

A question of merit: access to vacant places at a municipal public school in São Gonçalo¹

Questão de mérito: o acesso às vagas remanescentes em uma escola pública municipal Gonçalense

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to present the results of a study carried out in a public school in the city of São Gonçalo in the State of Rio de Janeiro in 2019, demonstrating the assumptions underlying the action of the school principal/bureaucrat in relation to vacant places at the school and the influence of his administrative discretion on the results of education policy. From an interpretativist research perspective, we analyzed the discretionary act of the school principal/bureaucrat as a factor in addressing or consolidating educational inequalities, based on data resulting from a semi-structured interview with the school principal, reflecting on the interaction of that bureaucrat with citizens who seek the benefits of education policies and the guarantee of rights. As a result of such interaction, we found distinct forms of discretion, rooted in the microcultures of bureaucratic practice, revealing processes that both include and exclude, based on the interference of endogenous and exogenous factors emanating from the bureaucrat's relations with the community.

Keywords: Bureaucracy. Education policy. School principal/bureaucrat. Discretion. Inequality.

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RESUMO

Este estudo objetiva apresentar os resultados de uma pesquisa realizada em uma escola pública do município de São Gonçalo no Estado do Rio de Janeiro no ano de 2019, evidenciando os pressupostos da ação do gestor/burocrata diante das vagas remanescentes da escola e a influência de sua discricionariedade nos resultados da política educacional. Em uma perspectiva interpretativista de estudos, analisamos o ato discricionário do gestor/burocrata como fator de confrontação ou consolidação das desigualdades educacionais, por meio dos dados resultantes da entrevista semiestruturada com o gestor da escola, refletindo sobre a interação do burocrata com o cidadão que busca as benesses da política e a garantia de direitos. Decorrentes de tal interação, observamos formas distintas de discricionariedade, enraizadas nas microculturas da prática burocrática, expondo processos incluídos e excluídos, a partir da interferência de fatores endógenos e exógenos resultantes das relações do burocrata com a comunidade.

Palavras-chave: Burocracia. Política educacional. Gestor/burocrata. Discricionariedade. Desigualdade.

Introduction

Discussion of the action of the school principal as a subject within contradictory and conflicting contexts of decision making and who, at school, besides other functions, promotes implementation of public policies, is recurrent today among researchers who debate school administration in Brazil. This paper was developed within the scope of these discussions, aiming to present the results of a study conducted in a public school in the municipality of São Gonçalo in the State of Rio de Janeiro in 2019, highlighting the assumptions underlying the action of the school principal/bureaucrat in relation to vacant places at the school and the influence of his discretionary acts on the results of education policy.

Understanding bureaucracy in school management systems, established by groups of administrators with decision-making authority, is important in determining its significance in schools, how it is implemented, and its implications, since it is based on standardization, while schools are fundamentally structured on human and social relationships. The structuring of this parallelism is materialized in everyday school life, in which the school principal acts as the legally instituted authority to foster the dubious intersection between rational/

legal bureaucracy and the interactions of the school's subjects. On the horizon of this intervening form of management, the school looms as the focus of our research, and based on its analysis as a form of bureaucratic and social organization (LIMA, 2001) we understand public policies as being essential to the composition of more or less satisfactory scenarios for the development of educational processes.

Taking Weber's (2004) approach, the school is a formal organization of a hierarchical nature, presenting a well-defined pyramid of control, where, in theory, the school principal is at the top and the other actors are subordinated to him/her. These positions, within the structures, are occupied by members who consciously relate with each other in order to achieve a set of goals. In this bureaucratic model, schools are seen as having hierarchical authority, with chains of command between different levels, and decision making is considered rational, based on a careful evaluation of alternatives and on the choice indicated as the most appropriate by school principals, who are then recognized as being in a legitimate position of power.

The fact of schools being characterized as bureaucratic institutions is largely due to their organizational structure of rules and regulations that aim to define how their subjects move within school spaces. Thus, organizational behavior is the guiding star of schools, the characteristics of which are built through imposition of rules. From the formal point of view, in a rational bureaucratic school structure, authority is usually concentrated in high-level administration, and information flows from top to bottom, encouraging a school culture focused on authority, with rigidly supervised operational processes.

Another factor related to the permanence of rational bureaucracy in schools is the need to ensure order, rationality, accountability and stability that provide the public with the idea of organization and predictability, and compliance with rules and guidelines within a rational legal bureaucracy. However, although schools share a number of similarities in their structures and roles, they have their own identities, their conflicts, their unforeseen events, their contradictions, their public, their resources, their culture, so that each one is woven in its own unique way.

This is because school is neither a static nor a linear construction and can be examined from different aspects. Lima (2008, p. 82, our translation) considers that "the school reveals itself as a complex and multifaceted object of study, built under various theoretical influences and disciplinary traditions". Canário (2005, p. 127, our translation), in turn, points to the complexity of analyzing the school as an organization, by stating that "[...] the school as an object of study does not correspond to 'a choice', nor to a 'discovery', nor even to an 'emergence', but to a process of construction carried out by the researcher".

Therefore, the rigid formalization of the ideal of the bureaucratic school is to an extent coercive, making it impossible to understand the school institution in its complex singularity. Moreover, although aspects of rational bureaucracy are necessary, to some extent, to organize the school attended by masses, its inflexibility results in the inability to legitimize diverse perceptions of its subjects that, like it, are plural, changeable and incomplete.

In this context, the figure of the bureaucrat, represented by the school principal, is considered as a central element in the analysis of the school in its daily complexity and the effects of its operation. According to Bernado (2020, p. 80-81, our translation), “faced with the varied political and pedagogical perspectives of public educational institutions, school administration imposes itself as fundamental in the field of social and pedagogical demands”. Therefore, this study focuses on three important elements for understanding the school as an intricate bureaucratic, social and plural organization that can mitigate or accentuate educational inequalities: the school principal and his discretionary acts, policies and bureaucracy.

We have opted for an interpretivist research perspective, by means of a literature review. Pinto and Santos (2008) believe that in the interpretivist paradigm, social reality is a product of subjective and intersubjective interactions of the subjects, therefore, reality is symbolic, constructed and re-signified by these subjects. In this approach, research does not seek an absolute truth or generalizations, but rather particular perceptions about a given phenomenon. Based on this, we focus on key elements shown as categories of analysis and explore the data obtained in the field, indicating the design of this research in three sections, in addition to our final considerations and this introduction. Thus, initially we discuss bureaucracy and discretion in its complexity in the policy game. We continue the text analyzing the action of the school principal, who through discretionary acts, intentionally or not, influences the establishment or the minimization of inequalities in school. We finalize the discussion with an analysis of the data obtained about the discretionary acts of the school principal in relation to the school’s vacant places. Our research took place in a municipal public school in São Gonçalo, located in the metropolitan region of Rio de Janeiro.

Our theoretical framework approaches public policy as a space of dispute and points to the discretionary act as a fundamental element for understanding the results of implemented public policies and their relationship with the establishment of educational inequalities. At the core of this debate, as he meanders through bureaucracy the school principal/bureaucrat becomes an object of analysis for the understanding of the judgments and decisions that alter the results of policies. For Oliveira (2017, p. 6, our translation),

“policy implementation agents seem to guide their discretionary actions based on a practical-moral sense that distinguishes ‘deserving’ from ‘undeserving’ students, addressing their perceived needs differently”.

These categorizations inform the courses of action chosen by bureaucrats, and may trigger exclusionary procedures in the school context. Goodsell (1981, p. 763) states that “clients who are perceived by bureaucrats as less worthy are discriminated against in policy delivery”. Rosistolato *et al.* (2019, p. 6, our translation) believe that “the decisions made by these bureaucrats directly impact the access of citizens to public goods, and may favor or disfavor certain citizens with regard to the enjoyment of a particular public policy”.

The authors consider discretion as a practice of school principals’ actions as bureaucrats within a structure that, despite being rational-legal, takes on “patrimonialist practices and logics” (ROSISTOLATO *et al.*, 2019, p. 17, our translation). As we see it, such practices result in the stratification of people and are a prototype of the abstract level that guides bureaucrats’ assessments and their actions towards their students, and may give rise to and/or ratify processes of social injustice.

Policies, bureaucracy and discretionary actions: conflicts and inequalities

Based on studies developed by Weber (2004), some researchers have used bureaucratic theory as an analytical tool to examine organizational structure. Until the 1960s, these studies were directed toward assessing bureaucratic characteristics of organizations, including schools. Such studies pointed to a unidimensional approach to analysis, since they were based on the idea that all characteristics of bureaucracy indicated by Weber (2004) could be found in organizations. However, this approach has been widely criticized, because several of its bureaucratic aspects may overlap or present themselves in differing degrees, so that different configurations of organizational bureaucracy may be created (HALL, 1978). From then on, dimensional approaches began to be used in an attempt to understand bureaucratic organizations taking their complexity into account.

One of the changes is related to the fact that bureaucracy inevitably intersects with the political and human levels. Thus, political actors and bureaucratic agents establish a relationship in which the former represent political interests and values and the latter are subordinates, whose concern should be the efficiency of bureaucratic work, intermingled with the incidents

of daily life. In this dichotomy, an aspect that deserves to be highlighted is the evident separation between political and administrative responsibilities in the formulation and implementation of public policies. This polarity is a recurrent theme of discussion and research, established in the opposition between the Weberian bureaucratic aspect (WEBER, 2004) of competent neutrality and the actions resulting from the unpredictability of the policy implementation process, which demand the bureaucrat's decision, that is, his discretionary act.

The discussion about the discretionary acts of bureaucrats during the process of policy implementation has thus not lost relevance. Scholars continue to debate about why bureaucrats use their discretion in ways that are more or less satisfactory for their clients and how their actions affect public goals (THOMANN, 2015).

The concept of discretionary acts often comes across as a broad term that encompasses different aspects of bureaucratic practice. However, in the implementation of public policies, this concept relates to the extent of freedom that bureaucrats have to choose between possible directions when acting in the process of policy implementation (HUPE, 2013).

In top-down theories, discretionary acts can be understood as a control problem (HILL, 1993). That is, the room for interpretation granted to bureaucrats makes it increasingly likely that the original policy is incompatible with its final design. As a consequence, discretionary acts should be avoided, as they may mean that policy is not implemented in line with its strategic planning.

Conversely, bottom-up theories understand discretionary acts as important to help implementers adapt a given policy to specific and unanticipated circumstances (LIPSKY, 1980). The fact is that these agents, in their role on the front line of the process, need freedom to adapt the policy design to local conditions, available resources, number of citizens, occurrences, etc., which are the exogenous factors that interfere in the implementation process. From this perspective, frontline workers are seen as de facto policymakers and discretionary acts help them to bridge the gaps between policy formulation and implementation (HILL, 1993). Muylaert (2019) assists us in understanding the role of these bureaucrats by elucidating that

From the analysis of the actions of the implementing agents and the implementation processes of a given policy, one can identify discretionary elements that cause the expected results to be achieved, partially achieved or not achieved (MUYALERT, 2019, p. 5, our translation).

Lipsky (1980) discusses discretion in the actions of bureaucrats who, in implementing policy, interact with clients. He understands it as the freedom available to bureaucrats to determine the type, quantity, and quality of sanctions and rewards during policy implementation.

There are conflicting perceptions in the literature in relation to this fact. In the administrative realm, discretion seems necessary and, in some cases, is required for utilitarian reasons. Handler (1986), for example, argues that allowing discretion in policy implementation increases flexibility and possibilities for an organization to respond to specific problems. The argument is about the impossibility of organizations anticipating the range of variables that may arise at the time of implementation, making the use of discretion indispensable.

However, while proponents of discretion have important points to support their defense of it, supporters of greater restriction on discretionary action also have significant arguments calling for greater control of bureaucracies. Scheuerman (1994), for example, considers the degree of discretion available to agents to be an undemocratic means of implementing public policy. For the author, political control of bureaucratic discretion is a central problem for bureaucracies.

It appears to us that, in this political/bureaucratic scenario, the bureaucrat's discretionary power is marked by a monopoly over the distribution of the supply of public goods and services, which raises his control, since this form of administration does not always correspond to the desires and needs of citizens, and may be a triggering factor for processes of inequality. A question that fosters debate in the field of bureaucracy is related not only to the technical qualification of the bureaucrat, but to how to ensure that this professional fulfills the interests of the organization. However, the action of this bureaucratic agent is not the result of a linear space and is conditioned to the vicissitudes of the routine of their work. It is not a purely personal behavior, but rather stems from a series of factors linked to the conflicting context of their daily lives.

In a way, these conflicts are also due to power and domination relations within an organization, which upset the balance of the links between institutional and private interests that constitute endogenous factors, inducing and forging actions and behaviors beyond bureaucratic rationality.

According to Rothstein (2011), bureaucrats occupy a strategic position for using political authority in the distribution of state resources through the implementation of formulated policies, and thus contribute to the minimization of social inequalities. This means that the agent's performance can play a key role in attempting to equalize disparities between citizens regarding access to policy benefits, promoting somewhat more egalitarian social contexts.

We can state that bureaucracy shapes the use of political authority in the distribution of resources at the front line of policy implementation, and the more bureaucracies are directed towards private interests, the lower the chances of addressing inequalities. In the debate presented by Rothstein (2011), governments depend on policy implementation to achieve a more equitable sharing of state goods.

And it is in the midst of this complexity that the school principal/bureaucrat is invited to participate in the implementation of educational policies, as an important articulator between bureaucracies. Policy implementation, however, is not a simple task and many bureaucrats have great discretionary power over decisions, including in policy areas that lack consensus. Thus, they are actors whose actions need to be investigated when considering how political systems operate. According to Oliveira (2019, p. 4, our translation), “in order to understand the implementation and effects of a policy, it becomes necessary to consider this discretionary space of implementers at the different levels where implementation occurs”. The following section discusses the action of bureaucrats in their discretionary space.

Bureaucrats at work: the reconfiguration of public policies

Having highlighted the importance of bureaucrats in relation to analyzing public policy, it is necessary to understand its materialization in the fulfillment of the stages of a process that goes from the formulation of its strategies, when negotiations with the actors interested in a policy take place, besides including the formulation of goals, priorities and options, costs and benefits, externalities, etc.; to its implementation, i.e. the moment in which bureaucrats establish their performance, playing the role of interpreters, reconfiguring the policy, according to their understanding of the rules and their relevance. The bureaucracy described in the literature tells us about three types of bureaucrats: the high-ranking bureaucrat², the mid-level bureaucrat and the street-level bureaucrat.

Bureaucrats are public service agents, whether effective or not, found at the top, middle and lower levels of the bureaucratic hierarchy. In public policy actions, there is a bureaucrat who plays a very important role in their direct

² High-ranking bureaucrats are those who make public policies and hold high positions in the bureaucratic hierarchy.

delivery to the end-user: this is the Street-Level Bureaucrat (SLB). Lipsky (1980) defines this professional as the agent on the front line of the service. He is the bureaucrat who, in the routine of his work, establishes criteria in the gaps left by policy guidelines, acting according to what he considers most appropriate, given the resources at his disposal. As seen by Lotta (2010), SLBs resignify policy as they put it into place, by adding their values and perceptions. This intervention in policy is translated into practice, into routine and into the execution or not of the strategies originally formulated.

However, for SLBs to work on policy implementation, they interact with the bureaucrat immediately above them in the chain of command. This is the Mid-Level Bureaucrat (MLB), who is located in the mediating body between policy formulators and policy implementers. Lotta, Pires and Oliveira (2014, p. 465, our translation) call these professionals “[...] actors who perform intermediate management and administration functions (such as managers, directors, coordinators or supervisors) in public or private bureaucracies”.

In this context and based on the strategic planning that has been prepared, the role of MLBs is to provide SLBs with a direction for possible ways of executing the policy. Their role as policy “administrators” makes these public agents fundamentally important in the policymaking process for the circulation of the strategies formulated (CAVALCANTE; LOTTA, 2015). In addition, MLBs put public policies into place both in their technical and managerial aspects, acting as policy managers in order for them to be delivered to the final users (OLIVEIRA, 2009).

Theoretically, mid-level bureaucracy is not high-powered. Its role is fulfilled in aligning the demands of policy recipients with high-ranking bureaucracy. However, this differentiation does not have a strict boundary, and MLBs can move between scenarios, sometimes in contact with the high level and sometimes approaching the policy user. Thus, MLBs circulate through the extremities of the bureaucratic hierarchy and remain in an intermediate position, turning to one or the other when implementation allows or is necessary. When approaching the policy beneficiary, an MLB acts as an SLB, and his characterization within the bureaucratic system is associated with the action of the latter.

Providing services directly to citizens and the tasks under their responsibility make the relationships established in schools and experienced by school principals complex. Added to this is the fact that policies are not always intelligible or arrive at schools with logistical and structural support. Often, the policy needs to be implemented with scarce resources, unsatisfactory clarification, insufficient strategies, regardless of whether or not the bureaucrat is prepared to implement it. Despite this, school agents are tied to bureaucracy, be

it at street level or middle level, and face conflicts arising from the discretionary action of the bureaucrat, the behavior of the actors involved and interaction with the policy recipients, their values, beliefs and ideologies (LIPSKY, 1980).

These agents can contribute to the reproduction of existing inequalities in access to school. This happens in a material sense, because they are routinely involved in processes of allocative inclusion and exclusion; but it also happens symbolically, by establishing the social place of the individual (PIRES, 2019). Moreover, in a context of scarcity, these bureaucrats act making decisions about citizens' eligibility, deciding who is worthy of receiving public services. In the view of Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003), policy users are classified into social identities and, based on these identities, SLBs decide how to act upon the demands presented. Thus, their discretionary decisions are based on judgments about the deservingness of each individual. According to the authors, the measure of this judgment, arising from bureaucrats' values and ideologies, is given by comparisons they make of policy users based on the perception they have of themselves or those who are close to them. This judgment will determine the degree of involvement of the bureaucrat with the citizen, and whether or not their needs are met.

It appears to us that in this context of judgments and decisions, situational factors influence the actions of SLBs, because when analyzing personal characteristics, behavior, origin of users, and the presence or absence of bystanders, they act much more according to their values and perceptions than in relation to laws and norms.

Hupe and Buffat (2014) state that the behavior of SLBs and decisions made by them can be associated with different characteristics of policy recipients, such as racial/ethnic background and gender. That is, culturally coded assumptions about social status based on race, gender and age permeate the work of street-level agents, leading to the perception that it is not feasible to separate the attitudinal dispositions of SLBs and their interactions with users. Through these dispositions, syntheses emerge that categorize citizens, redefining their nature and place of service provision in relation to accessing policy provisions (LIPSKY, 1980). From this perspective, SLBs can reproduce inequalities, acting in different ways in relation to different citizens, classifying them, electing some, ignoring others, and thus contributing to reinforcement of broader social vulnerabilities.

We perceive the power of bureaucracy in the implementation of policies and we understand it in the context of domination and exclusion, since policy implementers are not apolitical, but active subjects in this process of interaction with public service users and public service delivery, exercising asymmetrical power relations marked by discretion in contexts of exigencies, which also translate their worldview, their values and culture. The approach taken by

Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003), given that it understands the bureaucrat as a social agent who can use moral devices to respond to citizens' demands, provides an understanding of the limits of procedure standardization, since each citizen, with his strengths and difficulties, requires a specific form of treatment.

Delivery of educational policy as a factor in the intensification of inequalities in a public school in São Gonçalo

The São Gonçalo municipal public school system has 111 schools distributed over five districts, ranging from Kindergarten to the 9th grade of Elementary Education. The school examined in this research is located in the 1st district, together with another 38 schools, in the so-called southern zone of São Gonçalo.

We also note that in 2019 the school offered the 1st level of Elementary Education (from 1st to 5th grade) comprised of seven classes. As the school caters for Kindergarten to 9th grade, whereas most of the other neighboring schools only provide the 1st level of Elementary Education, and because the school is easy to access, with good availability of buses that provide connection between several neighborhoods, it is a school much sought after by the surrounding communities and even those from places further away. In the municipality, this school unit is considered to be a transit school. Moreover, the demand for vacancies in the entire São Gonçalo Municipal Public School System is high, since for a population of 1,091,737 inhabitants (IBGE, 2020), there are only 111 teaching units. The composition of the 1st to 5th grade of the school we studied is shown in Table 1, providing a comparison with the number of students indicated in the 2018 Enrolment Ordinance:

TABLE 1 – 1st LEVEL OF ELEMENTARY EDUCATION – COMPARISON

| 1st Level of Elementary Education – Comparison | | |
|--|---|---|
| School Grade | Number of students set by the Enrolment Ordinance | Number of students enrolled at the school |
| 1 st grade | 20 | 16 |
| 1 st grade | 20 | 16 |
| 2 nd grade | 25 | 28 |
| 3 rd grade | 30 | 30 |
| 4 th grade | 30 | 28 |
| 5 th grade | 35 | 17 |
| 5 th grade | 35 | 18 |

SOURCE: Prepared by the authors based on information taken from school documents.

We found that the classes were comprised of a number of students that did not exceed the number established by the municipality’s Enrollment Ordinance, published in the Official Gazette. However, Article 15, Paragraph 1 of that document (2018) stated the following:

The number per class, as set above, may, *at the discretion of the Teaching Unit Management*, be increased by up to 20% (twenty percent), except Preschool Education classes which must obey specific legislation of the Municipal Education Council (SÃO GONÇALO, 2018, emphasis added, our translation).

We detect in the ordinance a significant space for the discretionary action of the school principal. With regard to being able to have up to 20% more students per class, it is the school principal who decides whether or not to use this percentage, and it is also up to him to establish who will be the beneficiaries of the policy. However, we can see in Table 1 that the school principal chose not to use the established percentage and some classes have a number of students below the number indicated by law. In relation to this, he argues:

Well, I prefer that classes have fewer students so that teachers can do quality teaching work. This way, they can give more individualized attention, really give more attention, work better. When the class is crowded, the teacher’s work is impaired and the class performance is not the same, you know? This way, teachers work more satisfied, they work better.

It is important to consider that the school principal we studied has a degree in Pedagogy and has been working in the Municipal Education Network for twenty-seven years. Six years ago, he was appointed head of the school following political indication. However, he had already worked at the school for eleven years as a teacher and Pedagogical Coordinator, and was the principal of two other schools: one for two years and the other for eight years.

When we analyze his speech and his choice not to meet the needs of students who are waiting for a vacancy, we realize that this right has been denied. We do not intend to state that, given that a student is not able occupy a vacant place at the school they sought, they will not have the opportunity to attend another public school; however, we understand that the action of the school principal/bureaucrat exceeds the limits of discretion and denies children vacancies that the school has available. This is, in our view, a factor that intensifies inequalities, since bureaucrats, in their interaction with citizens and in contexts of contingencies, may act so as not to treat everyone equally and indistinctly, but rather respond to citizens according to the values attributed to them, as deserving or unworthy of the policies (MAYNARDY-MOODY; MUSHENO, 2003).

Dubois (2013) states that interpretation, adaptation and bureaucratic zeal result from the dispute between the logics of a situation (detachment versus empathy, tension versus cooperation, etc.) and conformity with the institution's rules. This dual aspect is observed by Lipsky (1980), when analyzing the relationship between school principals/bureaucrats and citizens dependent on that logic, which the principal at the school we studied uses to define the final limits and establish policy.

Thus, bureaucracy may play contradictory roles in the implementation of policy. The decision of the school principal reflects this contradiction, since, by choosing to provide, in theory, better working conditions for teachers, by reducing the number of students in the classroom, he denies the possibility of children and adolescents being admitted to the school. One of the consequences of the dichotomous tension between the choice of delivering or not delivering the basic right to education can reinforce the implication of a negative affirmation, reproducing a cycle of stigma and social disqualification of the subjects who, in the case of a school, are students and their families, who seek this state facility in search of participating in educational public policies designed to fight inequalities.

The school principal appears to establish priorities that, despite being a natural and even necessary element in the definition of the political process, when hued with subjective conceptions of values and judgments, can become a device to ratify processes of exclusion in the school context. From this perspective, the

definition of priorities is not simply a matter of bureaucratic hierarchy imposed in a top-down perspective, but is a complex process involving the categorization of subjects, who seek a position in the interface of contacts and relationships with the school principal who, by acting in street-level bureaucracy, defines the stances, benefits and beneficiaries of the policy.

Another important element surrounding the decision about who should benefit from the percentage of students per class, relates to the prevalence of very subjective criteria and values expressed by the action of the school principal (MLB). In this regard, the school principal informs us that *“there is a waiting list for vacancies, but we give preference to those who already have children at this school and to parents/guardians who can prove that they work outside the home”*. In this context, we can see that underlying the decision of the school principal is his conception of school, since when prioritizing the provision of places to families who have a job on the labor market, he demonstrates his welfarist vision of education, through his understanding that families who have not yet obtained the consolidation of their right to employment do not deserve to be classified on the same scale of priorities. In other words, there is an overlapping of oppressions, because the family that is unemployed and experiences the privations resulting from this is also denied access to school, thus significantly reinforcing the demarcations of exclusion of certain subjects.

Lipsky (1980) discusses the difficulty of evaluating the fairness of treatment of citizens by frontline policy implementers and cites two main factors as the cause of this difficulty. The first factor is related to the ambiguity of goals, an immanent characteristic of street-level bureaucracy, affecting both individual performance and strategic planning; the second has to do with preferences for certain subjects or social groups, representing a behavioral deviation that reveals meritocracy. In this sense, Oliveira (2017, p. 6, our translation) highlights that agents who implement policies *“appear to guide their discretionary actions based on a practical-moral sense that distinguishes ‘deserving’ from ‘undeserving’ students by addressing their perceived needs in a differentiated manner”*.

In view of this, we notice imprecise rules for decision making regarding the 20% available for use. The principal takes on the guise of someone concerned about the situation presented by parents/guardians when they look for a place at the school. However, his decision is based on the *“heat of the moment”*, without establishing rules. As he reveals:

Sometimes parents come here and tell very moving stories. Some have moved away from somewhere else because of drug trafficking and need a

place at school. There are mothers running away from violent husbands. At other times, it is the child himself who was getting involved in drug trafficking and the family had to move. And then we look on the human side and think about all this to give them a place at school. These are such complicated family situations! It is even difficult to make a decision, because we don't have a place for everyone, you know?

In this case, because of his direct involvement with parents/guardians deprived of the benefits of policy, the school principal's action takes place as street-level bureaucracy. In this way, public policy is delivered to the community: by establishing a certain proximity between the bureaucrat and the policy user, at the front line of the process. It is a discretionary act (LOTTA, 2010), interspersed with value judgments and criteria established by the bureaucrat, acting in the gaps left by the policy guidelines, heightening or mitigating contexts of inequality, because the benefit of the policy does not reach everyone.

Another relevant factor in the school principal's discretionary act regarding vacant places at school stands out in the following speech:

We don't take back unruly students who have left this school. They already had their opportunity here and didn't take it, right? And it is also out of respect for the teachers. And there are also many children wanting to study, I mean, really study and needing to.

Contradiction is a significant mark in the school principal's speech. He is concerned about children who “*want and need to study*”, but, at the same time, does not make vacant places available to the community. Also standing out is the categorization of subjects deserving his respect, on behalf of whom he does not accept “*unruly*” students back at school. This action impacts on inequalities in a symbolic way, since his judgment generates categorizations. Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003) state that in the case of citizens deemed worthy of policy, bureaucrats are determined to invest their time and disregard formal rules with the intention of meeting the needs of these citizens.

Oliveira (2017) considers that bureaucracy submits citizens to categories, making it easier to decide how and to whom to direct the benefits of policies, by separating the “*deserving*” from the “*unworthy*”. Consequently, bureaucracies favor some types of citizens over others, in a cycle of reproduction of inequalities evident in society.

In this situation, we detect institutionalized inequality in the practice of bureaucrats, in which the criterion of policy is based on the judgment of merit arising from subjectivity and hued by moral and evaluative judgment of individuals who seek state facilities, so that there is judgment of merit or demerit in relation to inclusion in actions to face inequalities, through delivery of policy benefits. However, the nature of the judgment of deserving they make potentiates and naturalizes institutionalization of inequality, disqualifying social subjects considered undeserving of the benefit.

Maynard-Moody & Musheno (2003) note that street-level agents are more inclined to serve in a differentiated manner citizens who cooperate, while a strictly bureaucratic approach may be used to discipline recalcitrant citizens. The authors analyze street-level bureaucracy from the agency and pragmatic improvisational capacity of SLBs to make judgments about individuals and develop solutions to problems. According to them, “decisions and actions at the street level are guided less by rules, training or procedures and more by beliefs and norms, especially beliefs and norms about what is or is not fair” (MAYNARD-MOODY; MUSHENO, 2003, p. 6). They also address how policy implementation agents categorize and judge users and can thereby reduce or reproduce inequalities.

Final considerations

Analysis of the inequalities explicit in the implementation of public policies in school institutions as seen through the lens of bureaucratic representation allows us to see the effects that discretionary acts of bureaucrats who implement public policies can cause. Through this lens, inequalities acquire symbolic effects and take on dimensions in decision making, since bureaucrats carry the responsibility of representing and implementing the public interest.

Since bureaucrats are the face of the State as expressed to the citizen, we can say that the high-ranking public sector participates in this reproduction of inequalities, either by a passive position or by formulating policies far removed from the real conditions presented by the demands of everyday school life. In fact, when the formulation of public policy excludes the collaboration of other bureaucratic levels and disregards the perceptions of its users, the possibility of the emergence of gaps is consolidated and increases the need for discretionary action by the bureaucrat.

Therefore, the omission of the State, here called “passive dimension”, or its disregard of the other levels, in opting for top-down policy implementation, contributes to processes of deepening inequality being perpetuated by bureaucracy. On the other hand, the “active dimension” of this bureaucratic representation of policy implementation agents is fundamental for understanding their behavior that, at the end of the implementation process, materializes state power in everyday life, producing distributive effects, impacting the lives of students and their families. And, despite the agents’ responsibility for managing conflicts in the public space, promoting justice, they are guided by very broad or imprecise rules, or by the scarcity of resources, which can lead to injustices and further consolidate inequalities.

The great challenge surrounding the performance of bureaucrats, whether mid-level or street-level, is that individualized and subjective processes interfere with the perception of the situations presented in everyday life, and can generate meritocratic bureaucracies.

The practice of these subjects linked to their public function is a catalyst for the way in which the State has materialized itself in schools in terms of addressing educational inequalities. Therefore, it is important to reflect in order to understand how the work of these agents is configured, moving either towards reproduction of historical stigmas or the attempt to break with them in dealing with social injustices and how the resignifications and tensions involved in their daily practice do or do not contribute to intensification of inequalities in schools.

We believe that these bureaucrats establish consensus through formal assumptions presented to them and dissensions evoked in the practice of their work at the front line of the process. This perception is a guide to the institutionalized way of establishing inequalities at school. In this sense, what we may call antagonism or tension between the managerial levels of the policy is constituted, because the guidance established at the top is not always translated into what is executed in the practice of bureaucrats.

Therefore, we note that the behavior of these agents is multidetermined by factors that influence, to a greater or lesser extent, their action in the implementation process, either by provoking conflicts and tensions over their decisions, or converging to strengthen practices with the potential to cause processes of social injustice.

We conclude by ratifying our understanding of the school principal/bureaucrat as mobilizing a certain power in his interactions with the school’s subjects, as he operates in a system that constrains him to make decisions about resource allocation and policy direction, often in the face of directive contingencies and imprecisions.

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