

International Conference on Education and Educational Psychology (ICEEPSY 2011)

School leadership in Portugal: the role of the *director's intervention project*

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Abstract

With the approval of the Decree-Law 75/2008, the applicants to the post of director of Portuguese public undergraduate schools have, mandatorily, to present an intervention project for the schools they intend to apply. This intervention project, which should take into account the school's educational project, needs to clarify the main lines of acting of the director during the four year period of his/her mandate. Two years after the publication of this Decree-Law, we applied a questionnaire to 48 Portuguese public school directors having as main objective to know some aspects of this document, namely to check its' importance as a instrument for the action of the director in the management and administration of the school. In this paper we shall present some of the results that we have obtained from the analysis of the questionnaires.

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Keywords: School Leadership; Project; Director's Project; Portugal;

1. Leadership and Project²

To lead an organization implies necessarily to know what we want for the organization in the most diverse areas of its development. Globally speaking, we can say that leading implies having a *project* even if this project has a more implicit side and is not materialized in a written document. The project will constitute the content of leadership itself and, in this sense, leadership without project is an empty, artificial, and most certainly, ineffective leadership. Nevertheless, the connection between *leadership* and *project* is not a theme that is broadly discussed by specialists. This is particularly true in English speaking countries due to the fact that the term *project* is, in this scientific and organizational context, scarcely used, being substituted by the concept of *vision*. Therefore, there are many studies in educational leadership that point out to vision as being crucial to a successful leadership (Bolman & Deal, 2003;

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² Research funded by MCTES/FCT – PTDC/CPE-CED/108655/2008 and Centro de Investigação Didáctica e Tecnologia na Formação de Formadores;

Kouzes & Posner, 1990; Nolan, Goodstein & Pfeiffer, 1993). Kouzes and Posner defend an idea of vision that comes very close to that of project when they state that “visions are statements of destination” (1990) and that “visions, then, are conceptualizations. They are images in the mind [...]. They become real as leaders express those images in more concrete terms to their constituents” (1990). As such, vision is not a mystical idea, a magical solution, but a well defined image of how the organization could become and an indication of how to get there (1993) – or, as we would say, a project. This connotation that the literature from English speaking countries associates with the concept of vision is not very far, specially in the field of leadership processes, from the one we in Latin countries attribute to project. As Barroso points out: “in anglo-saxon countries [...] the idea of project is substituted by that of mission, vision, elaboration of values and is connected to the exercise of leadership and the micropolitics of the school” (1992). In Latin tradition countries – such as Portugal, Spain or France – the idea of vision associated to leadership is identified with the idea of project. To Barroso, projects are affirmations of “micro-ideologies of daily action, creating their own systems of beliefs in order to guide the decision taking of (individual or collective) actors regarding certain principles or values” (1992). Thus, it can be said that, in the leadership processes, the project is the statement of certain objectives that reflect the values and ideologies that belong to the leader and which should be adopted by the followers in order to have effective leadership. The project, therefore, is between the “logic of wishes” and the “logic of action” (1992) and, therefore, “more than planning the action, it seems to be urgent to plan the sense of the action” (Costa, 2003) because, as Nolan, Godstein and Pfeiffer point out “specific plans need to be developed and successfully implemented before the vision can become a reality” (1993).

2. The directors’ questionnaire

With the Decree-Law 75/2008, the candidates to the post of director – the management and administration body of Portuguese undergraduate schools – must present an *intervention project* to be submitted to the *school’s general council* – the management body responsible for the recruitment process of the director. In this intervention project, according to the Ordinance 604/2008 “[...] the candidates identify the problems, define the objectives and strategies as well as establish the programming of the activities that they intend to carry out during their tenure” (article 6º, point 3). This project should take into account the school’s educational project, which, according to the Decree-Law 75/2008 is the document that embodies the educational orientation of the school or federation of schools. This project is made and approved by the school’s bodies of management and administration of a three year period. In this project the values, goals and strategies according to which the school or federation of schools are committed are stated.

Two years after the enforcement of the Decree-Law 75/2008 and, approximately, ten months after the beginning of their tenure, we applied a questionnaire to 48 school directors. The directors we enquired are teachers with experience of school management (they have at least one mandate in school management and administration bodies) and came from across the country (the questionnaire was applied in May 2010 during a directors’ training course that took place in Lisbon).

The questionnaire was divided into three groups of questions: the first was about the way in which the director’s intervention project was made; the second was centered on the divulgation of the intervention project (if it was on the school website or at the school’s main showcase); and the third was aiming at knowing how many times the director consulted his project since the beginning of his/her mandate.

3. The directors and the intervention projects: analysis of the results

In what concerns the first group of questions – regarding the way in which the project was made – we asked the directors if they had consulted the *educational project* of the schools to which they run and if their intervention project had been reformulated and presented to the general council of the school to which they had been chosen.

In regard to the first question (see Figure 1), 38 directors answered that they had consulted the educational project of the schools to which they had run (as it would be expected, given the content of this document). Nevertheless, surprisingly, 10 directors answered that they had not read the educational project of the school. This leads us to wonder about the value that these candidates have given to this institutional and fundamental document

of the school. Could it be that they knew it so well that they did not need to read it? Could it be that the school’s educational project did not have actual value? Was it not updated? Or did they just, simply, not pay attention to it? We do not have the answers to these questions, nevertheless, the reading we can establish is that there is a certain undervaluing of the school’s educational project by a significant number of candidates to the director’s tenure.

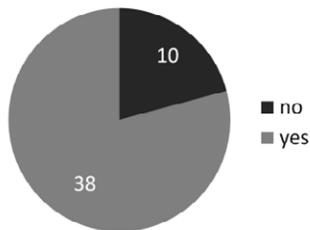


Figure 1 – Previous consult of the school’s educational project.

Next, we intended to know if the director’s intervention project had been reformulated and presented to the general council of the school to which the director had been chosen after his/her election. At this point (see Figure 2), the answers are inverted, i.e., 10 directors answered they did and 38 that they did not alter their intervention project.

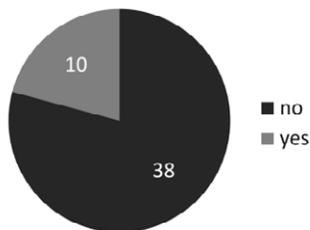


Figure 2 – Reformulation of the intervention project.

Even though, at the moment of the questionnaire completion, the directors had not completed a full year of their tenure, one can see that only 10 directors of our sample altered their intervention project and submitted it to appreciation to the general council. It seems, that in the follow up of the discussion of this application document (the candidates are submitted to an interview where their proposals are discussed), the intervention project should have received some critics/suggestions/alteration proposals to be taken into account by the winning candidate. Why, then, only 10 have changed their intervention project? Are they waiting for the end of their first year in tenure to do it? Or is it simply not even thought of? In this sense, has the director’s intervention project fulfilled its mission at the moment of the presentation of the application, and, therefore, is it only a mere fulfilling of a technical-bureaucratic ritual?

In what concerns the second group of questions we asked the directors about the place where the intervention project was, given that we intended to ascertain about the visibility that it had in the school context, as well as about the access that several members of the educational community and other people had to this document.

Answering the first question (see Figure 3) – “is the director’s intervention project available in the school website” – 22 respondents answered yes and 25 no (1 did not give any answer).

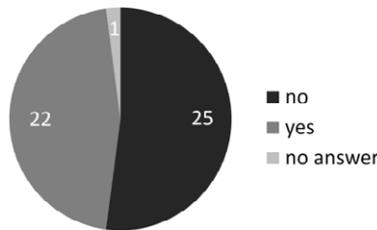


Figure 3 – Presence of the director’s intervention project at the school website.

Answering the second question of this section – “is the director’s intervention project on a school’s showcase” – only 12 respondents said yes and 34 said no (see Figure 4).

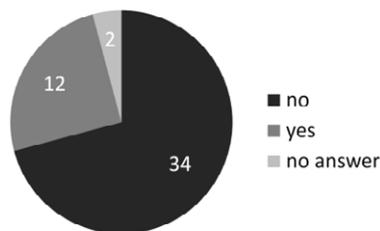


Figure 4 – Intervention project in a school’s showcase.

The relatively high frequency of negative answers to these first two questions of this section (52,3% in the case of the first question and 70,8% on the second one) leads us to have serious doubts whether the director’s intervention project is actually known by the educational community since, in many cases, it is not visible in the two main places of contact with the school (the school’s website and showcases at the school).

This doubt of ours is further supported by the answers we got to the two next questions in the same section. In the case of the third question – “is the intervention project integrated into several files of the school’s intermediate

structures” – 27 directors (56,2% of the answers) said yes and the remaining 19 directors who answered said no (see Figure 5).

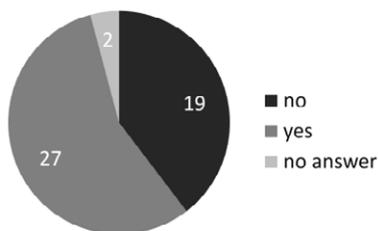


Figure 5 – Intervention project integrated into files.

In what concerns the fourth question of this section (see Figure 6) – “is the intervention project archived in an office ready to be consulted by anyone who requires it” – the answers are more coincident: 44 respondents said yes (91,6%) and only 3 said no (1 did not chose any option). Is it, then, the director’s intervention project a document oriented towards the outside of the school? Is it available only to those who go to the school and ask specifically for it? Should the intervention project be a “passive” document in the sense that it will only be read by those who ask to do it?

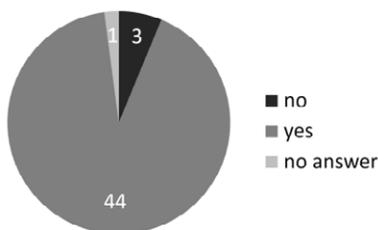


Figure 6 – Intervention project archived and available only through request.

The answer on the distribution of the document to the school teachers is also worthy of reflection (see Figure 7) since 35 directors answered no, which is the same as saying that in 72,9% of the cases the teachers of the school did not have direct access to this document through its distribution.

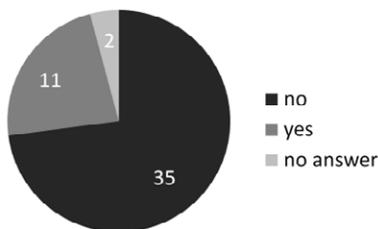


Figure 7 – Intervention project handed out to the teachers of the school.

The above results lead us not to exclude the hypothesis of being before one of the many situations in which the intervention project is “very well kept” (it is not in exhibition at the school, it is not in the school’s website, it was

not given to the teachers of the school...), being very close to what Costa (2003) calls “the drawer project”. In addition, most of our respondents (see Figure 8) answered that the project was not even at their desk ready to be consulted (25 directors said no – 52% of the answers – 20 said yes, and 3 did not answer).

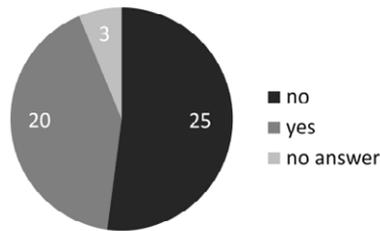


Figure 8 – Intervention project at the director’s desk.

At the end of the questionnaire there was a group of questions regarding the frequency in which the director consulted his/her intervention project. As one can see in Figure 9, only 1 respondent answered that he/she had never again referred to his/her intervention project. The great majority of directors answered that, since the beginning of their tenure, 10 months before the completion of the questionnaire, they had consulted their intervention project 4 to 10 times (31 respondents, 64,5% of the answers). Ten directors claimed they had consulted it 3 times, 3 that they had conferred it every week and 2 that they had read it every day (2 did not answer this question). Even though there seems not to be a systematic reading, the answers point out to the fact that, to most respondents, the intervention project is a document they call upon with some frequency.

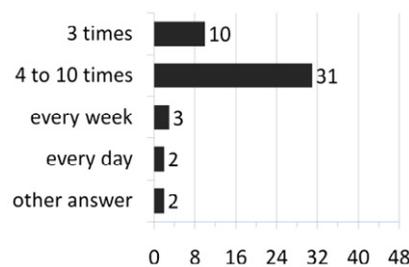


Figure 9 – Frequency in which the director consult his/her intervention project.

4. Final considerations

The kind of results we have obtained from this questionnaire does not allow us to infer some effectively supported conclusions since it is an exploratory empirical study and due to the inconclusive nature of many of the answers. Nevertheless we can posit several readings from the results that, supported by further reading and by other empirical research, can be converted into several other research hypotheses, thus:

Is the director's intervention project just a *technical-bureaucratic formality*, whose effects are finished with the moment of the legal mandatory character of its presentation for the formal procedure of the public request for tenders/election to the post?

Is the director's intervention project transformed into a mere *symbolical artifact* whose visibility is promoted as an institutional legitimating mechanism for the creation of a public image of efficiency from the director (and the school)?

Both hypothesis present the director's intervention project as a document with no effective practical application, that does not assume a effective orientation and bonding to the daily action of the school management, but that comes along as a mechanism at the levels of intentions, of representations and of the "action orientation" – a situation that can be framed in the "organized hypocrisy" as so many other projects in the school organizations (Costa, 2008).

From the answers we have collected, it can be inferred that the dimension of technical-bureaucratic ritual is still very present, given that, for instance, the director's intervention project, in many cases, did not take into account the school's educational project, it was not reformulated after the election of the director, it was not distributed and is not easily available for consultation by the educational community members. On the other hand, the connotation with a symbolic artifact of creation of a public image is not so clear since, for some respondents, the director's intervention project is not posted in places of high visibility in the physical space of the school, as well as it is not available on the virtual space of the school (the school's website).

Nevertheless, there is another kind of hypothesis with a distinct character from the above stated:

Is the intervention project an instrument at the service of a *strategic action* of the director and of the leadership processes of the school, being, therefore, an orientation and effective management mechanism for the daily work of the director?

In this case, our data, even though not conclusive, reveal several answers of the directors that show the idea that their intervention project is consulted with relative frequency, being, therefore, a valid document in the orientation of their action facing the challenges that come by everyday. The answers may also show that the director's intervention project can be seen as an important instrument in the checking of the completion of the activities to develop through the mandate.

Nevertheless, we are still before very incipient answers that only further research can corroborate.

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