

Anelise Andrade de Souza¹
Camilo Adalton Mariano
da Silva²
Olívia Maria de Paula Alves
Bezerra³
Élido Bonomo²

¹Fundação Oswaldo Cruz,
Instituto René Rachou. Belo
Horizonte, MG, Brasil.

²Universidade Federal de Ouro
Preto, Escola de Nutrição,
Departamento de Nutrição
Clínica e Social. Ouro Preto, MG,
Brasil.

³Universidade Federal de Ouro
Preto, Escola de Medicina. Ouro
Preto, MG, Brasil.

Correspondence

Anelise Andrade de Souza
Fundação Oswaldo Cruz,
Instituto René Rachou. Avenida
Augusto de Lima, 1715, Barro
Preto, Belo Horizonte, MG –
Brasil.

asouzandrade@yahoo.com.br

Working Conditions and Performance of School Food Counselors in Municipalities in Minas Gerais and Espírito Santo

Condições de Trabalho e Atuação de Conselheiros de Alimentação Escolar em municípios de Minas Gerais e Espírito Santo

Abstract

The adequate performance of School Nutrition Councils can reduce irregularities in the use of public resources and improve the quality of school meals. This study sought to know the working conditions and performance of school nutrition counselors, according to the regulations of the National School Feeding Programme. A cross-sectional study was conducted with 425 counselors from 84 municipalities of Minas Gerais and Espírito Santo. Univariate and multivariate analyses were performed, using Pearson's chi-square test and Poisson regression analysis, and the prevalence ratio was obtained. The results indicated a malfunction of the studied School Nutrition Councils, as well as inadequate working conditions for counselors, combined with the lack of knowledge about program regulations. Prevalence ratios suggest a positive action on the social control when the counselor is elected in a democratic way, when they have adequate infrastructure and access

to information on the program's regulations. The findings indicate the need to provide counselors with continuing education, improve their working conditions and favor their participative and democratic performance, providing effective social control of the program.

Keywords: School Nutrition Council. Working conditions. Performance.

Resumo

A atuação adequada dos Conselhos de Alimentação Escolar gera perspectivas de redução de irregularidades na utilização dos recursos públicos e melhoria da qualidade da alimentação escolar. Buscou-se, neste estudo, conhecer as condições de trabalho e atuação dos conselheiros segundo as normativas do Programa Nacional de Alimentação Escolar. Foi realizado estudo transversal com 425 conselheiros oriundos de 84 municípios de Minas Gerais e Espírito Santo. Foram realizadas análises descritivas, univariadas e multivariadas, utilizando testes do qui-quadrado de *Pearson* e regressão de *Poisson*, obtendo-se a razão de prevalência. Os resultados do estudo indicaram funcionamento precário dos conselhos, assim como condições de trabalho inadequadas para os conselheiros, que têm sua atuação prejudicada pela inadequação de infraestrutura de trabalho. As razões de prevalência sugerem uma ação positiva no controle social quando o conselheiro é eleito democraticamente, quando possui adequada infraestrutura de trabalho e acesso a informações sobre o programa. Os achados denotam a necessidade de propiciar aos conselheiros educação continuada, melhorar suas condições de trabalho e favorecer sua atuação participativa e democrática, propiciando um efetivo controle social do programa.

Palavras-chave: Conselho de Alimentação Escolar. Condições de trabalho. Atuação.

INTRODUCTION

The Brazilian Constitution¹ institutionalized channels for the political participation of society in the formulation, implementation, and evaluation of public policies in all areas under the tutelage of the State.^{2,3} Among other means, this participation occurs through managing councils comprising representatives of society and the government.

Managing councils exercise the right to voice opinions regarding priorities and to participate and protect the application of public resources through public administration to benefit society. This monitoring is called "social control."^{2,4}

In Brazil, managing councils act in areas such as health, education, social assistance, and school nutrition, among others.² In the field of education, the School Food Council (SFC) was established by Law No. 8.913/1994,⁵ and officiates the process of participation and control of civil society in the school nutrition policy⁶ and management of the National School Food Program (PNAE). Thus, the SFC became the body responsible for monitoring the use of public resources for school meals, its existence being an obligatory condition for the release of the financial resources of the PNAE to municipalities.⁶⁻⁸ Its constitution stipulates the inclusion of representatives of the Executive Power, educational worker and student entities, students' parents, and civil entities.^{9,10}

It is incumbent upon the SFC to report on the misuse of public resources to the Fundo Nacional de Desenvolvimento da Educação (National Fund for the Development of Education), Public Prosecutors, and other control organs such as the Federal Court of Auditors.^{11,12} Moreover, it must ensure the quality of school meals, ensure their provision, and analyze the accountability of the Executing Body.^{11,12}

The proper functioning of the SFC should reflect the improvement in the quality of the PNAE, and ensure that public resources are used appropriately¹⁰ to guarantee fewer irregularities in the use of public resources, compliance with the continuity of the provision of school meals during the 200 school days, school menu planning by a nutritionist, improvement in the quality of the food supplied, respecting the eating habits of students, and reducing operational costs.¹³⁻¹⁶ Thus, the effective preparation and involvement of school food counselors and their appropriate working resources are indispensable factors for the success of the PNAE.

Accordingly, the present study sought to characterize the working conditions of school food counselors and assess their performance in accordance with the regulations of the PNAE to contribute to implementing corrective actions to improve the quality of the social control of school meals and execution of the PNAE at the municipal level.

METHODS

A cross-sectional study was conducted using a non-probabilistic sample. The data used were collected by the Collaborative Center for Food and Nutrition in Schools from 2010 to 2013 during visits to municipalities in the states of Minas Gerais and Espírito Santo. The municipalities were selected based on the following inclusion criteria: cities visited by the monitoring sector of the PNAE between 2009 and 2011, municipalities drawn at the 33rd Public Draw of Municipalities of the Comptroller General of the Union, and municipalities with nutritionists registered in the National Fund for the Development of Education.

In total, 84 municipalities met these criteria, and a semi-structured questionnaire was developed comprising questions on socioeconomic and demographic resources, relationship with municipal management, working resources at the SFC, knowledge of PNAE regulations, and perception of their own performance in the council. The questions related to the knowledge of the PNAE's regulations and principles as well as to counselors' activities were directed to all members of the SFC. Those related to work resources and the Council's activities were directed only to members representing civil society. This was to seek greater independence and avoid overlapping responses.

The data obtained were doubly entered into a Microsoft Excel 2007¹⁷ spreadsheet and the variables of interest selected and analyzed using *Stata* software, version 12.0.¹⁸

The dependent variables selected for the Poisson model were *"follow-up of public bidding and public tender processes"*, *"knowledge of the SFC's regulations"*, and *"participation in meetings to follow the assessment of the accounts of the Executing Body"*. These were considered the main and most relevant actions of the counselors in the exercise of social control. The independent variables referred to the knowledge and performance of school food counselors in social control.

Initially, descriptive analyses of the variables were performed to characterize the sample, followed by univariate analysis using the *Pearson* chi-square test. After this test, variables that presented a p-value <0.20 were included in the multivariate analysis, and the Poisson regression employed with robust variance. In each step of the multivariate analysis, the variables with a p-value greater than 0.05 were excluded, until the independent variables with a p-value of less than 0.05 and confidence interval of 95% were retained in the final explanatory model.

The research was approved by the Research Ethics Committee, with opinion CAAE 26693814.2.0000.5150, without any conflicts of interest.

RESULTS

In total, 425 school nutrition counselors participated in the study from 84 municipalities: 77 (91.6%) from Minas Gerais and 7 (8.4%) from Espírito Santo. The average age of participants was 42 years (± 9.7), and the average membership in the SFC was 29 months (± 7.8).

Most members were female (84.5%), with a high level of schooling: 26.8% had obtained higher education and 28.2% had post-graduation qualifications. Furthermore, 38.8% were representative of municipal school workers and 24.9% of students' parents. The majority (77.6%) was employed by the Executing Body. Furthermore, 66.2% were competitively employed by the municipality, and 24.4% worked in the Secretariat of Education. Only 25.6% participated in other mandates in the SFC, and 45.8% participated in the Council without a meeting/assembly. In total, 45.8% of counselors could not indicate whether they were effective or alternate members of the councils in which they participated.

Regarding working resources, more than half the counselors (58%) were unaware of the internal regulations of their council, did not have access to the necessary documents (55.6%), did not actively participate in the analysis of the provision of accounts (58.4%), and were not qualified to perform their duties (76.9%). However, 78.3% claimed to have knowledge of the preparation of the minutes of meetings, and 86.5% reported having local managers' support for the development of their activities.

Regarding issues related with the structure for achieving the Council's activities, the questions were directed only to representatives of civil society to ensure the independence of responses and avoid any overlap. Thus, regarding the resources for the development of the Council's activities, it was reported that 91.4% (n=64) of the Councils had access to rooms for holding meetings, 74.2% (n=52) had access to a telephone, 72.8% (n=51) had access to the Internet, 78.5% (n=55) had a computer with access to the Internet, and 78.5% had access to transportation for school visits.

The majority of counselors (55.2%) claimed to have knowledge of the regulations of the PNAE and the value of the amount transferred by the National Fund for the Development of Education (51.2%) and Executing Body (64.2%) for municipal school meals, and on the use of PNAE resources solely for the purchase of foodstuffs (88.5%). However, many also reported little involvement in foodstuff procurement processes via public bidding or tender (40.0%) or the analysis of the provision of accounts of the Executing Body (51.5%). There was also a lack of clarity regarding the frequency of visits to urban and rural schools for the on-site monitoring of school meals.

Regarding the self-evaluation of counselors of their performance in the SFC, 51.1% reported being very active or active. Table 1 provides information pertaining to the knowledge

and performance of counselors according to the laws and resolutions of the PNAE. Table 2 presents information relating to the interviews with civil society representatives.

Table 1. Knowledge and performance of school food counselors according to the regulations and resolutions of the PNAE in municipalities of the states of Minas Gerais and Espírito Santo (n = 425)

Variables	N	%
<i>Knowledge of school food laws</i>		
Yes	235	55,2
No	156	36,7
Not informed	34	8,1
<i>Knowledge of the value of funds transferred by the FNDE</i>		
Yes	218	51,2
No	165	38,8
Not informed	42	10,0
<i>Knowledge of the value of funds transferred by the municipality</i>		
Yes	273	64,2
No	29	6,8
Not informed	123	29,0
<i>Participation in a meeting with other counselors to analyze the rendering of accounts of the EB</i>		
Yes	192	45,1
No	219	51,5
Not informed	54	3,4
<i>Knowledge of the documents necessary for the analysis of the EB's accounts</i>		
Yes	226	53,1
No	81	19,0
Not informed	118	27,9
<i>Monitoring of procurement processes through bidding and public tender</i>		
Yes	191	44,9
No	170	40,0
Not informed	64	15,1

Table 2. Knowledge and performance of civil society school nutrition counselors according to PNAE laws and resolutions in municipalities of the states of Minas Gerais and Espírito Santo (n = 70)

Variables	N	%
<i>Use of federal resources exclusively for the purchase of foodstuffs¹</i>		
Yes	62	88,5
No	08	11,4
<i>Meals for 200 school days in urban schools¹</i>		
Yes	70	100,0
No	0	-
<i>Meals for 200 school days in rural schools¹</i>		
Yes	28	40,0
No	42	60,0
<i>Responsible for assessing accounts of the EB¹</i>		
EB	09	12,8
Not informed	61	87,2
<i>Results of the last accounts¹</i>		
Approved	54	77,1
Approved with reservations	16	22,9
<i>Frequency of visits to urban schools¹</i>		
Weekly/monthly/bimonthly	28	41,7
Without defined frequency	39	58,3
<i>Frequency of visits to rural schools¹</i>		
Weekly/monthly/bimonthly	11	18,6
Without defined frequency	48	81,4
Self-evaluation of the counselor about his/her performance in the SFC (n=425)		
Variables	N	%
Very active/active	218	51,1
Fairly active/little/non-active	207	48,9

¹ For these variables, according to the methodology, only the responses of an SFC civil society representative of each municipality present at the time of the interviews were evaluated to avoid overlapping answers and increase reliability.

The final Poisson regression models for the dependent variables selected in the study and associated independent variables are presented in Table 3. Table 4 shows the final model for the performance of counselors.

Table 3. Final Poisson regression models with crude and adjusted PR values, 95% CI

<i>"Follow-up of bidding processes and Public Tender"</i> and associated independent variables				
Variable	Crude PR/p	95% CI	Adjusted PR/p	95% CI
Election/Meeting	1,82/0,006	1,1884-2,7993	1,73/0,009	1,5881-1,9254
Transport	3,18/0,006	1,2196-2,3800	3,96/<0,05	1,4465-2,6884
Knowledge of the documents necessary for the analysis of the EB's accounts	2,70/<0,05	1,5463-4,7349	1,73/0,003	1,2098-2,5021
<i>"Knowledge of School Food Program regulations"</i> and associated independent variables				
Variable	Crude PR/p	95% CI	Adjusted PR/p	95% CI
Knowledge of internal regulations	2,70/<0,05	3,1160 -7,797	1,78/<0,05	1,4484-2,2011
Access to computers	4,79/0,020	3,0147-4,1479	3,41/<0,05	3,1664-3,1247
Meetings to analyze the accountability of the Executing Body	1,64/<0,05	1,5937-2,2648	1,89/<0,05	1,5937-2,2648
<i>accountability of the Executing Body</i>				
Variable	Crude PR/p	95% CI	Adjusted PR/p	95% CI
Participation in other mandates	1,98/0,003	1,2649-3,1102	1,86/0,020	1,1025-3,1652
Knowledge of regulations of the PNAE	6,96/<0,05	4,3353-11,193	6,46/<0,05	3,8970-10,713
Availability of material resources	3,45/0,003	2,3030-2,8205	2,46/0,001	1,1105-2,0223

Table 4. Final model with the dependent variable "counselor's performance" and associated independent variables among School Food Counselors of municipalities in the states of Minas Gerais and Espírito Santo, with a confidence interval of 95%

Variable	Crude PR/p	95% CI	Adjusted PR/p
Election/Meeting	1,94/0,001	1,2901-2,9304	1,48/<0,05
Knowledge of regulations of the PNAE	1,54/<0,05	0,1180-0,2976	1,73/<0,05

The statistically significant independent variables in the model show that the availability of material resources, knowledge of counselors of the laws and regulations relating to the program, and democratic election to the Council, among others, directly impact the counselor's performance and monitoring of the PNAE in these municipalities.

DISCUSSION

The predominance of female counselors identified is consistent with the findings of Luchmann and Almeida,¹⁹ who reported a significant female presence in the Councils of public policies compared to traditional institutions of political representation such as the Executive and Legislative Powers.¹⁹ Querino et al. (56%)²⁰ and Wendhausen et al. (60.38%) reported similar results.²¹ The majority of women in organs of social control may be attributed to their alleged competence and sensitivity with social themes,²¹ and the availability of political action in this niche, since there is a quasi-monopoly of males in the Executive and Legislative Powers.¹⁹

The mean age in this study is also similar to the findings of Querino et al.²⁰ These authors related the higher cost of political participation in social councils to the greater interest in and social commitment to volunteer work by persons in this age group.²⁰

In relation to the representation of members of the SFC, approximately half the counselors, both effective and alternate members, did not know their standing in the Council. Presoto and Westphal²² reported that the work in social control councils is understood as the exercise of citizenship, and if the counselors do not know their roles as defined by law and the competencies explicated in the regulations that govern their work, they may lose interest in their function in the Council, which impairs effective social control.

Regarding interviewees' schooling, other studies^{20,21} point to the same direction, indicating the high participation of counselors with complete and post-graduate degrees. This may positively impact the interpretation of the regulations of the program and decision making.

Regarding the employment relationship, the study found that a low percentage of counselors do not have a working bond with the Executing Body. This may be a negative point, as the disproportionate relationship of counselors with the city's administrative machinery can lead to difficulties in the board's performance in terms of exercising control and oversight of government action.²³ In addition, the excessive representation of public power in the councils' activities and decision making may inhibit the performance of other counselors, leading to their exclusion from the debate and often even from effective participation.²³

The high percentage of counselors in their first term corroborates the results of Wendhausen et al.,²¹ who reported 55% of counselors in their first term. This contrasts Santos et al.,²⁴ who found only 23.5% of first term counselors.

In relation to the origin of the indication to the Council, 45.8% of the counselors were indicated by the Executing Body, similar to that found by Wendhausen et al.²¹ (68%). This can undermine the legitimacy of the Council's actions, as the counselor may not act as a speaker regarding issues defending the demands and needs of the groups they represent, or may act as a speaker of the Executing Body, compromising unbiased participation in social control.²¹

Only 42% of the counselors who participated in the study knew the contents of the internal regulations of the SFC to which they belonged. Querino et al.²⁰ reported that 24% of the counselors in their study did not know the regulations and 52% did not know how to answer the question. Internal regulations are important for the Council, as they outline its tasks and other legal provisions.^{25,26}

Most respondents (86.5%) mentioned managers' support for the work of the SFC. In contrast, only 41.6% of counselors have access to the documents necessary to assess accountability. This can mean a lack of effective management support, since it is the duty of the Executing Body to provide the SFC with all documents and information relating to the implementation of the program.²⁵ According to Bandeira et al.,²⁷ "The SFCs usually approve the yearly accounts without evaluating the basic aspects of the implementation of the program documents, including those of the Executing Body."

Councils face the challenges of a lack of access to information and lack of technical capacity and policy interventions, and 76.9% of counselors reported never having participated in training courses. Continuing education programs deserve special mention for active counselors and future candidates.^{2,16}

Regarding the resources provided by the Executing Body for the development of the SFC's activities, none of the municipalities indicated full provision regarding all issues considered essential to the good performance of the Council.²¹ According to Resolution/CD/FNDE no. 38/2009²⁶ and Resolution/CD/FNDE no. 26/2013,²⁵ currently in force, the Executing Body is obligated to ensure the SFC has the resources necessary to fully implement the activities of its competence, such as having an appropriate place for meetings, equipment, transportation of members to sites related to exercising their competencies, and sufficient human and financial resources.

Regarding the frequency of meetings held, 5.9% of counselors reported meeting once a year and 22.7% did not respond. Belik and Chaim²⁸ reported an average of seven meetings per year. Although the program regulations do not define the number of meetings the

SFC must have, monthly meetings are suggested by the National Fund for Development of Education, or at least every two months,²⁷ to ensure covering all the Council's attributions and competences.

Assessing the knowledge of counselors of the norms of the program revealed that only just over half claimed to know the laws of school nutrition, one of the many difficulties faced by various social control organs. This necessitates training them to ensure their effective contribution to the formulation, supervision, and control of policies deployed and implemented in the municipalities in which they operate.²

In terms of the financial resources transferred by the National Fund for the Development of Education to the Executing Body, only 51.2% of counselors reported knowing the value transferred. However, 64.2% reported knowing the value of the municipal budget transfer, which indicates compliance on the part of the Executing Body of its obligation to pass on their financial resources for school meals. In this regard, a study by Bandeira et al.²⁷ indicated the existence of a municipal financial counterpart in 75.5% of the municipalities surveyed. On the other hand, counselors' ignorance of the value of the federal funds received by the Executing Body is concerning. This can prevent the proper monitoring of the use of resources and an accurate analysis of the accounts of the Executing Body.

Regarding the issue of the use of federal resources, 88.5% of counselors reported knowing that the resources of the PNAE are used only for the purchase of foodstuffs. The municipal financial counterpart and use of federal funds only for the purchase of foodstuffs are good indicators of the municipality's performance in managing the PNAE.¹³

When questioning the civil society counselors about the continuity of the provision of school meals to pupils in urban and rural schools, low regular supply was identified in rural schools during the 200 school days. Data from the Federal Court of Auditors cited by Bandeira et al.²⁷ indicate that only 1.0% of irregularities were related to non-attendance on the 200 school days, a less significant figure than found in this study.

Participation in meetings with other counselors to assess the accounts of the Executing Body is a crucial activity in the work of the SFC, and if absent, can compromise the performance and quality of the program.²⁸ In the present study, only 45.1% reported participating in these meetings.

The council is created based on the principle of effective participation of all represented social sectors to ensure the effective control and evaluation of school meals. The analysis of the accounts and sending of the final report to the National Fund for the Development of Education are exclusive activities of the SFC. Here, the fact that 87.2% of counselors representing civil society do not know who evaluates and how the accountability of

the National Fund for the Development of Education is assessed indicates a significant weakness in the performance of these counselors and commitment to the program, preventing adequate social control. Accountability is very important, since through this process, the Federal Government is informed about the execution of the program in various locations in Brazil from the viewpoint of counselors.²⁹

Besides the analysis of accounts, counselors must participate in other activities related to school meals, such as bidding and public tenders. The present study showed that less than 50% of counselors participated in these activities: 58.3% of civil society counselors had no defined periods for visits to urban schools and 81.4% had no defined periods for visits to rural schools. The lack of monitoring the implementation of the program at schools affects the autonomy, performance, and mission of the Council, weakening its position as a representative body of social control.³⁰

The prevalence ratios cited above suggest the importance of how council participants are selected by their bases, that is, elected by the assembly/meeting. Counselors should be selected by the bodies or movements to which they belong through internal discussion, as this will represent the needs and desires of such persons and capacity for consensus through dialog and negotiation.²¹ It also indicates that the counselors who possess adequate resources have more chances of sustaining the activities relevant to the Council.²¹ Moreover, councils with access to information on the regulations of the program and the work they must perform become empowered, increasing their chance to effectively participate in social control. Knowledge on the regulations governing the work of the PNAE is essential, because it allows counselors to effectively contribute to formulating, monitoring, and controlling public policies.²

It was also observed that counselors who participated in other SFC mandates were more participative in meetings, which may be attributed to their maturation in their political role as a controller of the implementation of public policies.²⁰

The final model for the abovementioned conduct of counselors demonstrated the importance of democratically electing the Council and need for their continued training to ensure they pursue their functions according to the enforced legislation. A counselor's good performance is reflected in the effective control of the entire process of the School Food Program, ensuring the high quality of products and menus in all public schools²⁸.

It is emphasized that this is a cross-sectional study, which hinders establishing a relation between cause and effect. However, this does not affect the internal validity of the study, and the results can be generalized to other municipalities with similar scenarios to those of the participants in this study.

CONCLUSION

The results indicate the poor functioning of the SFCs surveyed, as well as inappropriate working resources for counselors, whose performance is weakened by the inadequacy of working resources and lack of knowledge of important aspects of the social control of school meals, such as legislation and internal regulations.

The prevalence ratios suggest positive action in social control when counselors are democratically elected by the segments to which they belong, and when the Executing Body provides them with adequate resources to implement activities relevant to the Council. Furthermore, there is a positive reflection of their actions when they have access to information on the program's laws and internal regulations of their Council.

This suggests the need for municipal managers' greater investment in SFCs to improve their human and material working resources and encourage their continuing formation. This will ultimately improve the quality of their work, which will reflect in the effective integration of the counselor in the PNAE, enabling broad social control and valuing their work. In this regard, the importance of counselors' role in monitoring compliance based on the premises of the PNAE must be highlighted. Here, monitoring the quality of meals served to students and control of the use of public resources through the analysis of the provision of accounts of the municipality are highlighted.

Their volunteer work as democratically elected representatives of different segments of society signifies a true exercise of citizenship in the social control of public policies, which should be recognized and valued by managers and society. However, given their enormous contribution to society, counselors are expected to demonstrate effective commitment and impartiality in the performance of their functions.

It is expected that this study will provide guidance for the improvement of municipal actions in terms of incentives to members of the SFC and the managers of the municipalities studied, contributing to enhancing the management of the PNAE. It reinforces the importance of joint actions between counselors, other members of the school community, and managers, with a view to achieving an adequate supply of food, ensuring Food and Nutritional Security for the students assisted by the program, and effectiveness of social control in these municipalities.

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Contributors

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