THE PARENTS’ ROLE IN THE GENERAL COUNCIL OF PORTUGUESE SCHOOLS – EFFECTIVE PARTICIPATION OR MERE ORCHESTRATION OF REALITY?

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Abstract

The Portuguese public educational administration and management follows the norms established by the Decree-Law no. 75/2008, which was later reviewed by the Decree-Law no. 137/2012. The Decree-Law no. 75/2008, in effect since 2008, intended to “strengthen the participation of families and communities in the strategic direction of educational establishments and in favouring the establishment of strong leadership”. In addition to these two objectives, the preamble of this Decree-Law mentions “the need to strengthen the autonomy of schools [which] has been called for by all sectors of opinion.” In order to achieve these objectives, this Decree-Law reorganizes the configuration of public schools’ administrative bodies, by introducing a major change: the institution of a strategic management body – the General Council - made up of representatives from teaching and non-teaching staff, parents, students (if adults or secondary education students), municipalities and local community (representatives from institutions, economic, social, cultural and scientific organizations and activities). By introducing this change, this legal document establishes the following school administration and management bodies: i) the General Council; (ii) the School Director / Principal; (iii) the Pedagogical Council and (iv) the Administrative Council. The General Council is the strategic management body responsible for approving the fundamental rules of the school’s functioning (internal regulations), the strategic and planning decisions (educational project, activities plan) and for monitoring their implementation (annual activity report). Moreover, this body is responsible for the election and destitution of the Principal, who reports to the General Council. None of the bodies or groups represented in the General Council holds, on its own, the majority of seats. All the interested groups must be represented and the bodies that represent the school staff (teaching and non-teaching staff) may not hold the majority of seats in the council. An open-ended single question was applied to a sample of parents who have a seat in the General Council of their children’s school, in order to collect their suggestions about ways to improve its action. We obtained a total of 42 answers that correspond to parents from 32 different General Councils across the country.

A content analysis of the answers given reveals that the majority of respondents think that the General Council is dominated by the school Director / Principal, becoming a propaganda body for his action. Moreover, they affirm that parents should have an increased presence in this body, in order to counterbalance teachers’ excessive power in the General Council. In terms of the decision-making processes, the results show that the General Council seems to be perceived by parents as a forum for the legitimation of previously made decisions, which leads to a deficit of parents’ participation in these processes. The results of the study are presented and discussed under the light of some classical organizational theories.

Keywords: School administration, school management, General Council, parents, participation, decision making.

1 INTRODUCTION

The paradigm underlying school leadership models has been changing and the tendency is for single leadership to be replaced by models of a leadership which is shared among different stakeholders, assuming the premise that the leadership capacity is increased by using the knowledge, skills, and expertise of stakeholders [1].

The means through which parents, students and other elements from community are involved in school administration and management processes are understood as “participative spaces” defined as “opportunities, moments and channels where citizens can act to potentially affect policies, discourses, decisions and relationships which affect their lives and interests” [2, p. 11].
In what concerns more specifically to parents’ involvement in schools’ administration and management processes, some authors state that parental involvement in decision-making processes “encourages demand for a higher quality of education and ensures that schools reflect local priorities and values. By giving voice and decision-making power to local stakeholders who know more about the local education systems than do central policy makers, decentralization can improve educational outcomes and increase client satisfaction” [3, p. 2].

However, the validity of these claims is necessarily dependent on the nature and on the modus operandi of participative spaces in schools.

In Portugal, since the publication of the Decree-Law 75/2008 on the 22nd of April 2008, most public schools are organized in what the Portuguese government calls “Agrupamentos de Escolas” (schools' groups or clusters). A schools’ cluster is an organizational unit with its own administrative and management bodies, made up of different public educational establishments, from pre-schools to schools with one or more educational levels or cycles. This means that schools from a given cluster have the same administrative and pedagogic bodies, as well as the same principal.

In terms of the above-mentioned Decree-Law, this political measure was taken in order to pursue the following objectives: a) to enable children and youngsters from a given geographic area to have a sequential and articulated educational path and to favor an adequate transition between educational levels and cycles; b) to overcome the isolation of some schools and pre-school establishments and prevent social and school exclusion; c) to reinforce schools’ and pre-school establishments’ pedagogical capacity within their cluster and to enable more rational management of resources; d) to contribute to the clusters’ management autonomy (in what concerns to their ability to make decisions towards the pedagogical and curricular organization, human resources management, school social support policy and strategic, patrimonial, administrative and financial management).

Also, according to the terms of the Decree-Law 75/2008, the constitution of schools’ clusters obeyed the following criteria: a) construction of integrated school paths; b) curricular articulation and alignment among different educational levels and cycles; c) geographic proximity; d) the need to order the pre-school, basic and secondary education network.

The number of schools that comprise each group or cluster may vary, and some clusters have more than five schools, spread along a relatively wide distance. Although the great majority of Portuguese public schools are aggregated into clusters, there are also schools, including some high school level schools with more than 1000 students, that haven’t been aggregated to any other school, though these schools are in the minority.

The Portuguese public educational administration and management also follows the norms established by the Decree-Law no. 75/2008, which was later reviewed by the Decree-Law no. 137/2012. The Decree-Law no. 75/2008 intended to “strengthen the participation of families and communities in the strategic direction of educational establishments and in favoring the establishment of strong leadership”. In addition to these two objectives, the preamble of this Decree-Law mentions “the need to strengthen the autonomy of schools [which] has been called for by all sectors of opinion.” In order to achieve these objectives, the Decree-Law reorganizes the configuration of public schools’ administrative bodies, by introducing to major changes:

i. The institution of a strategic management body – the General Council - made up of representatives from teaching and non-teaching staff, parents, students (if adults or secondary education students), municipalities and local community (representatives from institutions, economic, social, cultural and scientific organizations and activities);

ii. The substitution of a collegial management body - the Executive Board - by the creation of the position of the Director, assisted by a sub-director and by a small number of adjuncts, constituting, however, a unipersonal and not a collegial body.

By introducing these changes, this legal document establishes the following school administration and management bodies: (i) the General Council; (ii) the School Director /Principal; (iii) the Pedagogical Council and (iv) the Administrative Council.

The General Council is the strategic management body responsible for approving the fundamental rules of the school’s or school cluster’s functioning (internal regulations), the strategic and planning decisions (educational project, activities plan) and for monitoring their implementation (annual activity report). Moreover, this body is responsible for the election and destitution of the Principal, who reports to the General Council. None of the bodies or groups represented in the General Council holds, on its
own, the majority of the seats. All the interested groups must be represented and the bodies that represent the school staff (teaching and non-teaching staff) may not hold the majority of seats in the council. The members of the General Council elect its President from among all the members of the Council (exception made to students’ representatives).

The School Principal is the first person responsible for the development of the school’s or the school cluster’s educational project and for the local execution of the educational policy measures. This means that the principal is accountable for the provision of education public service and for the management of the public resources that are at his or her disposal. Although the principal is not legally considered to be part of the General Council, the legislation stipulates his / her participation in the General Council meetings, without voting rights.

Being responsible for the administrative, financial and pedagogical management, the principal also assumes the presidency of the Pedagogical and the Administrative Councils.

The Pedagogical Council is the body for pedagogical coordination and supervision and educational guidance of the school, namely concerning the domains of pedagogy and didactic processes, and initial and continuous training of teaching and non-teaching staff. Until 2012, it was constituted by: a) the coordinators of the curricular departments; b) other coordination, pedagogical supervision and educational orientation structures that ensure a multidisciplinary representation as well as the representation of different educational offers; c) representatives of parents and of students (in what concerns to the latter, only secondary education students had the right to integrate this Council).

The Administrative Council is the body responsible for making decisions on administrative and financial matters and is composed of the Principal, the Sub-director or one of the Principal’s adjuncts and the chief of the school administration services.

In 2012, the Decree-Law no. 137/2012 was instated, which maintained the administrative and management bodies, but “reinforces the competence of the General Council, in view of its legitimacy as a representative body of educational agents, parents and the local community, namely institutions and economic, social, cultural and scientific organizations [from the local community]”. This Decree-Law additionally readjusts the electoral process of the principal, giving it a greater legitimacy by making the requirements for achieving this position more demanding and, on the other hand, by the consecration of accountability mechanisms for top and intermediate leadership positions.

Another important alteration introduced by this Decree-Law is related to the constitution of the Pedagogical Council. This alteration established that only teachers could become members of this Council, preventing parents from integrating this administration body. From this alteration on, the only school administration and management body that is integrated by parents is the General Council.

In this political and normative framework it is important to consider that school is, simultaneously, a locus of normative and cultural reproduction and production, working in a diptych mode [4], which advises an analysis that considers both the plan of orientations (internal and external) towards action and of the action itself.

School is a loosely coupled system [5] that characterizes itself by the fragility of vertical and horizontal curricular articulations, by the frailty among the proclaimed goals and the functions that are practiced in reality, by the scarce cooperation among teachers and by the feeble connection among all the variables that constitute the organizational system (students’ grouping, teaching and learning times and places, technologies, teaching and evaluation strategies). Moreover, it is also a system marked by the bureaucratic action that legitimates the domination of the political and administrative center [6], by the coexistence of multiple interests and micro powers, by the diversity of the power bases [7], with emphasis being placed on the specialist power detained by teachers and the power of authority owned by the principal, who plays the double and paradoxical role of representative from the central administration and the elected person by the members of the General Council, which represent the local educational community. The participation of parents’ representatives in the General Council must, therefore, consider the context of a bureaucratic centralization of power, the fiction of a strategic direction, the asymmetry of the various powers and interests and the coexistence of multiple logics of organizational action.

Based on the legal framework that supports the constitution and functioning of the General Council of Schools and on the theoretical framework briefly presented, this study intends to analyse what roles, actions and responsibilities are perceived to be assumed by those parents who have a seat in General Councils and how they evaluate the organisation and the operating rules of this administrative and management body.
2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Procedure

An open-ended single question was applied to a sample of parents who have a seat in the General Council of their children’s schools, in order to collect their suggestions about ways to improve its action.

After their written informed consent, a dataset text containing all these answers was imported into MAXQDA Analytics Pro [8] for data analysis. Based on a qualitative approach, a content analysis was performed by two researchers in order to ensure a higher agreement between codifications. Data was analysed using mainly an inductive analysis approach [9] Each transcription was read and coded, line by line, to identify emergent themes and patterns related to the parents’ role and actions in the school General Council and how they evaluate the modus operandi of that Council.

Themes were categorised into three key-dimensions: (1) “positive aspects and facilitators”; (2) “negative aspects and constraints”; and (3) “suggestion for improving parental action”.

2.2 Measures

A total of 42 parents’ answers were obtained from 32 different General Councils across the country. 56.3% of parents were from the North of Portugal, 26.3%, from the region of Lisbon and Tagus Valley and 15.6%, from the centre of the Country.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The content analysis of parents’ answers reports on the perceived constraints and positive aspects regarding the constitution and modus operandi the School General School. Parents also mention some suggestions that could lead to the improvement of their participation and involvement in the Councils.

Table 1 presents the positive aspects and facilitators related to the participation of non-teaching staff in Schools’ General Councils. Frequencies and an excerpt of each code are also presented as a testimony and an illustration of how parents perceive those positive aspects. A total of three segments were coded as positive aspects.

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<th>Participants Involvement</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Excerpts</th>
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<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>“(...) I feel that there is a very positive harmony in relation to all the entities involved in it. We are all heard in the same way”</td>
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The positive aspects mentioned by participants are scarce and solely related to the harmonious relationships established between different stakeholders and to the diverse important contributions that non-teaching staff bring to the General Council. The scarce number of positive aspects that emerge from the participants’ speech content analysis contrasts with a high number of references to the negative aspects and constraints of the General Council’s modus operandi.

Table 2 presents the negative aspects and constraints to parents’ effective participation in the General Council of Schools. Frequencies and examples of parents’ answers are also provided. A total of 34 excerpts were coded in this topic.
Table 2: Negative aspects and constraints

<table>
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<th>Frequency</th>
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| Inoperativeness of the General Council | 18  
The General Council must cease to be a sterile body to play its true role.  
There should be a strengthening of "powers" of the General Council so that it can work more towards the education of children and young people instead of wasting so much time in approving documents that cannot be altered and that have already been elaborated by others (Pedagogical Board and Director).  
It would be enough if at least the recommendations and decisions taken by the General Council were respected and put into practice.  
Too much time is wasted on "propagandist" speeches by the director, who tries to make us believe there are no problems at school and therefore, there are no issues to be solved. |
| Decision-making process conditioned by the presence of the principal | 6  
The fact that teachers and non-teaching staff in the General Council are evaluated by the director limits their positioning when it is contrary to the director's position.  
The Director should not be present at the meetings of the General Council, because his presence may impose some conditions to the participation and decision of some elements (teachers or other school staff.) |
| Counselors Passivity / "civic alienation" | 3  
There should be a greater intervention from all the members of the General Council. Many of the members are very passive; they do not express their ideas and limit themselves to voting.  
There is a non-involvement of the counsellors that I see as a kind of "civic alienation". |
| Limits to parents’ action | 3  
The parents, in my opinion, have lost some room for action, but they do everything they can in order to have as much room for action as possible. |
| Bureaucracy | 1  
The General Council is a very bureaucratic body, mainly focused on the approval of documents, which leaves little time for debate and reflection. |
| Meeting Schedule | 1  
Meetings are too long (more than 3 hours long). The meetings are scheduled in late hours, considering the number of points to discuss. |
| Members attendance | 1  
The attendance of the counsellors from entities outside school is very low and often makes it difficult to obtain the minimum number of attendances to pursue with the meetings. |

The inoperativeness of the General Council is frequently mentioned by parents (18 references). These results seem to point to a “pseudo-participation” [10, p. 125] from the different counsellors, who do not get to address significant issues for the development of schools. The representatives of the parents, particularly, look at the General Council as a “sterile body”, whose recommendations and decisions may even be overlooked and not put into practice.

Moreover, some parents state that the presence of the school principal in the General Council prevents a free and independent decision-making process by the teachers’ representatives, once there is a hierarchical relationship between the principal and the teachers (the latter are evaluated by the former).

Other constraints to the efficiency of the General Council are presented by parents, such as the limitations they feel in their action, the bureaucratic nature of most meetings (where the focus is more on the approval of documents rather than on the reflection and discussion of strategic issues) and the limited meeting schedules and the systematic absence of external members.

The results shown above in tables 1 and 2 enable us to state that parents who have a seat in the General Council tend to look at it as a tendentially inoperative / inefficient body, which is far from accomplishing the normative goals presented in the introduction of this paper.

Lastly, table 3 presents the main suggestions provided by parents in order to overcome the constraints and negative aspects identified. A total of 35 segments were coded as suggestions. A central recommendation is related to the constitution of the school General Council (with 14 coded segments). According to parents, the principal should not be present at the General Council meetings, except
when expressly asked to by the counsellors. Moreover, some parents state that the president of the Council should be a parent and not a teacher. Note that although there is no legal hinderance for a parent to be elected as the President of the General Council, the fact is that in the overwhelming majority of cases the elected President is a teacher.

Another recommendation is related to a higher participation and involvement from all parents in school (not only those who are part of the General Council) and school community, who should be informed of all the decisions taken. The parents’ role in the General Council should be better clarified, not only for parents but also for the whole community. For some parents, the General Council should have broader competencies, moving beyond a mere formal approval of previously made decisions to a more active role in pedagogical issues. Last, but not the least, parents suggest that those who have a seat in the General Council should be rewarded for their work or, at least, their commitment to school should be valued by the community.

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<th>Table 3: Suggestions</th>
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<td><strong>Frequency</strong></td>
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<td>Sharing of information between parents</td>
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<td>Broader competencies</td>
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<td>Social valorization</td>
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<td>Compensation</td>
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<td>Clarification of parents’ role</td>
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<td>Integration of parents in the Pedagogical Council</td>
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<td>Greater dissemination in the school community</td>
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Table 3 shows us that almost every suggestion made by parents points out to alterations that ensure their greater participation and power, which implies that they tend to feel overpowered by the teachers and the principal in this administrative and management body.

4 CONCLUSIONS

A content analysis of the answers given reveals that the majority of respondents think the General Council is dominated by the school Director / Principal, becoming a propaganda body for his / her action. Moreover, they affirm that parents should have an increased presence in this body, in order to counterbalance teachers’ excessive power in the General Council. In fact, data leads us to believe that the principal’s and teachers’ agendas tend to dominate the General Councils in schools. In terms of the decision-making processes, the results show that the General Council seems to be perceived by parents as a forum for the legitimation of previously made decisions, which leads to a deficit of parents’ participation in these processes.

Getting back to the question included in the title of this paper, based on our findings we are led to say that from the parents’ point of view, their participation in Portuguese schools’ General Councils is far from fulfilling the legal orientations and is not considered to be effective. On the contrary, the General Council seems to be a kind of “democratic cosmetics” [11] and a way of maintaining the principal’s and teachers’ status quo [12]. There are obvious discontinuities between national policy rhetoric and real practices of participation, as other studies around the world also show [13]–[15]. Considering Lukes [7] power analysis framework, according to the data analysis we can say that parents’ influence seems to be limited to “one-dimensional power”, since they assert preferences within frameworks decided elsewhere. Although the meetings from the General Council give parents the opportunity to express their points of view on diverse aspects of life in school, the fact is that, except in rare cases, they do not decide which issues will be debated or put to a vote, and although they have fairly free reign to voice concerns, the school principal acts (or not) upon them at his / her discretion [16].

Although the number of school staff elements may not overcome the number of non-staff representatives in the General Council, in what concerns to the power bases, it seems fairly clear that, after the principal, teachers are the stakeholder group with the greatest capacity to influence decisions in this body. They exert their capacity to shape decisions (“two-dimensional power”, [7]) setting the agenda, opening or closing topics for debate and deciding which issues will be put to a vote.

Therefore, the General Council seems to work as a political arena [17] where reality is orchestrated by the dominant power (teachers) under the scenario of the organization of hypocrisy [18] and where actions are taken in order to maintain “institutional legitimacy” [19]. The General Council appears as a formal structure that reflects rationalized institutional rules. According to Meyer and Rowan these “function as myths which organizations incorporate, gaining legitimacy, resources, stability, and enhanced survival prospects [19, p. 340]. The General Council is a structure that seems to have become isomorphic with the myths of the institutional environment, which decreases internal coordination and control in order to maintain legitimacy (id. ibid.). We seem to be in the presence of a formal structure that functions more as “myth and ceremony” (id. ibid.), presenting a huge gap between normative rhetoric and the way things are really done.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study was funded by EDULOG - Fundação Belmiro de Azevedo.

REFERENCES