

**POLICY IMPLEMENTATION AS A LOCUS FOR THE REPRODUCTION OF  
INEQUALITIES: DELVING INTO RIO DE JANEIRO'S ACCELERATED  
LEARNING POLICY**

***IMPLEMENTAÇÃO DE POLÍTICAS COMO ESPAÇO DE (RE)PRODUÇÃO DE  
DESIGUALDADES: INVESTIGANDO A POLÍTICA DE CORREÇÃO DE FLUXO NO  
RIO DE JANEIRO<sup>1</sup>***

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DESIGUALDADES: INVESTIGANDO LA POLÍTICA DE CORRECCIÓN DE FLUJO  
EN RIO DE JANEIRO***

Marina MEIRA<sup>2</sup>  
Maria de Fátima Magalhães de LIMA<sup>3</sup>  
João Carlos GINO<sup>4</sup>

**ABSTRACT:** By articulating the results of two research projects focused on the same object, though in different levels, the present article analyzes key aspects of the implementation of an accelerated learning policy for overage students in Rio de Janeiro's public school system, between 2009 and 2014. It also discusses the processes of categorization and discretionary judgement exercised by school agents on the students targeted by the policy in a particular school context. By combining a quantitative and qualitative approach and turning to contributions from the fields of Political Science and Public Administration (LIPSKY, 1980; MAYNARD-MOODY; MUSHENO, 2003; LOTTA, 2019), we conclude that few overage students were served by the policy, while others who were not part of its target groups were granted access to its benefits. We also discuss how school principals and teachers exercise discretion as to which students are assigned to special classes at the local level.

**KEYWORDS:** Accelerated learning. Discretion. Policy implementation. Inequality.

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<sup>1</sup> We thank the Network of Studies on Implementation of Public Educational Policies (REIPPE), with the collaboration of Itaú Social, for the financial support for the translations of this article into English and Spanish.

<sup>2</sup> Pontifical Catholic University (PUC), Rio de Janeiro – RJ – Brazil. Doctoral student of the Graduate Program in Education. Member of the Network of Studies on the Implementation of Educational Public Policies (REIPPE). Teacher at Colégio Pedro II (CP2), Rio de Janeiro. ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5713-2384>. E-mail: [marina.meiraoliveira@gmail.com](mailto:marina.meiraoliveira@gmail.com)

<sup>3</sup> Pontifical Catholic University (PUC), Rio de Janeiro – RJ – Brazil. Doctorate in Education. Member of the Network of Studies on the Implementation of Educational Public Policies (REIPPE). Technical Manager of CAO Education of the Public Ministry of the State of Rio de Janeiro. ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7829-8383>. E-mail: [13fatimamlima@gmail.com](mailto:13fatimamlima@gmail.com)

<sup>4</sup> Pontifical Catholic University (PUC), Rio de Janeiro – RJ – Brazil. Doctoral student of the Graduate Program in Education. Professor at the Municipal Secretary of Education of Rio de Janeiro (SME-Rio). ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7452-0098>. E-mail: [joao.gino87@gmail.com](mailto:joao.gino87@gmail.com)

**RESUMO:** O artigo analisa aspectos da implementação da política de correção de fluxo desenvolvida na rede pública municipal do Rio de Janeiro entre 2009 e 2014, e discute as práticas de categorização e julgamento realizadas sobre seus usuários. Além de análise documental, trabalhamos com dados quantitativos para compreender os perfis e as trajetórias dos estudantes atendidos. Em seguida, selecionamos uma escola para estudo de caso e conduzimos entrevistas com 32 membros da comunidade. Destacamos o perfil de maior vulnerabilidade social dos alunos inseridos em turmas de correção de fluxo e a baixa cobertura da política, o que contrasta com o atendimento a alunos sem o perfil previsto. Discutimos, ainda, o exercício da discricionariedade dos agentes no encaminhamento desses alunos para as chamadas “turmas de projeto”. Observamos que julgamentos morais impactaram decisões alocativas, numa constante tentativa de “salvar” os alunos mais “merecedores” por meio da oferta de melhores recursos ou percursos escolares.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Correção de fluxo. Discricionariedade. Implementação de políticas. Desigualdade.

**RESUMEN:** Al articular los resultados de dos investigaciones centradas en el mismo objeto en diferentes niveles, el presente artículo analiza aspectos de la implementación de la política de corrección de flujo desarrollada en la red pública municipal de Río de Janeiro entre 2009 y 2014, y discute las prácticas de categorización y juicio realizadas por los agentes escolares sobre los usuarios de la política en una escuela seleccionada. Desde un enfoque cuanti-cuali, y en diálogo con autores del ámbito de la Ciencia Política y la Administración Pública (LIPSKY, 1980; MAYNARD-MOODY; MUSHENO, 2003, LOTTA, 2019), mostramos cómo la política estuvo marcada por una baja cobertura en relación a la demanda de alumnos con distorsión de edad/grado en la red, mientras que se atendió a alumnos sin el perfil esperado. También analizamos cómo se ejerció la discrecionalidad de los directores y profesores a nivel local en cuanto a la remisión de estos alumnos a las llamadas "clases de proyecto".

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Corrección de flujo. Discrecionalidad. Implementación de políticas. Desigualdad

## Introduction

When we bring up the issue of the right to education in Brazil, we can hardly escape celebrating the democratic achievement represented by the Federal Constitution (BRAZIL, 1988). Alongside other social rights such as health, housing and security, the country's supreme law seeks to ensure that, amidst the profound inequalities that characterize Brazilian society, all citizens have their essential needs met, and their well-being promoted through public policies. However, the legal provision of rights is only the normative level for these demands to be effectively guaranteed.

This process depends, in reality, on the concretization of these normatives in public services delivered daily to the population by the so-called "street-level bureaucrats," who

materialize the image of the State for citizens in the provision of public policies in its different agencies: schools, hospitals, social welfare centers, among others (LIPSKY, 1980; LOTTA, 2019). It is in these spaces inhabited by real people - with distinct identities and trajectories - acting amidst adverse conditions, that the inequalities focused by much of social policies are, in effect, countered and/or (re)produced.

In the case of the right to education, this is especially significant when we deal with two - of the three - dimensions that manifest this right: access, permanence, and learning (OLIVEIRA; ARAÚJO, 2005). In relation to the first, many studies show the excluding character of the low access to formal schooling that has historically characterized Brazil (NUNES, 2000). Given this scenario of unequal opportunities, several social movements began to organize themselves in the struggle for the democratization of access to school, culminating in its progressive (and belated) expansion from the 1960s onwards.

However, the tensions that were sought to be contained by the expansion of vacancies in the educational system were aggravated when it was observed that a portion of children and young people entering school presented significant difficulty in progressing within the system (RIBEIRO, 1991), mainly experienced by students who previously did not even have access to it. In this way, although the right to education understood as access to schooling has been increasingly guaranteed by the progressive universalization of the educational offer, the persistence of the so-called "school failure" (PATTO, 1999) signals that the right to permanence and learning has not yet been realized - or materialized - with equity.

In the movement to contain the inequalities observed from the expansion of elementary school enrollments, several educational policies were implemented in the states and municipalities of the country. Among them are the policies to correct the flow, unfolded in programs and projects of accelerated learning, which aim to correct the age/grade distortion of students two or more years behind in school. According to the design of these policies, the students are temporarily organized in special classes with standardized curriculum, materials and teaching approach. Once the school delay has been corrected, the policy provides for the subsequent re-admission of these students to regular classes, in a more advanced school year, appropriate for their age group, correcting their age/grade discrepancy and recovering their learning.

However, several mappings of these programs (intensified in the 1990s), such as the one developed by Parente and Lück (2007), point to problems faced during their implementation. Among them are the structural failures related to the lack of adequate teaching materials and

teacher training, the low adherence to the continuous progression proposal, the limited reach of the policy's target audience, in addition to a strong resistance of the school community to deal with multi-repetent students, generally recognized as undisciplined, unmotivated, and difficult.

Considering the relevance and timeliness of flow correction policies as a strategy to combat school inequalities, Lima (2016) and Oliveira (2017) developed two articulated studies that sought to understand, at different levels, how they are effectively implemented in subnational contexts and what are the dynamics that enhance the chances that pre-existing inequalities are reproduced at the frontline of implementation. To this end, the authors chose the case of the policy of flux correction developed in the municipal education system of Rio de Janeiro from 2009, and sought to establish a dialogue with implementation studies. These studies, originally concentrated in the fields of Political Science and Public Administration, have been increasingly appropriated by different areas of knowledge, but are still not very present in the field of Education (OLIVEIRA, 2019).

Seeking to contribute in this sense, we present in this article the main results of these two studies, based on a systemic view that recognizes the need for articulation between the stages of agenda, formulation, implementation and evaluation (SOUZA, 2006). It is important to emphasize that this traditional division represents less a clear delimitation of sequential stages, and more a way of approaching the complex process of policy production. From this joint effort, we seek to point out some of the main challenges that stand in the way of ensuring the right to education in its dimensions of permanence and learning for all, which can lead to the (re)production of inequalities even in the materialization of policies that seek to combat them, such as the flow correction projects.

In this sense, in the next sections, we seek to 1) explain the theoretical and methodological framework that guided our look at the implementation of the policy in question, both at the "macro" and "micro" level; 2) present an overview of the main aspects of the implementation of the policy of flux correction developed in the context of the Rio de Janeiro municipal network, considering its antecedents, its trajectory, the arrangements established, and the signs of discretionary action observed in the categorization of the policy's target public; 3) explore the potential of studies on bureaucracy and front-line management for understanding discretionary action at the front-line; 4) deepen the analysis on the practices of categorization and judgment carried out in a researched school, associated with the referral of students to special classes and the allocation of resources to different beneficiaries; and finally, 5) make brief considerations on how the conditions found at the local level, associated with negative

representations about the target audience of the policy, generated a fertile ground for the right of all to education to be re-signified as a reward to some.

### **Implementation studies in the public policy field: relevance and possible clippings**

Systematic literature reviews, such as the one presented by Barrett (2004), point out that the attention given to implementation processes is recent when compared to traditional studies on public policies. These, originally focused on the agenda and formulation phases, sought to understand how certain themes entered the list of priorities of a government, and how the plans developed to address them were structured. The little emphasis given to the materialization of these plans was due to a classic Weberian vision of the implementing bureaucracy, which would faithfully and impersonally execute the directives from the upper echelons.

This view, however, began to be challenged by empirical findings from research conducted from the 1960s on, when, in the midst of the cold war context, the concern with the welfare state model stimulated the development of social policy evaluation studies. These, in turn, indicated a gap between the goals envisaged by the policies and the results achieved, generating in researchers an investigative curiosity about the "black box" of implementation (LOTTA, 2019).

This first generation of studies was marked by works such as that of Pressman and Wildavsky (1973) - which showed how centralized decisions were altered along the execution chain - and became known as top-down for focusing on high-level decision-making processes, i.e., carried out at the "top." These studies shared a normative perspective and understood that changes in the decisions of elected officials (who had democratic legitimacy), promoted by an unelected bureaucracy, represented a hierarchical distortion and an obstacle to successful implementation, and were therefore considered "failures" to be corrected. Analyses of this process were commonly followed by recommendations to reduce the decision-making space at the top.

Among the various criticisms made to the top-down perspective, Bichir (2020) highlights the model's excessive simplism and rationalism, which disregarded the very political aspect inherent to public policies, marked by points of conflict and resistance in the different stages of its production. Moreover, there was criticism of the predominant emphasis on the formulators as the sole holders of legitimacy for decision making, ignoring the creative work done by the implementing agents, then reduced to obstacles in this process. As a result of this criticism, the 1970s and 1980s saw a second generation of implementation studies, which

sought to understand this process from the bottom up. The so-called bottom-up approach had as a central element of analysis no longer the pre-established goals in the formulation, but rather "the policy as it is" (LOTTA, 2019), that is, the everyday interactions that characterize what actually happens at the bottom, during the delivery of services to users.

One of the main contributions brought by this second generation is the re-signification of implementation as a creative process, and no longer as a merely operational and sequential stage to formulation. The policy production cycle is now understood as a continuous decision-making process, in which the implementing bureaucrats, in their various local agencies, react to plans drawn up at the highest levels and, thereafter, develop and implement the programs themselves (MATLAND, 1995). The recognition that there is decision-making at the top has caused many scholars to turn their attention to the so-called "street-level bureaucrats" (LIPSKY, 1980) and their day-to-day practices that directly influence policy delivery. Given the centrality of these agents in some of the research covered in this article, we will return to this topic later.

The bottom-up approach was also not immune to criticism, among which was the excessive emphasis on the autonomy of local agents, while much of this autonomy could be manipulated at the central level, through, for example, the provision of resources. The mutual criticism and the clashes between the two approaches extended throughout the two decades in question, and led to a third generation of studies in the 1990s, which sought to create synthetic or alternative models, indicating contexts more appropriate to the adoption of one or the other. Among them, we can mention Matland's model (1995), which proposes to analyze how the variables ambiguity (degree of uncertainty about the means and ends of a policy) and conflict (the extent to which these means and ends are objects of dispute) interact in producing implementation contexts more or less favorable to top-down or bottom-up analyses.

At present, we are in a fourth generation of implementation studies (LOTTA, 2019), in which multiple approaches and forms of analysis coexist. Influenced by areas such as Sociology, much of the current research focuses, for example, on the new models of governance, increasingly present after the 1995 State Reform<sup>5</sup>, and that complicate the analysis of "government in action" by bringing new actors and arrangements to the realization of public policies. As Lotta (2019) points out, implementation studies have arrived in Brazil already

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<sup>5</sup> Inspired by the New Public Management (NPM) model, the reformist experience in Brazil began in 1995 through the State Reform Master Plan. The Plan sought, among other things, to reduce the amount of bureaucratic procedures and increase the performance and accountability of bureaucrats. Among the main mechanisms used to achieve these objectives are: the establishment of plural modes of governance through management contracts between public entities and social organizations; results-oriented management, supported by targets and indicators; and the adoption of institutional forms of control (SANO; ABRUCIO, 2008).

within this timeframe, especially since the 2010s, but seeking to answer different questions from different perspectives.

Considering that flow correction policies emerge strongly on the national scene in the 1990s, a period of stimulus for partnerships between the state and social organizations, their implementation generally foresees arrangements between public and private institutions, and interactions between state and non-state actors for the delivery of the service. By analyzing "macro" aspects of implementation - such as the coverage of the policy, the profile of users served, the definition of criteria for referring students to project classes, the decision about the schools that would receive these classes, and their local capacities - Lima's (2016) research pointed to several challenges that were possibly being faced at the local level, and reflected in the data observed in the "macro" sphere. Based on these findings, Oliveira (2017) developed an investigation focused on the performance of frontline policy workers, the so-called "street-level bureaucrats" and their direct managers: the teachers, principals, and other agents who made the local translation of the comprehensive and sometimes contradictory norms of the flow correction policy adopted in the municipal network of Rio de Janeiro.

### **Flow correction at the network level: arrangements, instruments and capacities**

According to Souza (2006), the beginning of a new government is characterized as the most prosperous moment for changes in the political agenda and the presentation of new solutions to social problems. Possibly, one of the best expressions to translate this dynamic in relation to policymaking is "window of opportunity", used by Kingdon (2006), to explain how the election and the change of government have the potential to integrate a set of conditions that favor policy transformations or the entry of new themes into the governmental agenda.

In the city of Rio de Janeiro, the 2008 municipal election was marked by criticism of the cycle policy, identified by teachers and large sectors of society as "automatic approval". This argument won over public opinion, motivating all candidates in opposition to the municipal government of Rio de Janeiro to incorporate the end of "automatic approval" to their electoral platforms, and to define the improvement of education as one of the main points on the agenda of the next government, with the extinction of the cycles being the objective of most candidates for the municipal executive. In this context, in January 2009, one of the first acts of the elected mayor was to revoke the previous educational policy, through Decree 30.340 of January 1, 2009 (RIO DE JANEIRO, 2009), as a response to the educational crisis installed in what is recognized as the largest public municipal network in Latin America, a reference for

the implementation of innovative educational policies, and in some ways vanguard, such as the Curriculum Laboratory in the 1970s and the Special Education Program, which originated the Integrated Education Centers (CIEPs in the Portuguese acronym) in the following decade.

According to information on the website of the Municipal Secretariat of Education, in 2009, the municipal network offered Kindergarten, Elementary School (early and final years), Special Education and Youth and Adult Education (EJA), and had 705,659 students enrolled in schools located in urban areas, including 1062 regular schools, public day care centers, day care centers under contract and Spaces for Children's Education.

The prominence given to external evaluations on the SME website, as the main item on the educational agenda that year, expresses a fundamental aspect of the management model that began to guide the structure and operation of the network, which was based on the implementation of an evaluation system, with the establishment of goals and bonuses, characterizing a policy of accountability and agreement on results.

Within the scope of public administration, the municipal government began to highlight the need to promote a "Management Shock", based on the New Public Management model (CARRASQUEIRA, 2013), whose objective is the restructuring of the administrative machine through the adoption of three fundamental mechanisms: establishment of goals and permanent evaluation of results using accountability, dual planning (short and long term), and alignment with social organizations, people and administrative systems (governance), including through public-private partnerships (ARAUJO; PEREIRA, 2012). According to Abrucio and Gaetani (2006), these practices, inspired by managerialism, express the coalition around a reform agenda.

In Education, the reform agenda demarcated the differences between the management plan that would be developed and the previous policy, and was announced through a policy that integrated: strategic planning supported by empirical data; greater dynamism in network management, through multiple arrangements and actions that particularly involved public-private partnerships; implementation of an evaluation system for monitoring and assessing educational quality; establishment of goals based on external evaluations; accountability and bonus.

In an attempt to support the implementation of this agenda, the Municipal Secretariat of Education (SME in the Portuguese acronym) began to publicize, in addition to the low learning and functional illiteracy rates measured in the diagnostic evaluation applied in the network, the age/grade distortion as a problem integrated to the low performance of students. Data from the



2009 School Census indicated that, in the Rio de Janeiro municipal public school system, 39.9% of students enrolled in the 6th grade of elementary school showed an age/grade discrepancy. In the same year, the age/grade distortion accumulated 35% in the final years of elementary school (INEP, 2009).

In order to reduce functional illiteracy and the age/grade distortion, the SME presented the School Booster Program as the central policy of the first year of management. According to Law No. 5.215 of 2 August 2010, which provides for the revision of the Multi-Year Plan 2010-2013, the general objective of the School Booster Program, implemented between 2009 and 2014, was "to reduce the functional illiteracy rate and the age-grade gap with the consequent increase in IDEB (Basic Education Development Index) in the municipal public network", and the specific objectives were: "to promote the eradication of functional illiteracy and the age-grade gap and to qualify learning" (RIO DE JANEIRO, 2010, p. 81, our translation).

The flow correction projects were integrated into the School Booster Program in order to correct the age/grade mismatch and clear the school flow, through partnerships established between the SME, the Ayrton Senna Institute (IAS) and the Roberto Marinho Foundation (FRM), focusing on literacy and accelerated learning. In the analysis of the formulation and/or reformulation of the School Booster Program, no official documents were found that explained or even presented, in the scope of the SME, the objectives of the Program. Despite the declared adoption of the management model anchored in New Public Management, it is worth noting the absence of indicators, deadlines and the definition of clear and measurable goals to be achieved by the School Booster Program and the flow correction projects. Although the projects are structured, as widely reported in the literature (CHAVES, 2012; PERONI, 2009), it is noteworthy that the SME has not established, for the policy, external mechanisms to control the process and report the results, although it has incorporated, since the change of management, accountability mechanisms in education policy.

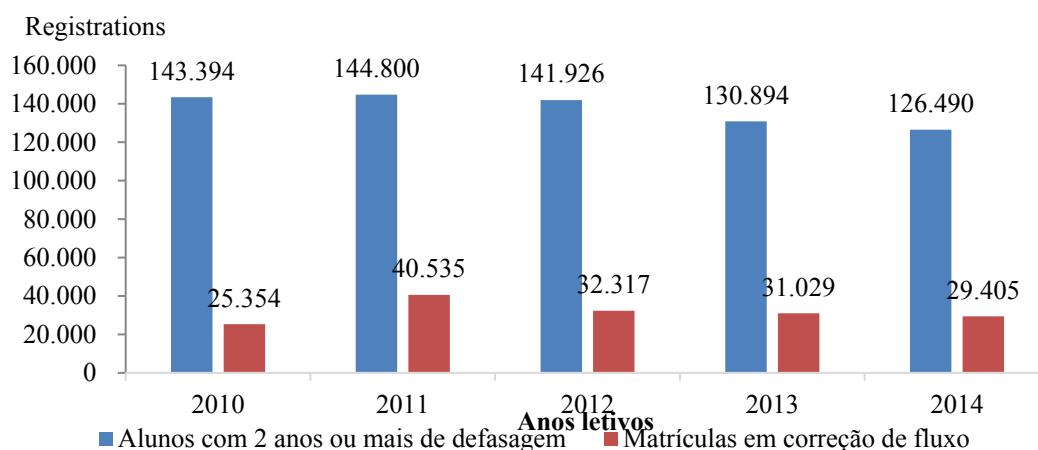
The interviews conducted with the technicians responsible for the flow correction projects at the central and intermediary levels of management confirmed the standardization of the policy and highlighted that the implementation would be conditioned to the prescriptions of the entities that owned the technologies, which involved the correction of the grade-age distortion through the acceleration of learning (LIMA, 2016). Among the criteria established by the Ayrton Senna Institute and the Roberto Marinho Foundation, the following were highlighted: the organization of homogeneous classes, exclusively with students two years or more behind in school; the limit of 25 students in the classes of the projects in the early years

of elementary school and 30 students in the classes of the final years; the participation of teachers in training with alignment at the three levels of management; the use of standardized teaching materials and the adoption of generalist teachers in the final years of elementary school.

At the policy level, school principals and pedagogical teams had the freedom to select teachers for the projects and to assign students to classes according to their age, year of schooling, and the objective of the project (literacy or learning acceleration), in a scenario of structurally diverse schools. According to Lima (2016), between 2009 and 2014, the schools that offered the policy were preponderantly those that concentrated the highest number of students with age/grade distortion. In this sense, the distribution of project classes in the municipal network occurred notably in large and huge schools, characterized as those with a high level of management complexity (OLIVEIRA, 2015).

Regarding the coverage of the policy in the period under investigation, it was observed, based on school census data, that enrollment in the flow correction projects corresponded, on average, to 23% of the students who were the target audience of the policy in the municipal school system.

**Graph 1** – Ratio demand-supply of enrollments in flow correction projects in the municipal public school system of Rio de Janeiro (2010-2014)<sup>6</sup>



Source: Lima (2016)

Paradoxically, within the limits of care, Lima (2016) observed enrollments in acceleration project classes of students who did not present age/grade distortion, or whose distortion was of 1 year, contrary to the scope of the policy. There were also discrepancies

<sup>6</sup> Anos letivos = School Years; Students with 2 or more years of lag time; Matrículas em correção de fluxo = Flow Correction Enrollments

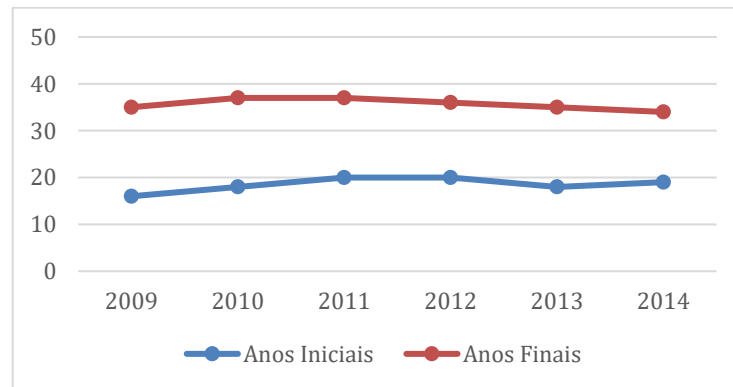
between the maximum limit of enrollments in project classes in the final years of elementary school, with classes of more than 35 students. These inconsistencies between policy formulation and implementation are similar to those found in the study by Parente and Lück (2004; 2007), and show the wide margins of discretion in the implementation by agents at the street level.

The author also observed successive changes in the policy design at the beginning of each school year, in relation to the previous year, including the incorporation of new groups of students. The redesign seems to have been intended to give greater dynamism to the policy and to adapt it to the demands of schools and students, requiring managers, teachers and others involved in the implementation to take ownership of the changes and recognize in them better conditions to achieve the goals set.

The study of the trajectories of students, which involved the analysis of school paths between 2010 and 2014, showed that students enrolled in the flow correction project classes were mostly male, non-white, poorer, with less educated mothers, and with higher levels of age/grade distortion than students who were kept in regular classes (LIMA, 2016). In addition to pointing out a pattern of reproduction of inequalities, and reinforcing the greater vulnerability to school failure (understood as repetition) to which a particular group is subject - black boys (ORTIGÃO; AGUIAR, 2013) - the researcher observed a possible indication of low effect of the policy in the recovery of learning of these young people, based on the outcomes of their school trajectories in 2014. At the end of elementary school, students who had gone through flow correction projects were concentrated in the outcomes considered less promising: youth and adult classes, new enrollment in flow correction projects in high school, or new failures faced at this stage. Regarding this last outcome, it is noteworthy that, among the 1062 students who had passed through project classes in elementary school and who were enrolled in the 1st grade of high school in 2013, 634 (59.7%) failed the following year, remaining in this same grade in 2014 (LIMA, 2016, p. 191).

Regarding the result of the policy, it is observed the inexpressive reduction between the age/grade distortion rates observed in the initial year of its implementation (2009) and in the last year of the analysis (2014).

**Graph 2** – Age/grade distortion in the early and final years of elementary school in the municipal public education system of Rio de Janeiro (2009-2014)<sup>7</sup>



Source: Prepared by the authors based on INEP (2009-2014)

Although it is not possible to establish a causal relationship, it seems plausible to consider some elements that present themselves as possible hypotheses for this result: the absence of clear rules on aspects of the policy, the successive changes observed in its design, the high complexity of management observed in implementing schools, and the discretion of principals in defining the policy's beneficiaries, which ended up being amplified by these same factors. This margin of freedom at the implementation end was precisely the focus of the research of Oliveira (2017), who resorted to studies on street-level bureaucracy to better understand the logics that motivated its exercise.

### Street-level bureaucracy: a look at the "front line" of the school floor

In the brief trajectory of implementation studies presented above, we mentioned the prominence that local agents began to receive in the so-called second generation. These agents - teachers, policemen, social workers, among others - were named as "street level bureaucrats" in the seminal work of Michael Lipsky (1980), and defined as the frontline public service workers who interact directly with users/beneficiaries of policies and services. A key element in understanding their relevance is the margin of freedom they have to determine which, how many, and how rights, benefits, and sanctions will be delivered to citizens. This relative freedom is called discretion in the literature, and can refer to both the space for action itself, left open by the policy, and the action itself.

Among the various elements that unite these professionals from different areas, systematized by Lipsky (1980) and re-presented by Lotta (2019), is the fact that they materialize

<sup>7</sup> Anos iniciais = Early Years; Anos finais = Final years

the image of the state for citizens, being its most apparent face. Moreover, they are primarily responsible for transforming comprehensive and abstract norms into concrete practices, usually in the midst of unpredictable situations and in a context of scarce resources and intense work, giving rise to various improvisations and innovations. Finally, these workers suffer a double pressure: from "above", to increase their productivity and efficiency, and from "below", to offer a more personalized service to each user.

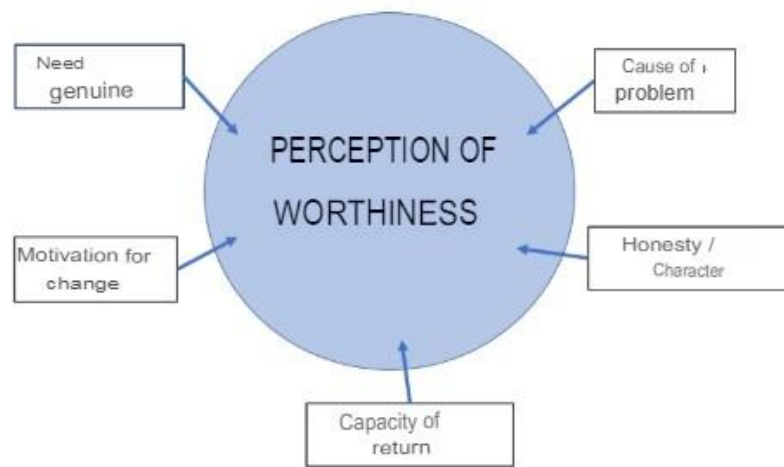
This context usually leads to the development of coping mechanisms or coping strategies, such as prioritizing cases that are easier or that offer a greater possibility of a return. Other activities common to the different street-level bureaucrats, and which involve high levels of discretion, are: 1. screening, classifying, and categorizing users ("who is who" or where they fit in the policy); 2. distributing benefits and sanctions ("who gets what"); 3. structuring the contexts of interaction ("who gets what, when, how often, and in what way"); and 4. socializing citizens as users of the state (the disciplinary act of teaching how to be a "good citizen", deserving of public services). None of these processes is neutral or restricted to formal rules, since these cannot predict the totality of situations encountered at the street level, nor their complexity. On the contrary, many of these judgments are permeated by social stigmas, and may end up reproducing inequalities to the extent that groups in situations of greater vulnerability are categorized as "difficult". (LOTTA; PIRES, 2020) or "less deserving" (OLIVEIRA; PAES DE CARVALHO, 2019), then receiving lower priority in the distribution of resources or access to rights.

Regarding this last aspect, it is important to mention that other authors after Lipsky (1980) have delved deeper into understanding the explanatory factors of frontline discretionary action beyond the need for adaptation or self-preservation. Indeed, the cases chosen to receive priority or better treatment may be even the most difficult ones, provided that the users in question are deemed worthy of such efforts. Authors such as Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003) point out the relevance of the moral dimension in the judgments of implementing bureaucrats, who may go out of their way to offer extraordinary service to "deserving" citizens (going beyond formal policy provisions), or go on a "zeal strike" and offer the minimum to those who are considered "undeserving".

This perception of deservingness, in turn, would be crossed by cultural representations that are often stereotyped, and would result from the (in)conscious assessment of the implementing agent about the beneficiary based on five main factors: (i) how much the citizen-user needs the policy (what is his/her "want" or **genuine need**); (ii) his/her degree of

responsibility or guilt for the situation he/she is in (**cause of the problem**); (iii) his/her **motivation for change**; (iv) his/her **honesty/character** (whether he/she is being "smart" by seeking some indirect benefit for him/herself through the policy or service in question); and, finally, (v) his/her chance of a **return to the efforts** made by the implementing bureaucrats. This summative evaluation of worthiness can be illustrated by the figure below.

**Figure 1** – The perception of merit by frontline agents



Source: Oliveira (2017, p. 150), based on Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003)

In the case of the educational policy analyzed, participate in these dynamics not only the "prototypical" street-level bureaucrats - that is, the teachers who have direct and daily contact with students (final beneficiaries) - but also the agents that we can call their direct managers (GASSNER; GOFNER, 2018), in this case, the school principals. These bureaucrats, commonly identified in the literature as "mid-level" (LOTTA; PIRES; OLIVEIRA, 2014; OLIVEIRA; ABRUCIO, 2018), are responsible for both the management of public equipment (resources, rules, etc.) and of people (the street-level bureaucrats), mediating between the high level and the top, and coordinating the implementation of the policy at the local level. Because they present a hybrid profile (LIMA, 2019; MOTA, 2018), sometimes they share coordination tasks with the higher echelons, sometimes they assume a more direct contact with students. In the case of the research at hand, we highlight the protagonism of the directors in an activity typical of the street level: the classification and categorization of users, and the distribution of benefits and sanctions from them. In other words, being responsible for the organization of classes and distribution of teachers in the school, these agents assume a key role in deciding

who are the "project students" and their referral to specific classes, associated with the allocation of resources to these classes. Given this specificity, principals are treated by the research articulated in this paper as street-level agents, along with teachers.

To analyze the implementation of an educational policy from a focus on street-level bureaucracy and its direct management, taking into account the issue of inequality, means to elect as a central element the discretion exercised by the implementing agents, its explanatory factors, and its material and symbolic effects on the users: the multi-repetent students, who generally accumulate markers of social exclusion.

### **Flow correction at the school level: categorization, judgment, and (re)distribution**

Based on the extensive mapping conducted by Lima (2016) - which pointed out the prevalence of large or huge schools among those that organized, over the selected period, flow correction classes (the so-called "project classes") in the municipal public network of Rio de Janeiro - Oliveira (2017) selected a school unit with this profile to deepen a case study on the implementation of the policy. Thus, the selected school had more than 900 enrollments, served more than one stage of schooling, and had organized (re)literacy classes<sup>8</sup> and acceleration of learning since 2010, that is, the first year of effective implementation of the policy. In addition to the management challenges that its size and type of service already posed, the school did not have a pedagogical coordinator at the time who could articulate the various stages of education and work fronts.

The implementation context at the local level was marked, therefore, by a scarcity of resources (human and material) and consequent work overload experienced by the teaching and management team. Thus, the processes of categorization, prioritization, and allocation already common to the frontline gained an even more moral dimension, involving judgments about which users were deserving of the few resources available. This situation of rationing and dispute was aggravated by the arrival of the projects, which introduced an additional demand for work, considered especially challenging because of the public served.

The main instrument used for the qualitative analysis of the decision-making processes that characterized the implementation of the policy at the local level was the conduct of semi-structured interviews with 32 members of the school community, detailed in the table below:

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<sup>8</sup> Although the term does not seem appropriate, since students who have been literate do not need to be literate again, the re-signification of the term literacy assumes, according to LIMA (2016), a political sense, demarcated by the Secretariat of Education. At the time, after identifying the functional illiteracy rates, it informed in interviews that "the Rio network knew how to be literate, but not "re -literate"."

**Table 1** – Subjects participating in the case study

Function/description	Interviewed Subjects
Managers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Principal</li> <li>• Deputy Principal</li> </ul>
Education Agents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Education Agent 1</li> <li>• Education Agent 2</li> </ul>
Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• - Final Years Project Class Teacher</li> <li>• - English teacher in a project class in the final years</li> <li>• - Former English teacher in a project class in the final years</li> <li>• - Former Final Years Project Class Teacher</li> <li>• - Former Final Years Project Class Teacher 1</li> <li>• - Former project class teacher in the final years 2</li> <li>• - Former Final Years 3 project class teacher</li> <li>• - Former teacher of early grade project class</li> <li>• - Mathematics teacher of regular classes, including a 6th grade class whose students were mostly from early grade projects</li> <li>• - Math teacher of regular classes</li> <li>• - Portuguese teacher of regular classes</li> <li>• - Music teacher of regular classes</li> </ul> <p>- Early years generalist teacher</p>
Regular 8th grade students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 3 girls</li> <li>• 6 boys</li> </ul>
Students from the flow correction project class <sup>9</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2 girls</li> <li>• 4 boys</li> </ul>

Source: Oliveira (2017, p. 86)

The interviews lasted an average of 40 minutes in the case of teachers and managers, and 10 minutes in the case of students, and all were conducted within the school itself throughout the months of June, July and September 2016 (since August was the month of recess this year, due to the Olympic Games in the city). After transcribed by the researcher, the interviews were analyzed with the help of the Atlas T.I software, through which they were coded under four main themes of interest to the research: perceptions about the policy; perceptions about users; perceptions about the school; and exercise of discretion (regarding the referral of students to the projects and other allocative decisions involving this target audience).

In addition to allowing an approximation to the concrete actions that characterized the implementation of the policy - reconstructed by the participating subjects in their narratives - the conduct of interviews was essential to map "beliefs, values and classificatory systems of

<sup>9</sup> The class in question was the only one remaining among the "project classes" in the year 2016, and corresponded to the terminus of elementary school (acceleration of learning planned for the 8th and 9th grades). There is one exception to the description of the participants in this group: one of the students interviewed was an egress of this same project, which he had completed the year before the interview (2015). He was visiting the school on the day the other students were interviewed, and agreed to record an interview with us, and was included in this group.



specific social universes" (DUARTE, 2004, p. 215, our translation), which are precisely at the basis of the exercise of discretion by frontline agents, and that should therefore be the focus of attention in the analyses of the field (LOTTA, 2014). In light of the literature on street-level bureaucracy, we sought to understand what kind of categorization about policy beneficiaries emerged from the interviewed agents' accounts, and in what way the classifications presented could be related to the summative assessment of deservingness proposed by Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003). Then, based on the symbolic title of "deserving" or "undeserving" resulting from this process, which influences the distribution of benefits and sanctions among users, we sought to understand the exercise of discretion by these agents in relation to the target audience of the policy from the action or allocative decision made. This, again in dialogue with the literature, could be associated with the provision of an extraordinary service for the deserving (in an attempt to "save" them), or minimal for the undeserving (as a way to "punish" or discipline them).

This categorization of the policy's target audience by the implementing agents appears more explicitly in the following account of a member of the management team:

*The project student, you have students with **emotional problems**, you have students with **cognitive problems**, and you have students who are, let's put it this way, classified in the wrong way, **lazy**. You have in this class three types of people. So, for the one that has learning difficulties, you can do something. The one who is lazy, can do it, but... he is there. But the one that has a behavioral problem... it is difficult. And this one gets it. And this - I see, I may be wrong, but let's put it this way, this is my personal opinion [...] in a class of 20 projects, I tell you that more than 50% have behavioral problems (Management Team, 2016, emphasis added).*

This tripartite categorization of policy beneficiaries can be analyzed in view of the elements that make up the summative assessment of merit. In this sense, with the exception of students who would have a genuine learning difficulty (and therefore need) (a "cognitive problem"), for whom something could be done, the other project students could even be considered responsible for their own school failure situation to the extent that they would present a moral problem (laziness) - which also accompanies a low motivation for change - and emotional problem (bad behavior), which results in a low chance of return to the efforts made for their recovery. If most students in the project classes are identified with the latter profile, for whom little can be done, we conclude that the belief in the potential of the policy to achieve its goal in implementation is low. Indeed, the interviewee reinforces this perception later in the interview, "*So it's more difficult, not that it's that I don't believe in the project work, I don't believe it can do so well because of that.*" (Management Team, 2016).

The association of the "project student" category with "undeserving" users generally resulted in the attribution of a lower degree of priority to meeting their demands. When it came to the distribution of the benefits that characterize the school educational service, the allocation of resources to different students seemed to privilege those in regular classes. Scarce teaching materials, for example, as was the case of the English textbook at the time of the research, began to be reserved by the subject teacher for regular classes, since there was no sense in "undermining these classes" to *"use material in a class that will not get the **outcome** that another class would have," and that presented "a disregard for the material"* (Words of the English teacher who had taught project classes, 2016, emphasis added)

This negative perception also applied to the policy itself, considered a "make-up" made by the SME to "clean up" the regular classes (concentrating the "problematic students" in project classes), since only they would be submitted to external evaluations, impacting the network's educational indices. As for the effective recovery of learning, however, the policy was *"not going to be effective, no doubt about it"* (Talk from a former project teacher, 2016), due to a series of structural problems attributed to it, including the teaching methodology considered outdated (the use of teleclasses offered by the partner foundation) and the format of teaching polyvalence, in which only one specialist teacher was in charge of teaching the various subjects of the curriculum, even in the final years of elementary school.

In this sense, it is worth mentioning the cooperation networks that teachers created as a strategy to face the challenge of teaching content that they did not master. For example, a math teacher who taught regular classes would dedicate some free time to go to the project classes to answer students' questions and/or support the regular teacher in teaching the subject. As for the standardized teaching methodology, considered unattractive by the teachers, but whose adoption was mandatory according to the policy guidelines, we also observed the exercise of discretion by teachers, who produced, shared and used alternative materials in their classes, despite the risk of oversight by higher education agencies.

However, although a strongly criticized point of the policy was precisely the concentration of the most difficult cases in the same class, there were situations in which this logic of cleaning up the regular classes seemed to be repeated in the organizational action of the school itself, as an attempt to "save" deserving students. A symbolic case was the grouping in the same regular 6th grade class of students from successive projects in the early years, together with repeating students from this grade in the previous year, and with students transferred from other schools. According to the report of an educational agent interviewed,

this decision had even been questioned at a parent meeting: "*if it was a class that gave problems last year and the year after, why did they put them all together again in the sixth grade? Having heard that the idea would be that differentiated work would be done with them, the interviewee recognizes that this grouping has harmed a lot "not only in pedagogy, but in discipline as well,"*" in her words. However, she says that the school was still trying to figure out the best "formula" to organize the classes, because, if on the one hand the mixture of students would be positive, on the other hand, "*this class that is not very good hinders the performance of those children who really want to learn, that we could do a better job and have a better result at school*" (Talk of the agent educator interviewed, 2016).

A similar logic that seeks to preserve "deserving" users from potentially unfavorable situations was also found as the basis for discretionary actions regarding the referral of students to project classes. In relation to this point, it is important to remember that the discretionary nature of the policy ended up being expanded due to the successive transformations that the policy has undergone, involving changes in the criteria for entering students into the different projects. The director's answer to the question about how this was done illustrates how comprehensive rules are interpreted and translated into actions in the face of cases not foreseen or regulated. After initially answering that "it is not us who choose, it is the rule: it is two years of gap," the director (2016, our emphasis) adds:

***This also includes the child's performance.** Sometimes the student may be indicated for a project because of his age, but he is very literate, it was some other problem that happened there. There was one student here who was already older, but he only started studying very late. So **he didn't have a project profile**, he was only older because something happened in the beginning, **so we could take him out of the project.** [...] He was keeping up, he was doing well, so there was no need. But, **without knowing anyone, the rule is two years of delay.***

Considering that the policy in question aimed to solve two problems that were, in principle, linked - age/grade distortion due to grade repetition and the low learning level it revealed - what should be done in more complex situations, when, for example, a student was behind in age but did not have learning difficulties? The results found point out that this decision depended on the perception that the agent had about the policy, the user in question, and the extent to which he would benefit or be harmed by the service offered. In the director's speech, the student is presented as a "deserving" citizen, who is not responsible or guilty for the situation in which he finds himself. Although he had a problem of being behind at school, which fit into the category to be served by the policy, this condition was not a result of repetition (associated

with laziness or bad behavior). On the contrary, his delay was due to external factors, to something that happened "there at the beginning", hindering his access to school at the right age. Moreover, he seemed to be a good student, who was well literate. In other words, the opposite of the "project student" profile described above, so that his insertion in these "problematic" classes could harm him more than contribute to his school success.

However, in the (rare) circumstances in which a positive perception about the projects predominated - as on the part of a teacher who was willing to take on these classes because she believed in the work she was doing - the effort to "save the deserving" followed the opposite path: the search for his enrollment in these classes, even when he was no longer behind in age. Although she was unsuccessful in her attempt to send a student (who had already been in a project class in the early years) to the project class in the final years of which she was the teacher, the teacher in question offered her extra tutoring after her regular class hours. The student, considered "deserving," was described on the basis of her good character and her genuine need (*"she was a person, a wonderful student, but [who] lacked everything"*), the externality of the cause of her problem (*"they threw her from the 4th to the 6th grade," an "absurdity"*), and her motivation for change (*"she studied in the morning, and when she finished, she didn't leave, she stayed with me until 1 p.m. upstairs"*), according to the regular teacher.

Finally, if the title "deserving" guaranteed students a more attentive or priority treatment in the (re)distribution of school benefits, the categorization as "undeserving" could even be accompanied by more sanctions, as in the case of those who tried to "cheat" the system, seeking indirect advantages (e.g., *"the student who had the nerve to repeat, thinking he was going to Acelera and not do anything, and pass anyway,"* in the words of one of the education agents interviewed in 2016). In this sense, the situation of a regular 8th grade student who had more than two years of delay resulting from repetitions, and who said he always asked to be included in the acceleration projects, without getting in, drew attention. According to the student (2016), *"they say it's the computer that chooses right, the computer moves by itself. I've never seen that, computer messing with itself."* Although he fell into the category foreseen by the policy, it is possible that this student was considered "smart" when he tried to take a shortcut to the school's faster completion, and, consequently, was punished with the impossibility of access to the project classes. This explanatory hypothesis would dialogue with one of the typical street-level activities mentioned in the previous section: the disciplining of citizens as good users of the

State, teaching them who deserves to receive what, in what way, and under which circumstances.

### **Final remarks**

By articulating two researches that focused on the implementation of an educational policy at two levels - the macro, of the public school system, and the micro, of a school that is part of this network - we seek to shed light on a recent theme in the studies of street-level bureaucracy: the (re)production of inequalities on the frontline of implementation. This ongoing agenda seeks to understand how even policies formulated with the objective of reducing inequalities, as is the case of flux correction, end up (re)producing them when they are materialized in the daily encounters of citizens with the State.

Among the mechanisms that explain this process, Pires (2019) highlights three: the resistance of local agents towards a policy, consequently choosing not to implement it; the dynamics of classification and judgment carried out by frontline bureaucrats, which, being crossed by social stereotypes, end up excluding or not prioritizing more vulnerable groups from access to goods and rights; and the moral control over the permanence of users as beneficiaries of a policy, who sometimes have the provision of a service discontinued by presenting unexpected behaviors. The case explored in this article is related to the second type of mechanism, focused on the processes of categorization of users and the degree of priority assigned to their demands, in the context of the educational service.

It is important to emphasize that the focus on street-level bureaucrats and their direct managers does not seek to blame these public servants who are the majority in the country - and who work in a context of unpredictability, few resources, multiple pressures, and work overload - for the results of policies crossed by several conflicts and structural problems. The emphasis on these agents seeks to show that, although often undervalued, they are important decision makers when it comes to "government in action", and, precisely for this reason, need to be the focus of attention, training, and the offer of better working conditions.

By analyzing macro aspects of the flow correction policy implemented in the Rio de Janeiro municipal network, we sought a better understanding of the challenges faced on the front end. It was possible to see, for example, that unclear and sometimes contradictory rules opened up a large margin of discretion at the school level, without there being any guidance for its good use - understood as that which generates more equity and inclusion, the ultimate goal of any social policy. Moreover, the prioritization of more administrative criteria (e.g. the

number of students with age/grade distortion and available classrooms) than pedagogical ones (schools with better implementation conditions, such as a full management team) generated fertile ground for moral judgments based on social stereotypes to be activated in allocative decisions about the few resources available. There was also a lack of incentives for direct frontline managers to, for example, choose the "silver of the house" (LIMA, 2016, p. 94) to work with the (re)literacy projects, as expected by the policy, instead of handing over these classes to teachers new to the school, as generally observed in research. In fact, the distribution of teachers in classes is usually the task of school principals, who may be guided by principles of greater or lesser equity. However, they also rely on a greater power of persuasion when it comes to the allocation of teachers to more challenging classes, as is the case with projects. The absence of any bonus (symbolic or material), in this sense, made few teachers feel encouraged to take on a function that would demand more work and emotional stress from them.

The constant dialog between the specificities of an educational policy and the broader field of implementation studies, pursued in this work, allows us to better understand what brings educational agents closer to the other workers who materialize the image of the State for the citizen. Moreover, it sheds light on the dynamics that transform universal rights - as is the case of education - into rewards for the few, in a scenario of scarce resources and entrenched social stigmas.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:** This work was carried out with the support of the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel - Brazil (CAPES) - Funding Code 001. We thank the Network of Studies on Implementation of Public Educational Policies (REIPPE), with the collaboration of Itaú Social, for the financial support for the translations of this article into English and Spanish. We also thank the Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Rio de Janeiro (FAPERJ).

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### How to reference this article

MEIRA, M.; LIMA, M. F. M.; GINO, J. C. Policy implementation as a locus for the reproduction of inequalities: Delving into Rio de Janeiro's accelerated learning policy. **Revista Ibero-Americana de Estudos em Educação**, Araraquara, v. 17, n. esp. 3, p. 2290-2316, nov. 2022. e-ISSN: 1982-5587. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21723/riace.v17iesp.3.16687>

**Submitted:** 17/04/2022

**Revisions required:** 06/07/2022

**Approved:** 27/08/2022

**Published:** 30/11/2022

**Processing and publication by the Editora Ibero-Americana de Educação.**  
Correction, formatting, standardization and translation.

