and what the school is doing to get good grades to achieve the targets. The teachers have to do their job in the classroom and the Principal has to do everything to ensure that the teachers can do their job well. This may mean that the principal has to make decisions that not everyone likes, but it's her role to make it work, and work right. The role of the Principal teamwork is to help achieve this: to ensure every cog is ready so that everything works out in the classroom, in the classes, at break time, during the meetings with the parents, in the certainty of taking the tests right. And this is a daily job and that never ends. Everyone makes decisions all the time, but the principal is the one who answers for everything. So, it is normal for her to want to know and make decisions that are more serious and important. (Principal E2).*

The decision-making process in the organization of school activities was one of the dimensions of the organizational practices of the studied schools that was most emphasized by the interviewees, especially by the principals who highlighted the decision-making experience as one of the most complex and demanding organizational practices of a school. According to the Principals, once decisions are made and the school community is informed, the community and the Secretary of Education can insist on their implementation. So, you have to be aware of what you decide, because you will have to implement the decision.

The interviewees' statements show they understand that the director can make decisions on her own, in a more centralized way, since it is a prerogative of the position and, mainly, because she is perceived as being responsible for the school, the one who answers to the school community and the Secretary of Education. While the discourses allude to more

participatory, consensus-based management, they agree that centralized decision making predominates, and this is recognized as normal and often necessary.

What has been found, in this research, therefore, is that Principals of high performance schools make more centralized decisions on their own, if necessary. But they also take responsibility for those decisions and, importantly, they are perceived by those they lead as being answerable for the school and its performance in the external assessment, who put their 'neck out', especially in relation to the Secretary of Education.

From Schatzki's (2002, 2005) perspective, this moment deals specifically with what organizes a practice in terms of the tasks and sayings embodied within it. Thus, understandings, rules and the teleoaffective structure are constantly present in the interviewees' statements, as they signal an attempt at a more participatory form of management and that they seek consensus when they recognize the predominance of a centralized management in the school and explain that this is necessity for the school and a question of understanding the role of the Principal, since the latter was elected by the community to fulfil that role and must respond to the Secretary of Education for the results of the school.

When the interviews focused on the relationship of school organizations with students, parents and the surrounding community, a third category "commitment to learners" emerged, which is highlighted in this text:

*We perceive considerable participation on the part of the students' parents. Over 90% of parents come to the meeting. Here, the family makes a difference. Here at the school, we believe that there is no way the school can be good school if the family does not participate. Hence, one of the main goals of our school is to bring 100% of parents to the meetings. It is difficult, but we are trying and, so, our parental involvement is high. The Principal is insistent and even calls those parents who do not show up.* (Educational Supervisor E3)

*The parents participate in all the events the school holds. They encourage the community around the school to attend, too. Our relationship is very open. Anything at all, they look to the school. So, I think this is what contributes to a good job, because our partnership, what we have with the parents, trying to work together, if it wasn't so, it wouldn't work, it's no use being unilateral, it has to start from both sides, right?* (General Principal E6)

*The participation is very good, especially with the leadership group we have: parent representatives and the school community council, who are active in the day-to-day life of the school, encourage and collaborate in carrying out the proposed activities. Our staff attempt to keep in touch with parents. If contact is lost, it is more difficult to recover. And we make an effort encourage parents who are already involved with the school to bring other parents to the meetings. This has helped a lot. But we also have to go around the community to find parents and call them to find out why a parent or guardian does not come to a parenting meeting with the teachers in the class in which his or her child is enrolled.* (Principal E1)

The participation of the parents and/or guardians of students in their school life is considered fundamental by all the interviewees. They believe that without this participation there is no way to obtain commitment to the learning performance of learners. Therefore, the commitment of teachers to school organization is considered a priority for schools.

*We've had teachers drop out in the first week. Then, I asked the team responsible for supervising them: what did you do? Why did these teachers give up so quickly? You have to invest in the teacher in the same way that you invest in the student. In order to have quality teaching, the teacher has to be good. But if the teacher is bad, if the*

*teacher seems reluctant, if they're just there to receive the salary, in the teaching council we will not teach that person to be a teacher, we will not teach, not even in college. You can teach about theories, but you cannot teach a person to like what they don't like, if they're only in the job because they have no other. There are teachers who says they're only teaching because they need to. We try to help, but often, it does not change anything and that is bad for the children. So, if we perceive this, we do not want teachers like that in the school because it will cause a lot of harm to the children and can contaminate other teachers. (Principal E4)*

The Principal of school E5 also showed concern regarding the factors that determine whether teachers fit in and the lack of interest in their recovery, before they are possibly returned to the Municipal Department of Education.

*In the first year, you have to give the teacher a chance because s/he has just started in the school, just finished a competitive entrance exam, so you give them the chance to work. But if they worked that first year and did not do well, we give them another year of chance to find themselves. We do everything we can for the teacher. But it the second year isn't good! If you have to send them back, we return them. But we only return them when we perceive that, unfortunately, there is nothing else to do for them. But we are wanting to shorten this time because it's two years that are lost for the student. And you have to recover it later. So, we have to choose: either the teacher or the children. We choose the children. At first, it was difficult because when you have to return a teacher, you have to present all the records of their behaviour and performance. But what will happen to the children? We have to talk to all the teachers so they understand what's going on. But our school culture says that children are our top priority. (Principal E5)*

The principal of school E2 shows a similar attitude.

*Our work is serious. The school is already known for its work. So, anyone who doesn't want to work seriously, doesn't want to come here. And those who want to work hard often ask the Secretary of Education to come here. This is a very good community. It is a very enlightened community, which knows its rights. Of course, from time to time, duty is forgotten, but they know their rights and they do not give them up easily. As the community is very present, they know about the problems with the teachers, so they support us with the Department of Education. (Principal E2)*

This discourse is very similar to that adopted by the Principal of E3.

*I explained the situation to the teacher who did not adapt to the method of working in our school. Within two months of her being there, I already realized she didn't have the right profile to work at my school. I couldn't let her ruin a class, wait a year to find out if it was going to work or not, when I could already see she wasn't adjusting. Could I wait? (Principal E3)*

Again, the understandings, which, in this case, relate to the understanding of the internal and external school community, contribute to the organization of the practice and to the organization of the school. In other words, there was no sign that the desire to ensure cordial relations implied any kind of negative impact on the student, such as favouring teachers who failed to fulfil their obligations or who did not adapt to the work required at school. It is very clear that in high performance schools, the learners are the priority and the closer the school is to the school community and the more the teachers trust the Principal, the easier it is to dismiss a teacher who does not meet the requirements that the school sees as fundamental to ensure excellence in the teaching-learning process.

Understanding this practice defines the rules of these organizations and consolidates their respective teleoaffective structures (Schatzki, 2005), since the commitment to the student's learning is the priority in these schools. Thus, managerial decisions, including removing teachers who do not adapt to the projects that focus on student learning, find

legitimacy within the school community, avoiding possible conflicts due to any kind of corporatism.

Acevedo, Valenti and Aguiñaga (2017) in México, Santos Filho (2017) in Brazil, both present evidences that the stability of teachers in the same school results in commitment and continuity of work and brings improvement in students' results. The researchers emphasize that the level of commitment of teachers is one of the variables that has the greatest influence on the results of students' performance.

Furthermore, it is also emphasized that, at least in this research, the use of rules, of the understanding of how to do things and instigate actions of the same kind in others, and the teleoaffective structure in the daily construction and alignment of the 'arts of doing' in each school contribute so that something established of the practice is accepted and widely established in the organizational practices of the schools. To paraphrase Schatzki (2002, 2005), this set of actions does not "happen in a vacuum" and, as no organization is static, neither is management the exclusive attribute of the manager, but rather it is a social construction in contexts inhabited by other practitioners within the environment (Certeau, 2008). Therefore, there is a need to continuously renew and reaffirm certain organizational practices so that they acquire meaning, identity and legitimacy among their practitioners.

#### **4. Discussion and conclusions**

First, it is necessary to show some evidences on the schools included in the study that did not achieve the targets in 2013 and 2015. In this way, it is relevant to emphasize that this study adopted Schatzki's (2005) perspective, in which the organization is a social construction that defines its own identity. In this sense, in order to be part of this social construction it is necessary to adopt the 'arts of the doing' of the organization.

In order to understand this construction, it is fundamental to perceive the role of the same key variable within the context of these schools and that has modified their results: the delivery of the residences in the Programa Minha Casa Minha Vida (Federal Government Public Housing Program), without the previous planning of schools to meet the new demand.

In the early conversations with the Principal of the Antonietta Motta Bastos Municipal School, the subjects interviewed made plain their concern about not reaching the target in 2013, but stated that the school had expected this, due to the change in the profile of the local community, which significantly changed the profile of the students and their guardians.

As reported in the local newspaper *Jornal Diário do Vale* (2015), since 2013, Volta Redonda City Hall and the Caixa Econômica Federal had delivered 1,220 housing units through the Programa Minha Casa Minha Vida. The first keys were handed over on July 15, 2013, benefiting 224 families. On August 15, 2014, another 496 units were delivered, in the Nova Vida Project, in the Roma neighbourhood, and on November 14, 192 families received the keys to the Dom Waldyr Calheiros Housing Project 1, in the São Sebastião neighbourhood. On December 5, 2014, the keys of the 144 units of the Padre Bernardus Hendrikus Project in the Candelária neighbourhood were handed over. On February 23, 2015, the residents of the Dom Waldyr Calheiros Housing Project 2, with 160 units, in

the São Sebastião neighbourhood, received the keys to their apartments, thus fulfilling the dream of having their own home.

These are the neighbourhoods served by these schools. It is a fact, the children who experienced this mobility were allocated to schools with organizational practices to which they had to adapt. The same process of adaptation occurred within the in schools, as they had to some extent (re)start to build and share their organizational practices with the new entrants, learners and their respective parents. According to the school Principals with the delivery of the apartments, there was an increase of 30% to 35% in the student body, in a short space of time, and many of the children had studied in schools with lower performance and, probably, with other organizational practices where perhaps the community was less involved and parents were not called upon to participate.

As early as the first internal assessments, the unevenness in the formal education of the students became apparent. In this case, the new students, their parents, and the school staff had to readapt so that the schools could appropriately incorporate the new students. In the first year, in 2013, the year the new students entered the Antonietta Motta Bastos Municipal School, and also the year of external assessment, the school was only 0.1 from achieving the stipulated target. In 2015, the best indication that the school community had reorganized itself, incorporating the new members and adjusting itself as a whole, was the score of 7.7 obtained in IDEB, when the target was 6.8.

The Amazonas and the Damião Medeiros Municipal Schools went through the same process with the delivery of the apartments Minha Casa Minha Vida Program. Theirs results of the Basic Education Development Index (BEDI), published in 2016 and 2018, showed the same results of Antonietta Motta Bastos Municipal School. That is, the schools that received a large number of students from other schools obtained below-expected results.

It is necessary to emphasize that Antonietta Motta Bastos Municipal School improved its results and reached the goals established in 2016 and 2018. It is hoped that these schools (The Amazonas and the Damião Medeiros Municipal Schools) will also be able to incorporate their new students and adapt their organizational practices so that their teaching-learning relationship remains excellent.

In this research, it is also essential to highlight that, in the case of these schools, it was verified that: the understanding of how to do things in the schools is founded on the process by which the Principals are elected by the school community (parents, teachers and employees), as stipulated in the rules of the Municipal Education Department. Through this process, the respective school communities have chosen Principals who have worked as education professionals, on average, for more than 20 years in the same school, have had some other management role within the school and whose work has been recognized by the community.

The teleoaffective structure, the “hierarchically organized and normative set of ends, means of achieving them and emotions, that are accepted and recommended, are considered valid and legitimate in practice” (Santos, & Alcadipani, 2015, p. 85). Therefore, each school is socially constructed on the understanding of how to do things in school and based on the legitimacy provided to the Principal by the internal and external school community, so that she/he can act to obtain the best results in the teaching-learning relationship of the students, and therefore the best results for the school.

This understanding contributes towards the maintenance of close partnership between the organization and the community and it also contributes to understanding of the organizational practice of the schools. The Principals, in turn, because of their legitimacy, provided by community support, are able to implement the decisions made, although they may sometimes be unilateral decisions taken by manager alone. It is also part of the understanding in these organizations that, occasionally, the Principal can make decisions, which may even cause displeasure, without consulting the school community, since it is part of the manager's role to make decisions and, mainly, because it will be the manager who assumes the consequences of the decisions before the Department of Education of the Municipality.

Finally, there is an understanding in the studied schools, held by both the manager and the school community, that the School Principal is responsible for the results of the school and that it is her/his job to ensure the best results for the teaching-learning relationship of the students. A clear example of this understanding is the 'return' of teachers to the Department of Education, with the support of other members of the school, when their performance is considered detrimental to the learners' learning.

It is also worth noting that in the studied schools, the managers are present in the daily routine of the school and follow the students both in their performance and in their behaviour, which makes it easy to identify when there is a problem and whether the family needs to be brought to school. The teamwork of school, that is, the staff that works in partnership with the school Principals, has proved fundamental in the process of following students, especially with regard to the routine of each school, in the classroom, in daily conversations with students and teachers.

Systematic meetings between the manager and his/her team, as well as meetings with teachers to monitor student outcomes is another common practice in high-achieving schools. In all the investigated schools, actions aimed at improving results were also found, such as: Using IDEB's own test so that teachers understand why children err on what is expected by external assessors; Identifying teachers with best practices that can be shared among others; Systematic monitoring by the Municipal Education Secretariat of Volta Redonda.

The commitment and involvement of the whole teamwork of school is a differential for the results presented by the students. The mandatory presence of teachers in the classroom. If a teacher is missing, it is part of his/her obligation to give notice in advance. Acceptance of the presence of educational supervisors, shift officers and Principals in the classrooms to follow the classes of the teachers, in an effort to ensure their continuous improvement.

The Principals assume responsibility for the running the school and its results. To that end, managers state that while they seek participative management, they retain their prerogative to oppose a collective decision if they believe it might, in some way, jeopardize student learning. The managers pointed out that taking decisions is part of the position and, as they are answerable to the school community and the Municipal Education Department of Volta Redonda for the results achieved by their schools, if necessary, they adopt a more hierarchical and centralizing management. It understood that everyone is involved with the focus of the schools: the students. There is recognition that each one must fulfil their obligations. These are not perfect schools, but student learning is seen as a priority.



It was seen that, although the schools do not coordinate practices among themselves, there are significant similarities, such as: The application of mock tests; Individualized assistance to students with difficulties, not only by teachers and counsellors, but also by the management team and by the Principal him/herself; The search for the active participation of the family in the school and accompaniment of the students.

Finally, it was found that in all the school units, both the teachers and the support team emphasized the fact that they are very close to the Principals, in a relationship of partnership, respect and cooperation. However, they recognize the importance and the responsibility of the position held by the managers and the existence of a necessary hierarchy. While the various discourses show that dialogue, the exchange of ideas and the opportunity to offer suggestions are present, in all the school units, the Principals are seen to be those that have the final word.

This study allowed us to approach high performance schools and, especially, allowed us to know the organizational practices of these schools. The results showed that the involvement and commitment of the school administrators is fundamental for obtaining good results in learning and for the continuous improvement of school performance. The results of this research are supported and validated, as well as support and validate research already done in Brazil and other Latin American countries. Despite the small number of schools surveyed, which is the main limitation of this work, the results indicate that the educational systems are complex and there is no way to indicate a single factor responsible for the results of the schools. Therefore, it is necessary to understand that student learning is the result of dynamic interactions between the collective of the school, school community, school context, cultural, socioeconomic, institutional and political conditions of the school. That is, even successful organizational practices that can lead to high student achievement are not easily replicable due to the set of factors that make the school unique. In other words, the composition of the school and its characteristics affect organizational practices and these influence student outcomes. In the future, we suggest researches to compare organizational practices of high performance schools with organizational practices of underperforming schools.

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