

HIGH PRESSURE SCHOOL REFORM IN BRAZIL: THE CASE OF “THE DIFFICULT SCHOOLS”

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DO BRAZILIAN AUTHORITIES HAVE AN INTEREST IN SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT? IS THE CONNECTION BETWEEN SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT (a process) AND SCHOOL EFFECTIVENESS (a status) UNIVERSALLY UNDERSTOOD? WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS AND THE RISKS OF A PARTNESHIP OF BRAZILIAN GOVERNMENTAL AND NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF EDUCATIONAL PROJECTS?

This is not a success story about school improvement, but a story of failure and disillusionment. The case demonstrates at the one side that bringing about change is doable in relatively short time, but at the other that schools and educators may pay a high price as they are abandoned by the system. However, it also is a tool for learning from mistakes made and it helps to understand why it still hurts.

If one believes that there is no such thing as ONE reality, or no Truth with a capital T, then it will be easy to understand the reason of one same experience becoming many different stories told by different partners. The intention here is not to give a perfect account of what happened, which would be impossible, but to understand how different actors can interact and truly see the situation created by the partnership and the decisions made in very different ways. By exploring this topic, the authors hope to shed light on certain aspects of how organizations behave and the challenges they face, that need to be addressed.

This is a story of cooperation between three very different organizations. On one side, there is a Governmental Organization: a State Department of Education, with a huge structure to oversee 7 thousand schools, 6 million students, more than 200 thousand teachers and other state

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workers. This is a bureaucratic, heavy and highly hierarchical organization, involving a budget of hundreds of thousands of dollars. As a large machine, it is, similar to the Titanic, slow in making decisions and changing course in any direction.

On the other side, there is CECIP – Centro de Criação de Imagem Popular, a small not-for-profit organization (NGO) specialized in producing educational materials, and developing processes of education with teens, school leaders and community leaders. This organization is now doing its baby steps into being an education change facilitator agency. As a matter of fact, the first crew of educational change facilitators is in its first year of training. It has, nevertheless, conceived and successfully executed some very challenging projects already.

The third component involved is APS – Algemeen Pedagogisch Studiecentrum, a Dutch Study Center with large experience in supporting educational change in different countries, all over the world. The Dutch NGO had previously worked with CECIP, and they had done great work together, being currently involved in several projects.

The case we will present was written in the NGOs perspective. It starts in the beginning of this new century, at the end of a problematic external evaluation process that publicly ranked all the schools in the whole State, singling out 180 of them in which the students were learning less. Labeled as “difficult schools”, they felt this public exposure as a humiliation. The Secretary of Education, who from previous experiences knew and valued the work of both the Dutch NGO and the Brazilian NGO, called them and presented them with a challenge: would they be able, in one school year³, to support educators in such way that they became able to improve the students’ scores up to 70%? The timeframe was tight, if not totally unrealistic: between December and February the partners had to conceive, write, get approval and even start the implementation of the project.

The conditions were specially challenging: first of all, CECIP was located in another state at 400 km from where the project’s actions were going to be. This meant going back and forth, but it also could raise jealousy amongst the State Education Secretariat’s education specialists: why invite “strangers” – weren’t there competent enough people among them? Also it is noteworthy that a traditional rivalry between these two states always plays a role.

The geographic extension of the project was also a challenge: the 180 schools were geographically spread all over a state roughly the size of Oregon, but with a population of more than 37,000 000 (larger than California’s).

Why would a small organization like CECIP even accept the challenge? First and foremost, there was the possibility of making a difference in the quality of education for about 200 000 children, and promote learning and professional development for 700 teachers. That is part of the Brazilian NGO mission and vision. There was also a chance to coordinate a project in a scale much larger than the ones it had been doing in its 15 years of existence. It was a concrete chance to accomplish the dream of getting the experience to scale. The dream to test its wings.

³ The school year in Brazil goes from early February till mid-December (winter break in July)

For APS the new project represented the opportunity of, again, working with Brazilian educators and demonstrating the power of applying to local settings up-to-date research-based knowledge.

Pause for a flash back

In the middle of the nineties, the same Secretary of Education who presented to CECIP and APS the challenge of the “Difficult Schools” had been chosen to carry out an educational reform that proposed a set of radical actions to change the administration and organization of public schools in the State. These changes should be able to resolve the problem of drop out and student failure and lead to a new model of school, “the school for success”. The changes included reform of the administrative structure, management decentralization and pedagogical measures such as putting more educative materials in classrooms, organization of thematic classrooms for students from 5th grade on and more investment in human’s resources professional development. The Secretary of Education, who led this reform process- a committed, enthusiastic and competent educator- decided to hire the services of Dutch educators from APS - a fully developed system to plan and conduct educational change in The Netherlands - to assist her in this task.

It is important to notice that at that time the concept of “facilitating educational changes” as many others related to school improvement, were not well established in Brazil. Even if in the late eighties the results of researches on school effectiveness were largely disseminated at the Universities and served as parameters for the Ministry of Education in its quest for quality, there was no information available in Portuguese language about basic principles of educational change that emerged from later investigations. Authors such as Michael Fullan, for instance, were to be translated to Portuguese only in the mid-nineties. In Brazil one tended then (and often still does) to focus on the desired outcomes and results, not on the often difficult and time consuming process towards these.

From February to November, 700 professionals from 300 schools were involved in the experimentation of proposals and actions, having participated of two great seminars, one in the beginning and one in the end of the process- and of two regional workshops in-between. In the process educators were invited to understand and apply new concepts such as School Vision and Mission, SMART planning and also concepts that existed only in theory, such as collaboration and teamwork. Abilities that are essential in the building of collaborative groups, such as listening, advocating and enquiring, adopting a nonjudgmental attitude, started to be exercised.

Even within a reduced timeframe, the Project’s results were very encouraging. The practice of prioritizing the school’s problems and solving them through an strategic planning approach contributed to make school teams more trustful in their capacity to transform aspects of the school reality using the available resources. 80% of the problems that were identified were solved in three months, such as improving groups of student’s abilities in Mathematics, recovering the school library, and many others.

A process of professional learning that could result in more effective schools had been initiated. There were indicators that this professional learning was stronger amongst principals,

weaker amongst supervisors and technical assistants and almost inexistent amongst Regional Educational Authorities, the most driven by political and not by professional/educational motives.

In a letter to APS, the Secretary of Education evaluated the initiative when she wrote: “The expertise of your organization (...) has made of this project an example for other Brazilian initiatives focusing on the improvement of schools.” However, the Department of Education Managing Team (composed by the Heads of Pedagogic Department, Department responsible for the Metropolitan Area schools, Department responsible for the Hinterland schools, Communication Department, Financial Department) decided not to go on with it.

The Secretary of Education, as the Managing Team’s leader, could not impose her will to her other politically powerful colleagues. The reasons of this political obstruction remained obscure. In the evaluation presented to the Secretariat in November, APS team identified a problem of “contaminated communication” affecting all levels of the system. To invest in improving the horizontal and vertical communication between these levels (schools, Administrative School’s Regions, Department of Education) making possible collaboration, could have been crucial for the effectiveness of the Secretariat’s education reform.

Resuming the “Difficult Schools” case

Nonetheless, four years after the termination of “Facilitating Educational Changes” Project, the same Secretary of Education invites NGOs APS and CECIP to give support to a new school improvement process. As told before, this time the challenge was to support the 180 schools (out of 7000) that had demonstrated, in the Student’s External Evaluation, the greatest difficulty in teaching the students basic competencies in Language and Math.

After the decision to go ahead was made by all partners, CECIP and APS planned together a strategy based on what research tells that is effective – get new information to the teachers, encourage them to be bold and try new ideas, give them opportunities to practice in a safe environment, one that allows for mistakes in order to learn.

In two weeks CECIP/APS planned activities for the next 50 weeks for the following sectors: management team, support team – formed by 12 CECIP’s facilitators and 50 teacher’s coaches, who would visit schools once a week; school leaders –in cooperation with support team; teachers (in cooperation with support team); monitoring area; communication system; project organization and administration.

The project would provide a strong professional support system, at least during this first year of implementation. It included:

- Train teacher’s coaches to act in schools and support principals
- Train principals in leadership skills to support teachers in their efforts to continuously improve

- Train teachers to improve classroom management and to apply strategies that would allow as many students as possible to pass the external evaluation's tests (Portuguese Language)
- Invite principals and teachers to design and put in practice pedagogical experiments with constant professional dialogue.

But crucial from the start was that APS and CECIP constructed this support system on critical values. In order to bring about the changes the Department of Education wanted CECIP/APS should trust the teachers and principals in their professional abilities, we should time after time seek opportunities for professional learning and should build and celebrate success whenever and wherever possible. The "Difficult Schools" were basically a demoralized lot – this was to be a unique opportunity to boost their self-esteem.

Initially CECIP and APS proposed to the Department of Education to train a number of school supervisors to act as teacher's coaches towards the participating schools. This suggestion was not accepted, because supervisors were mostly seen as very attached to the controlling dimension of their role and as not easy adopters of a coaching attitude. To solve the situation, 50 professionals (educators) not belonging to the Education Secretariat's *cadre* were recruited and trained to act as *coaches* of the professional learning that would be happening in the schools. Later we will see the consequences of this compliance with the Secretariat's request.

CECIP trained the facilitators in its headquarters, and sent them off to hold the first seminar in March, – where they would present the project to 180 principals and 180 pedagogical coordinators who would choose if they wanted to join it or not. This was an important principle of the project: participating in it had to be a *choice* – it could not be *mandated*. The contribution of APS in preparing the facilitators and in leading some of the sessions was crucial for the success of the seminar. CECIP was experimenting what it was like trying a new approach while being supported – APS was able to create that "safe environment" where CECIP could learn – and then CECIP was able to make the principals feel the same way.

With only one exception, all school leaders decided to accept the challenge of, in nine months, initiate with volunteer teachers actions to strengthen collaboration and coherence in the schools, aiming to respond to basic psychological needs of learners (to belong, to feel respected, competent and autonomous), thus improving interactions students X students, students X teachers and school X community students, with impact on reading/writing skills, and diminution of taxes of school failure and abandonment.

The resolve to join the project was not taken easily. Many participants did not trust the Secretariat, did not agree with the External Evaluation proceedings and doubt of the Secretariat's commitment to really make the project happen. Even so, at the end of the day, they preferred to join the project.

After the first meeting in March with principals and coordinators, the trained *teacher coaches* visited all schools to gain entrance and to make a first diagnosis of the situation, building a relationship of trust between them and each school principal, as the foundation of all the learning that would follow.

The April seminar summoned not only school leaders but also two teachers that in each school volunteered to put the project in practice in their classrooms.

The following specific contents were introduced in this seminar:

1- Professional Improvement: teachers started to learn how to think and interact together, an essential condition to work collaboratively in groups, to create learning organizations.

2- Competence in Reading: teachers started to learn new ways to develop their student's reading competencies and to enlarge their vocabulary. With these objectives in mind, they designed small "pedagogic experiments" to be put into practice in their classrooms, targeting the improvement of the classroom climate as well as the students' reading competency.

3- Adaptive Instruction: teachers and school leaders started to learn how to put into practice the basic principles of a *constructivist* approach to promote learning.

4- Leadership: Principals and coordinators started to learn how to motivate and inspire their teams, to create a collaborative climate with a coherent pedagogical approach focusing on students learning. They've made action plans drafts in order to improve a selected aspect of their practice, focusing the strengthening of teamwork, the support to docent's learning and building of coherence in the group.

The professional learning that started during the Seminar was to carry on at the school, where the dialogue would continue, with assistance of the 50 teacher's coaches, each of them in charge of 3 to 4 schools, visiting them at least once a week. An atmosphere of enthusiasm and motivation could be felt. It was possible to see sparkles of enthusiasm in the educator's eyes. The interactive format of the Seminars made a deep contrast with the regular in service training activities, mostly focusing only on "delivering information".

Teachers, principals and pedagogical coordinators left the April Seminar having designed in a collective way small "experiments" to improve collaboration in the team, reinforcing links with the community, creating a culture that welcomes children (principals/coordinators), getting the best out the students and help them succeed (teachers). In June, a new meeting would happen, in which school leaders and teachers would have the opportunity to present and reflect on their "experiments of change". New actions would be planned and implemented till the end of the year, when the students would be tested to demonstrate their growth in reading skills.

However, under the surface, political events were boiling up and preparing to explode and destroy the improvement process. More than a thousand educators would wait in vain for the June Seminar. Lets examine this ebullition.

The political factor

A few days before the first seminar (March), the Secretary of Education that had invited CECIP and APS announced that she was stepping down. She had a verbal agreement with her

successor, who gave her assurances that the project would be continued. In the meantime, all schools were being called by the Department of Education to be present on the seminar. CECIP went ahead on good faith that things were progressing. A representative from the Department of Education opened the event, assuring the school leaders that this project was a response to the needs that were identified, that as schools that needed the most improvement, they also were going to get the best professional development available. When at the end of the event, 99% of the schools decided to adopt the project, CECIP and APS considered this a success beyond their expectations.

After the Secretary of Education left the office, however, it sounded that it was going to be a more complex process than CECIP and APS had anticipated. Her successor, a person of the same political party, turned out to have different political and educational priorities and announced all projects would be re-evaluated in view of new priorities. Political adversaries of the former Secretary inside the Department of Education gained strength. The threat of non-continuity floated in the air. Several meetings were scheduled with the new Secretary staff. Week after week CECIP was told that the following week it would have an official answer, and was informally assured that the project wouldn't stop. The show must go on – and so did CECIP and APS

At the same time supervisors started to show discontentment with the presence of teacher's coaches ("outsiders") visiting "their" schools.

It was already time for the second seminar (April), this time with 700 teachers, coming from all 179 schools, from all around the State. At this point, CECIP had hired not only the facilitators, but also the 50 teacher's coaches, some already starting to visit the schools once a week, as planned. They were trained by the project leader to perform a very specific job, and met with her once a week to go over the challenges they faced. Those professionals were essential to the project's success. The April seminar took place as planned—only with a lot of tension.

The new Secretary of Education didn't send anybody for the opening, to make it official. Feeling that the situation was getting very complicated indeed, on the second day of the seminar, CECIP described to the teacher's coaches the gloomy scenario, so they could make the decisions they had to make in an informed way (some were considering asking for a unpaid leave in another job in order to dedicate themselves entirely to the project, some were planning to move from their original cities to a place closer to the school they were responsible for, some other decided to buy a better car counting on the money she was going to get from the project). Even knowing the reality of the situation, all but two decided to go ahead with the project, saying that they believed so strongly in the ideas and fundamentals of the project – for some the highlight of their careers in education – that it was worth the risk.

After the April Seminar, all teacher's coaches started visiting the schools and reporting to the Project leader. Indicators that the new Secretary of Education was not supporting the project became stronger when the Seminar scheduled for June was suspended and transferred to August. And the resources to pay for the Project's teamwork were not deposited.

Unofficially, CECIP's team got the news that there was a movement against the project from the supervisors, who felt somehow stripped from their authority. Their argument was that the state was misusing the state's funds, duplicating payments, since they were paying external teacher's coaches to do their jobs. CECIP organized a meeting with them to clarify the situation – but at that point communication had become impossible. They had closed their position way before entering the meeting room. In July the Supervisors Union sent the new Secretary a letter advocating the Project's termination.

The announced death of a school improvement/effectiveness project

While the Department of Education's new leaders were discussing if and when the project would be stopped, the "Difficult Schools" were enthusiastically experimenting and putting into practice new educational concepts. Four months after the project's beginning, one school leader reported:

"Before (the project), the teachers were working as individuals. Now, there is an atmosphere of cooperation in the team, and they are working to improve the school's reputation in the community. We designed projects in partnership with the Gym Academies, Theater Courses and radio stations. The teachers adopted the strategy of systematically inviting students to add new words to their vocabulary. Teachers of all disciplines are encouraging students to use dictionaries in the classroom, and each classroom is building its own dictionary. The students choose the words and suggest the format of the dictionary. Each letter of the vocabulary has an illustration. Teachers are discovering how creative their students are and they are amazed with it. Teachers are curious and are implementing new ways of teaching. They developed more confidence in their own actions and have a higher expectation of success. The students learned to ask interesting questions. Almost all are progressing with better interactions between teacher and students"

By the 24th week into the project, CECIP got the word that it had been suspended. CECIP immediately communicated the news to the supporters and put a hold in all activities. It tried to negotiate with the new Executive Head of the Secretary, to no avail.

In August, the Education Secretariat communicates officially that the Project "Success and Learning in schools" was being suspended due to "changes in the administration priorities and excess of professional development in the second semester".

With no possibility of a new face-to-face interaction, CECIP said good-bye to all participants through a letter that was delivered by the teacher's coaches to the schools they were responsible for.

What happened next is even more dramatic – like in a Kafka plot, CECIP became the villain – the one who acted in good faith and failed to see the political struggle involved and its impact on the project. The teacher's coaches, whose payments were delayed, hired a lawyer and started recording all conversations they had with CECIP. Instead of directing their frustration

toward the Department of Education, they directed it against CECIP. After a series of unbearable meetings with the Education authorities, CECIP finally managed to be paid for the work done, enough to face its obligations towards all those involved in the project. Advised by its lawyer, CECIP settled each case, having everyone sign documents exempting the NGO from further prosecution. What had begun with a dream, hope and trust ended up almost in court, with feelings of anger and betrayal.

In an official letter to the Project Leader, that was distributed to the teacher's coaches, APS-International representative wrote the project's epitaph:

“It is sad to see again how problems of bureaucratic and administrative nature can block any trial to improve the operating conditions of teachers and students. (...) We felt that in the end facilitators, teacher's coaches and schools started to see it was possible to initiate a process in which teachers and students appreciate cooperation, in which they try by all means to operate in a trust basis, in which people encourage each other to demonstrate pride, in which the seeds of a feeling of belonging and direction have the chance to grow.

We might not have succeeded in realizing the project as designed, but you have demonstrated great courage in joining in and by doing so you proved that it is possible to mobilize people with real interest in improving schools. (...) I am sure that at the end of the day the schools, the teachers and the students are again the victims. They must be feeling in an intense way abandoned by the System- and for good reasons, I must say”.

The question for CECIP and APS was from that moment on, how to overcome the mourning for the end of so many hopes and to transform in learning the indignation in face of the disrespectful way in which the 179 schools, their leaderships, teachers and students were treated. To write this paper was a way to do so. If the questions it raises are collectively discussed, and new insights arise on how to avoid the same mistakes be repeated, then the project “Success and learning” will not have died in vain. That's why we invite our colleagues to consider the reflections we make here and then give us feedback, presenting your own analysis of the problem and how it would have been better tackled.

3- Reflecting on the Experience: our conclusions and questions, what was learned

“Adults do not learn from experience, but from reflecting on the experience ”

(Robert Garmstrom & Bruce Wellman, *The Adaptive School*, 1999).

In our view, the saddest thing in this process is that schools were once more invited to improve and then let down. Public resources were invested in what could have been a great experience for the schools, and it was discontinued before any real evidence of success or failure could ever been found. The teacher's coaches had early results, and wrote reports on actions that were promising because schools were willing to continue to invest time and energy. One supporter decided to keep true to her word and kept visiting the schools, even as the project was cancelled, and got wonderful results with it. But the new Secretary had already proposed yet

another plan aligned with his own ideas. Just another example of discontinued administration, unfortunately so common in education in Brazil.

What we see now, looking back at this process is on one side the madness of it – Goliath and David measuring forces. We see also some of what Senge (2000) called the organization archetypes: patterns that repeat themselves in organizations, especially the “solution that fails” and “treating the symptoms”. Many times, we applied “quick fixes” instead of addressing the real problem. And by doing that, we got into much larger troubles. An example of this was our acceptance of the exclusion of the supervisors from the process, without questioning it, or the assumptions this exclusion was based on.

Not all supervisors have a controlling authoritarian profile. APS staff knew from previous experiences with the Secretariat that amongst the supervisors there were many who adopted or tried to adopt a supportive approach toward the schools they were responsible for. It even had met with a representation of the Board of the Supervisors Union to discuss a constructive role of supervisors in future improvement processes. Would the events developed in the same way if the 50 teacher’s coaches were supervisors? Maybe not. Should we spend more time and energy in discussing the issue to find a better solution? Absolutely.

CECIP and APS started the project with the assumption that not only the Secretary of Education but also the Department of Education’s Managing Team wanted the project and believed in its principles. However there was no opportunity for this Management Team to open their mental models about what they understood by professional learning, school effectiveness, and school improvement. Should CECIP/APS have advocated for the need of an initial workshop with the Secretariat’s top managing team? With hindsight: definitely.

We believe that if a Department of Education wants to transform schools in learning organizations, the Department itself must aim to become a learning organization. The Department of Education’s leaders should model the way the school leaders deal with their teams. Trust schools, trust educators, make them feel respected, competent and belonging is a way to make schools able to act in the same way toward teachers, students, families. Since CECIP and APS work with schools in a way that mirrors these basic values, we have assumed that the other partner (the Education Secretariat) would operate in the same manner. We have learned the hard way that it may do so in many situations, but if things come to worst, the bureaucracy will quite mercilessly make sure that “they” are not to blame. It may force organizations like CECIP and APS to negotiate very precise contracts that will cover all possible risks, but also may stifle the dynamics so essential in school improvement. And also make the projects more expensive to manage.

How can the Department of Education overcome the communication difficulties already identified in the first joint project with APS? The effective articulation and communication between all levels of the educational system would be basic in supporting school teams so they can act in an autonomous way. From the Dutch perspective it is often amazing to see how little communication there is between the various levels in the system – teachers operate assuming they know the motives and ambitions of principals, principals assume they know the motives and ambitions of local authorities and supervisors, local authorities assume they know about the state

authorities and in the State Government all these assumptions come together. In the past decades statistical data collection and analysis have improved tremendously, especially in Brazilian Southeast region. But very few people discuss why and how the data may be interpreted in such a different way by, let's say, principals or local authorities.

Is it possible for a Brazilian Department of Education not to make politics the priority and to become a trustworthy organization, were the three essential renewal components mentioned by Calabrese (2002) are present– civility, respect and dialogue?

In Brazil (and probably in other countries as well) many Education Authorities still believe that adults learn only by taking in information. However, as Calabrese (2002) stated “Learning is not instantaneous. It is a process of taking in information, processing the information, integrating the information, and practicing with the new information. There is a distinct difference between learning and performance”. Citing Good and Brophy (1997): “Learning refers to information processing, sense making ... Performance refers to the demonstration of such knowledge or skill after it has been acquired.”

Education Authorities will only change their original belief if they also have an opportunity to learn. Do most Brazilian Secretaries of Education, Regional authorities, superintendents, see themselves as lifelong learners, or do they think that only others must learn?

There are indicators that both Facilitating Changes Project and the Success and Adaptability Project may have contributed to the Education Secretariat's learning. One example: when presented for the first time to educators, the concept of school mission was very difficult to understand. Most educators had who always defended a lay school, strongly rejected the religious connotation of the word mission. Today most educators of educators in the Secretariat urge schools to define in a collaborative way their vision and mission. Also the format of the institutional teacher's training is becoming more interactive, and practice focused.

In Brazil the struggle to reach Quality Education for All - in a very slow and gradual way – starts to be informed by knowledge about the requirements for school change. We hope that future innovations will not be introduced top down in the educational system anymore with the assumption that guidelines and pedagogical resources will automatically be translated in better teaching-learning practices. We also believe that in the future the “killing” of lively and promising education processes/proposals motivated by political reasons will be abhorred and proscribed.

In the meantime Brazilians must discover how to deal with the contradiction between the interest educational leaders may have in starting processes of education improvement and their necessity to indulge to political impulses that interrupt and dismiss these processes.

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