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State-Level Implementation of the Secondary Education Reform in Brazil: Between Conflict, Ambiguity, and Heterogeneity

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This paper seeks to contribute to the understanding of variations in subnational policies and the factors that explain them. Some studies attribute these differences to the uneven distribution of state infrastructure and capacity at the subnational level, while others emphasize the role of policy legacies, actors, ideology, ideas, and networks to explain subnational policy variations. This study, analyses variations in policy changes in secondary education across Brazilian states and the factors that influenced them through a qualitative and comparative approach based on data collected through document analysis, survey, and in-depth interviews. The findings indicate that the high level of ambiguity and conflict in national guidelines led to significant variations in state policies. Subnational policies resulted from an intersection between horizontal cooperation, policy legacies, political leadership, and bureaucratic activism, though the influence of these factors varied across states.

Keywords: Education; policy changes; intergovernmental relations; subnational governments; Brazil.

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Variations in subnational policies are common across different countries, resulting in different levels and types of social benefits and policies inside countries (GIRAUDY and PRIBBLE, 2019; HARBERS and STEELE, 2020), particularly in federal systems (GREER, 2006; OBINGER, LEIBFRIED and CASTLES, 2005). Some studies argue that national coordination – primarily through resource redistribution and project grants - is crucial for inducing the subnational implementation of national policies and ensuring minimum standards of access and quality in social policies (GREER, 2006; OBINGER, LEIBFRIED and CASTLES, 2005). National coordination is especially crucial in unequal federations, such as Brazil, as it reduces inequalities in service provision and policies at the subnational level (ARRETCHE, 2012). However, national coordination alone does not fully account for variations in subnational policies (GREER, 2019; VAMPA, 2016), and the dynamics that shape national policies do not necessarily operate in the same way at the subnational level (GIRAUDY, MONCADA and SNYDER, 2019; PAQUET, 2015).

This paper seeks to contribute to this debate by analyzing the case of Brazil's secondary education reform. Historically, national coordination has played a key role in education policy, ensuring, service expansion, minimum standards, inclusion, and inequality reduction. However, secondary education has followed a highly decentralized trajectory, with weak national coordination and significant policymaking authority at the state level. An attempt to shift the course of this policy occurred with approval of Law N^o 13,415 in 2017, amid a context of high conflict and lack of consensus, which continued in the following years and influenced further changes in 2024. Given this policy trajectory, this study focuses on understanding subnational variations and policy making in the implementation of the secondary education reform across Brazilian states.

A growing body of literature has focused on an in-depth exploration of variations in subnational social policies and the dynamics of subnational policymaking (GIRAUDY, MONCADA and SNYDER, 2019). Some studies suggest that variations in welfare policies stem from the uneven distribution of state infrastructure and capacity at the subnational level (BICHIR, BRETTAS and CANATO, 2017; CONNEL, DENNY and MARTIN, 2021; ECKERSLEY, 2017; GIRAUDY and PRIBBLE, 2020; HARBERS and STEELE, 2020; LAVALLE, RODRIGUES and GUICHENEY, 2019; LUNA and

SOIFER, 2017; RODRIGUES-SILVEIRA, 2019). Others argue that variations in subnational policies are related to institutional features, partisanship, policy legacies, bureaucratic activism, and the interactions between state and non-state actors (BÉLAND and LECOURE, 2023, 2006; BORGES, 2008; CONNELL, DENNY and MARTIN, 2021; FENWICK, 2015, 2010; GIBSON, 2017; KARCH, 2007; NIEDZWIECKI, 2015; PAQUET, 2015; SUGIYAMA, 2008; TILLIN, 2021; VAMPA, 2016; WALLNER, 2014).

This study seeks to deepen the understanding of the influence of national coordination and subnational factors – such as policy legacies, state capacities, actors, ideology, ideas, and networks - on subnational policy variations. This study also contributes to the ongoing debate by offering a comparative and qualitative analysis of subnational policies within a federal country, capturing intra-country variations and shedding light on subnational actors and institutions that are often overlooked (GIRAUDY, MONCADA and SNYDER, 2019). We analyzed recent policy changes in secondary education across the 27 Brazilian state governments by mapping their policies, categorizing them, and identifying the factors that explain the differences among these categories.

The empirical research included a qualitative analysis of data collected over four years (2018-2021) through documents, surveys, and in-depth interviews with key actors involved in state education policies in Brazilian states. The analysis shows that states initially implemented changes in line with national legislation. However, the ambiguous and conflictual feature of national legislation (CAETANO and ALVES, 2020; MARCELINO et al., 2017; MICHETTI, 2020; SARGENTINI, 2018; SILVA and SANTOS, 2018) led to significant variation in subnational policies, further reinforced by the heterogeneity of state contexts. Subnational policies were shaped by the intersection of horizontal cooperation, policy legacies, political leadership, and bureaucratic activism at the subnational level. National coordination only mattered in states with low administrative capacity and no policy legacy. In contrast, in states with established policy legacies and greater administrative capacity, political leaders and bureaucrats engaged others actors, persuaded them, and built consensus to reduce ambiguity and conflict, thereby influencing the development of the policies.

This paper is organized into three sections. In the first section, we present a literature review on federalism and subnational policies. In the second section, we

discuss the characteristics and dynamics of Brazil's federalism, along with the evolution of education policy over the past few decades. In the third, we examine state policy changes within the context of the secondary education reform. Conclusively, we summarize our main research findings.

Subnational policies in federal countries

The scholarship on federalism and social policies has highlighted the tensions related to policy variations within federal countries. While variations are expected and even desirable as reflections of religious, ethnic, and linguistic diversities in multi-nation societies, they can also lead to disparities in welfare, thereby reinforcing regional inequalities (GREER, 2006; OBINGER, LEIBFRIED and CASTLES, 2005). In response to these tensions, scholars have focused on the role of national coordination in ensuring consistent standards across subnational policies and reducing variations in welfare levels between regions (GREER, 2006; OBINGER, LEIBFRIED and CASTLES, 2005). This issue is particularly relevant in unequal federations, such as Brazil (ARRETCHE, 2012).

Although national coordination is central to understanding subnational policies, a certain degree of variation is expected. This variation can be even more pronounced when national policies are too vague and ambiguous. For this reason, some studies have emphasized the importance of analyzing welfare policies at the subnational level, particularly focusing on the extent of policy variation and the factors that explain it (GREER, 2019; PAQUET, 2015; VAMPA, 2016). Moreover, gaining a better understanding of subnational policymaking is crucial for understanding policies in federal countries “[...] since policy features and political dynamics at the national scale might not entirely be reproduced at the subnational scale” (PAQUET, 2015, p. 1816). A growing body of literature indicates that variations in welfare policies arise from the uneven distribution of state infrastructure and capacity at the subnational level (BICHIR, BRETTAS and CANATO, 2017; CONNEL, DENNY and MARTIN, 2021; ECKERSLEY, 2017; GIRAUDY and PRIBBLE, 2020; HARBERS and STEELE, 2020; LAVALLE, RODRIGUES and GUICHENEY, 2019; LUNA and SOIFER, 2017; RODRIGUES-SILVEIRA, 2019).

Other studies highlight the importance of policy and institutional legacies, bureaucratic and administrative capacities, and the relational dynamics of subnational state infrastructure and capacity (BICHIR, BRETTAS and CANATO, 2017; ECKERSLEY, 2017; LAVALLE, RODRIGUES and GUICHENEY, 2019). Eckersley (2017) argues that lower levels of national coordination can lead to weaker subnational capacity, which in turn fosters closer relationships with other actors at the subnational level as a mechanism to balance the fragility of state capacity.

The literature mentions other variables. Among institutional factors, national coordination and other federal dynamics - such as credit claiming and blame avoidance (BORGES, 2008; FENWICK, 2015; 2010, NIEDZWIECKI, 2015; SEGATTO, SILVA and ABRUCIO, 2023; TILLIN, 2021) – as well as horizontal diffusion between jurisdictions (KARCH, 2007; WALLNER, 2014) play a key role in explaining subnational policies. Federal dynamics, combined with partisanship, ideological orientation, and the characteristics of party systems are also factors that influence subnational welfare policies (NIEDZWIECKI, 2015; VAMPA, 2016). Studies focused on the Brazilian case, for instance, have shown that political alignment was critical for the creation of new social programs (NIEDZWIECKI, 2015).

Some studies have focused on the role of actors and agency in subnational policy changes, including specific political actors deemed legitimate (CONNEL, DENNY and MARTIN, 2021), networks and policy communities that ‘carry’ ideas and ideological orientations (SUGIYAMA, 2008), and bureaucrats (PAQUET, 2015). Paquet (2015) argues that, in the case of immigration policies in Canadian provinces, exogenous factors - such as shifts in public opinion and societal dynamics – were significant drivers of policy changes. Still, bureaucrats acted as policy makers in three different ways: 01. classic entrepreneurs, seniors analysts who connected problems, solutions, and political processes based on specific ideas about solutions; 02. policy puzzlers, managers and executives with prior experience outside of government, who forged links between state and non-state actors to implement changes based on specific ideas about problems; and 03. innovators, managers and executives with experience in other governments and, in some cases, in the private sector, who influenced policies based on successful experiences from other governments. The role

of bureaucrats with ties to non-state actors was also emphasized. By Gibson (2017) in the context of healthcare policy changes.

Béland and Lecours (2006) explored the influence of identity and ideas on welfare development in subnational contexts within federal countries. They also analyzed the interplay between actors, ideas, and institutions, arguing that subnational policies are also explained by ideational policy feedback, where existing policies reshape collective identities and influence politics as political actors frame and reframe specific policies in federal countries (BÉLAND and LECOURS, 2023).

Building on this debate, we analyze the case of secondary education reform in Brazil, a national regulation mandated for implementation across all Brazilian states. Previous studies on the reform's implementation in Brazil reveal variations in policy implementation among states, categorizing them into four groups: 01. states without prior experience that implemented changes primarily influenced by national coordination (two states); 02. states without prior experience with limited capacity to implement changes, as they were not influenced by national coordination (12 states); 03. states with prior experience where the national reform accelerated the implementation of new changes (six states); 04. states with prior experience, some of which highly institutionalized, that struggled to adapt their existing policies and pathways to align with the national reform (seven states) (LOTTA et al., 2021). However, there is a lack of studies exploring these different explanatory factors. In this regard, we seek to understand the subnational changes in secondary education by examining the effects of various subnational factors on state policies going beyond policy legacies and national coordination. Specifically, we seek to better understand whether and how other factors identified in the literature - such as state capacities, actors, ideology, ideas, and networks within institutional contexts, including both national and horizontal intergovernmental relations - play a role in this process.

Brazil's multilevel and multilayer education policy

Brazil is a federation consisting of three levels of government: the federal government, 26 states, 55,570 municipalities and a federal district. The country's most recent Constitution, adopted in 1988, marked a significant milestone, establishing a new democratic regime after more than 20 years of authoritarian rule. The

Constitution established a model of federalism that combines greater autonomy for subnational governments, shared responsibilities across different levels of government, and the central role of the federal government in decision-making, due to the substantial fiscal asymmetry between the levels of government in favor of the Union (ARRETCHE, 2012).

Regarding social policies, these characteristics consolidated the federal government as a key decision-maker in defining national policy parameters, owing to its fiscal resources and political and administrative capacities. In education, responsibilities were shared among the federal government, states, and municipalities. However, education was historically provided by both states. And municipalities within a dual system, meaning that both state and municipal education systems operated schools and enrolled students. Additionally, until the 1980s, federal coordination in this policy area was limited, as the federal government primarily focused on higher education which only changed after the enactment of the 1988 Constitution. However, the lack of strong federative coordination resulted in unequal provision of education in terms of access and quality, as state and municipal governments varied greatly in their fiscal and administrative capacities (OLIVEIRA and SOUZA, 2010).

National coordination is central to Brazil's federalism, ensuring consistent standards in subnational policies across the country and reducing regional inequalities (ARRETCHE, 2012). This places national coordination at the center of the education policy debate. Moreover, national coordination is crucial because jurisdictional autonomy, combined with a formally disintegrated framework and centripetal features, could lead to further disintegration and conflict (CAPANO, 2014).

The Brazilian federation has both formal and informal mechanisms for consensus building between levels of government that influence subnational policies (FRANZESE and ABRUCIO, 2013). These include institutionalized intergovernmental arenas with representatives from all three levels of government. In education, relevant associations such as the National Council of Education Secretaries (Conselho Nacional de Secretários de Educação, CONSED) play a key role. However, there is no overarching institutionalized arena within the education system. Except, for those that focus on specific topics, such as resource redistribution (SEGATTO, 2018).

Changes in secondary education began with national guidelines approved in the 1990s (Parâmetros Curriculares Nacionais) and the 2000s (Diretrizes Curriculares Nacionais da Educação), which required subnational governments to include specific content in their curricula. In 2014, the National Education Plan set out to define a national curriculum with learning goals and rights within the next decade. As a result, in 2016 and 2017, the National Education Council approved the national curriculum for elementary and secondary education. Following this, the Temer administration (2016–2019) introduced other changes in secondary education, called the New Secondary Education (Novo Ensino Médio), initially issued as a provisional measure (Medida Provisória Nº 746/2016) and later ratified by the National Congress as Law Nº 13,415/2017.

The approval of the national curriculum and the New Secondary Education occurred following Dilma's impeachment in 2016, during Temer's administration, which faced low levels of social legitimacy. While the national curriculum emerged from a minimal consensus among various actors in the education policy field, this was not the case for the New Secondary Education reform. In this case, a minimal consensus existed only among a small group of political leaders and managers from subnational governments, including some from states such as Pernambuco, which had already implemented changes. However, no broader consensus emerged among various groups, as the reform was not widely discussed within the education field, and some groups actively opposed the changes (CAETANO and ALVES, 2020; MARCELINO et al., 2017; MICHETTI, 2020; SARGENTINI, 2018; SILVA and SANTOS, 2018).

This law proposed a wide range of changes and regulations for secondary education, including modifications to the curriculum structure, teacher training requirements, provisions for professional and technical education, incentives for full-time education, and increased workload. Among other changes, MP Nº 746/2016 mandated a gradual increase in annual instructional hours from 800 to 1,400, moving towards full-time schooling; mandatory teaching of Portuguese, Mathematics, and English, while eliminating previously required subjects such as Physical Education, Art, Sociology, and Philosophy; and introduced courses designed to promote students' life projects. In 2017, the National Congress approved Law Nº 13,415 replacing MP Nº 746, reintroducing Physical Education, Art, Sociology, and Philosophy as mandatory

subjects in a distinct category separate from Portuguese, Mathematics, and English. The law also set a five-year goal to reach a minimum of 1,000 hours in all schools, with a maximum of 1,800 hours and a minimum of 800 hours, along with provisions for adequate teacher training.

The federal government introduced financial incentives, particularly through the Policy to Promote the Implementation of Full-Time Secondary Schools (EMTI), under which the Ministry of Education (MEC) allocates resources to states over a 10-year period per school to support the implementation of the approved guidelines. However, the lack of strong national coordination created ambiguity about how the changes should be implemented.

The implementation of the reform took place during Bolsonaro's government, which reduced the role of the federal government in national coordination (ABRUCIO et al., 2020). In education policy, this led to a weakening of the MEC's role in assisting and supporting subnational governments, as well as a decrease in resources transferred through project grants. At the same time, the Ministry made top-down decisions, excluding subnational governments from key matters, such as the renewal of the equalization system and the postponement of the national exam for higher education admission (ABRUCIO et al., 2020; GOMES and SEGATTO, 2024; SEGATTO et al., 2023). Although the EMTI program continued, the full planned budget was not allocated to the states, and only a small number of schools received funding through this initiative (GOMES and SEGATTO, 2024).

The national guidelines of the reform – the new curriculum and the New Secondary Education – contained conflicting and ambiguous elements. They were not a consensus among actors in the educational field; on the contrary, some provisions, such as changes to mandatory courses and the introduction of the students' life projects course, were highly contested (CAETANO and ALVES, 2020; MARCELINO et al., 2017; MICHETTI, 2020; SARGENTINI, 2018; SILVA and SANTOS, 2018). Furthermore, although the New Secondary Education stipulated that the federal government should provide technical and financial support to states and oversee the implementation of the reform through various funding mechanisms, including the EMTI, national coordination remained weak, resulting in a context of high ambiguity.

Being a complex, heterogeneous, and unequal multi-level system, Brazil's education framework requires consensus building and coordination of different levels of government with heterogeneous administrative and fiscal capacities. In the case of the secondary education reform, national guidelines contained ambiguous and contentious elements, combined with project grants designed to incentivize states to implement changes. These included expanding school hours, developing multiple pathways for students to choose from in secondary education, adapting state curricula, and establishing partnerships with non-state actors. However, despite these incentives, the extent of change varied significantly across states.

Methods and empirical settings

We analyzed policy changes in secondary education in all 27 Brazilian states. Our empirical research is grounded in a qualitative analysis of primary and secondary data collected between 2018 and 2021 in three stages. The first stage, conducted in 2018, involved gathering data from various documents, including legislation, reports, and policy briefs. Additionally, we conducted an original survey, completed by managers from all 27 state education departments, and carried out in-depth interviews with these managers. This stage aimed to capture the early phase of policy changes following the approval of the national guidelines.

The findings from this first stage, previously published, demonstrate substantial variation in subnational policies across the country. This variation allows for the classification of states into four distinct categories: 01. states without prior experience that implemented changes primarily influenced by national coordination; 02. states without prior experience that demonstrated limited implementation capacity, as they were not influenced by national coordination; 03. states with existing experience where national reforms facilitated additional policy changes; and 04. states with prior experience, sometimes highly institutionalized that encountered difficulties adapting their existing frameworks to national reforms (LOTTA et al., 2021).

The second stage of the empirical research involved in-depth interviews with managers from all 27 state education departments, conducted in 2019 and 2020. In 2021, we carried out a detailed analysis of four states – one from each category – using

documents and additional in-depth interviews with state education department managers and other key actors in the state education systems, such as representatives from education state councils and teachers' unions. The interviews aimed to better understand the factors influencing the differences among these categories of states. They were conducted via Zoom, phone, or in person. To ensure confidentiality and protect interviewees from potential professional or personal repercussions, this paper does not disclose their names or affiliated institutions.

It is important to note that this study focuses on the early years of policy change implementation at the state level, emphasizing the initial adjustments made by the states. Accordingly, our analysis focuses on the implementation of state curricula, educational pathways, and full-time schools the primary - changes conducted by the states during the period under review. Seeking to understand the factors that explain the implementation of these changes, we analyzed the role of national coordination and subnational dynamics in this process.

Secondary education changes in the Brazilian States

The combination of conflict and ambiguity heightened the complexity of policy implementation, as conflict hindered the mobilization of actors, while high ambiguity created challenges in adopting changes. As a result, state governments had considerable agency in shaping their policies, including the design of educational pathways, curriculum flexibility, the introduction of life projects centered on students, and the expansion of class hours (LOTTA et al., 2021).

This led to considerable heterogeneity across the country. In the group of states that were already implementing reforms in secondary education, some adopted specific changes or focused on particular themes, influenced by federal incentives, while others had more consolidated reform processes, with interrelated, more institutionalized initiatives that were not tied to federal incentives. Other states, with fewer previous experiences in terms of scope, incidence, and institutionalization, were influenced to varying degrees by federal induction mechanisms (LOTTA et al., 2021).

In the first group, two states had undertaken few prior initiatives, but the reform served as a catalyst, prompting the adoption of significant changes. These states seized the reform as a window of opportunity to drive broader changes, such as

increasing the number of full-time schools. In the second group, twelve states were also characterized by a lack of more robust previous initiatives, but they implemented national changes in a strict manner, meaning these were not innovative changes in terms of content or scope beyond what was mandated by the federal government, particularly the EMTI. The third (six states) and fourth (seven states) groups are those characterized by more robust and consolidated previous experiences, but differ in the degree of institutionalization and integration. While the reform accelerated change in the third group, it did not have the same effect in the fourth group. On the contrary, in some cases, national changes led to a slowdown or even a paralysis of ongoing reforms (LOTTA et al., 2021).

Intersections between national coordination, horizontal cooperation, and local factors

National coordination – in this case, through the approval of national guidelines and project grants – influenced the implementation of the reform, ensuring the adoption of changes in secondary education across all states. This means that the vertical relationship between the federal government and states was crucial in ensuring subnational policy changes. However, its influence varied across states. While all states followed national changes and received funding to implement federal programs, particularly the EMTI, their responses differed due to the intersection between national coordination mechanisms and state-specific contexts. National coordination mechanisms had the most significant impact on three groups of states (01, 02, and 03), but only in group 02 states were significantly influenced by national coordination.

However, national coordination weakened over the course of the implementation process, particularly between 2019 and 2022, as unilateral and top-down decisions became more prevalent. This shift created challenges for states and further reinforced disparities among them. As one interviewee noted: “the federal government has not been a facilitator but an imposer. It introduced a law, but there has been no guidance for the states, and they are not following up with the states. In reality, we have faced difficulties because they haven't engaged in dialogue with us; it has been complicated” (ANONYMOUS INTERVIEW, 2020).

In group 02, state education departments had fragile bureaucratic structures that struggled to mobilize actors within the education system, build consensus on key issues such as curriculum and pathways discuss and legitimize policy proposals, and effectively implement changes. Some states in this group experienced frequent changes in the bureaucracy and leadership of their education departments, resulting in a high level of policy discontinuity. Additionally, teacher unions played a significant role in opposing the reforms, successfully mobilizing teachers against the changes. As one interviewee noted, “especially the unions [opposed]; [...] this union culture is very strong. The union is not very supportive of the reform [...] they are constantly monitoring the situation” (ANONYMOUS INTERVIEW, 2021) Teachers were particularly concerned about the ambiguity surrounding the reforms, a concern that state managers were unable to appease over time. One interviewee argued that “[...] before the significant benefits that the New Secondary Education will bring, what it’s currently causing is a lot of concern and insecurity among teachers. This has created some discomfort” (ANONYMOUS INTERVIEW, 2021). Subnational changes took longer than in other states and were only enacted when the federal government aligned national guidelines to inducement mechanisms (project grants).

In the other groups (01, 03, and 04), local factors were important in shaping policy changes. In groups 01 and 03, states were influenced by both national coordination and local factors. In group 01, national coordination served as a ‘window of opportunity’, allowing political actors and bureaucrats to mobilize actors within the education system and build consensus on key issues. They ‘believed’ in the changes set by the national guidelines and implemented mechanisms that enabled principals, teachers, and students to debate curriculum content and pathways, leading to the adoption of important changes such as the expansion of school hours.

In group 03, states had a prior history of changes in secondary education. These changes were aligned with national guidelines and project grants, as many of them had been introduced as early as 2012 (with some dating back to the 2000s). These included curricular reforms, the creation of technical professional schools integrated into a single shift, experiences with complementary hours, integration with the workforce, and the adoption of elective courses – all of which had been further enhanced by federal actions in the previous decade.

Even though some state bureaucrats disagreed with how the law was approved, they were convinced that the changes were necessary to address the challenges in secondary education and that the national guidelines provided the best available solution. In these cases, they also mobilized within the education system and built consensus on key issues, leading to a more consistent process of change compared to the other groups. An example of this can be seen in the statement of one interviewee: “it's completely viable. I believe the starting point is for school management to believe in change and to communicate this to both their internal and external communities. [...] The major challenge is finding principals and teachers who accept and understand this need and who invest in this model. So, it is viable; it is possible!”(ANONYMOUS INTERVIEW, 2021).

The last group of states (group 04) was the least affected by national coordination. These states had a prior policy path focused on changes in secondary education and the adoption of innovative educational policies. They implemented major, consistent, and integrated changes, creating a comprehensive process of secondary education reform. They invested in a broader institutionalization of changes – such as revising curriculum guidelines aligning vocational education with regular secondary education, and expanding school hours. While other states (groups 01, 02, and 03) focused on more specific changes, such as expanding school hours in select schools, and other states are still in the process of debating and building consensus on these key issues. States in group 04 had stronger administrative capacities, with solid bureaucratic bodies that had already implemented previous reforms, enabling them to carry out these changes without relying on national coordination.

These states had already innovated in the creation of the EMTI more than a decade earlier, having approved models for curricular reorganization and offering professional education in a single shift, among other initiatives. In all these states, a transformation process was already underway, with a clear direction, well-defined goals, and their own model, accompanied by a high level of institutionalization. In these cases, the approval of national changes became a potential obstacle, as it created an environment of uncertainty that led to paralysis (e.g., the lack of clarity regarding the new curriculum). In addition, they recognized that adapting the measures already in place to the new reform proposals would come at a high cost. As a result, in these states,

the reform became a reason to foster a climate of ‘calm and caution’ – that is, to wait and see what would unfold before adapting to the already consolidated changes.

Over time, states in group 04 could be further subdivided into two groups. In some cases, they adopted a more conservative approach, criticizing the national guidelines and continuing with the implementation of their own policies. In other, bureaucrats gradually began to promote changes in line with the national guidelines. Although project grants did not directly influence the adoption of changes in these states, political actors and bureaucrats were convinced to follow national changes as they observed other states implementing them. In one case, for instance, political actors who participated in the approval of the national reform held key positions within state education departments. In another case, the implementation of the reform led to a division of schools into two groups: one group consisted of schools that fully implemented previous state reforms, such as increasing school hours, upgrading school infrastructure, and introducing new courses. While the second group made only partial changes, following national regulations by changing courses without increasing school hours or altering infrastructure.

This analysis shows that state-level changes in education have varied significantly across the country. This variation stems from the decentralized nature of education policy, with some states having adopted changes as early as the first decades of the 20th century. These states developed stronger administrative capacities, bureaucratic bodies, and innovative policies over time, particularly in secondary education. However, this was not the case for all states. A significant number of them had more fragile administrative capacities and bureaucratic bodies, which hindered the development of innovative and consistent secondary education policies, leaving them reliant on national coordination to implement major changes. In these cases, national coordination was crucial in ensuring state-level policy changes. However, national coordination alone does not explain the changes observed across all groups of states.

In addition to the heterogeneity in policy legacies and capacities that shaped recent changes, political leaders and bureaucrats also played a key role in explaining the differences between states. Given the ambiguous and conflictual nature of the national guidelines, these actors had to be convinced of the importance of changes in

secondary education and that the national guidelines offered the solution to face the existing challenges. Interviewees from all four groups stated that secondary education faced numerous challenges, including low levels of learning and graduation rates, and a lack of student engagement and motivation to study. As one interviewee put it: “A student who sees that the school is not meeting their needs wants change”, leading to the conclusion that “change was necessary” (ANONYMOUS INTERVIEW, 2021).

However, the strategies used to mobilize different actors within the education system – engaging them in debates, building consensus on key issues such as curriculum and pathways, and legitimizing these decisions to convince principals, teachers, and students while reducing resistance and conflict – varied greatly among the four groups of states. The states that implemented major changes developed plans in collaboration with various actors, created forums for discussion, and initiated processes to modify courses, provide teacher training, and improve school infrastructure, among other efforts. Political leaders and bureaucrats sought to reduce conflict and ambiguity by adopting these strategies. However, this did not mean they overcame all the numerous issues raised by the opposition, such as inadequate school infrastructure, lack of resources, fragilities in teacher training, limited course offerings in most schools that restricted student choice, and the division between schools with extended hours and regular schools.

Horizontal relationships with other states through the CONSED influenced the changes implemented by states in all groups. Horizontal relations played a crucial role in strengthening ties between states, facilitating the exchange of information and the diffusion of ideas – reinforcing findings from previous studies (SILVA and SANTOS, 2018; SEGATTO et al., 2023). This horizontal cooperation was further reinforced in the context of fragile national coordination. Even though the federal government implemented inducement mechanisms through the EMTI, its role in national coordination weakened between 2019 and 2022. As a result, a workgroup was created within the CONSED, bringing together bureaucrats from state education departments and nongovernmental organizations to discuss how to implement national guidelines and clarify the ambiguous and broad directives. This meant that, in addition to financial assistance, states collaborated to compensate for the lack of technical assistance from the federal government. This workgroup also served as an

important arena for convincing political leaders and bureaucrats in states that had not yet adopted changes.

This horizontal cooperation was especially crucial for states with no prior policies related to secondary education and with low administrative capacities. Interactions within the CONSED not only facilitated the flow and diffusion of ideas but also contributed to the development and legitimization of specific definitions for the most ambiguous aspects of the national changes, such as the creation of new state curricula and teacher training initiatives. It is important to note that the CONSED did not continue the workgroup after its political leadership changed in 2020, which means that the lack of institutionalized horizontal coordination could create additional barriers for states with no prior policies and low administrative capacities.

Table 01. Implementation of Secondary Education Reform by state categories, policy changes, and explanatory factors

Groups	State Policy Changes	Explanatory Factors
01	Medium level of changes following national guidelines with innovative changes	National coordination Political leadership and bureaucratic activism
02	Specific changes following national guidelines	National coordination
03	Previous policies and medium level of changes following national guidelines	National coordination State policy legacy and capacity Political leadership and bureaucratic activism
04	Previous policies and, in some cases, major changes following national guidelines	State policy legacy and capacity

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Conclusions

The approval of national changes in secondary education in 2016 and 2017 marked a shift toward increased federal coordination in education policy. However, national coordination in this case was characterized by ambiguity and conflict. Different actors in the education field opposed both the content of these changes and the manner in which they were approved, leading to high levels of conflict. Additionally, these changes were characterized by a high degree of ambiguity, granting states considerable agency to create itineraries, modify the curriculum, adopt life project courses, center the focus on students, and expand class hours, among other adjustments. Between 2019 and 2022, while the federal government maintained some

incentives to support states in implementing these changes, its role in providing financial and technical assistance diminished, which affected the pace and scope of reforms at the subnational level.

Although the reform was ambiguous and conflictual, states began the implementation of changes. National changes influenced all state education policies, but they cannot fully explain subnational policy changes. Our analysis shows that federal incentives played a role in shaping changes in some states. However, national coordination alone does not account for all state policy changes. This raises the question: What other factors help explain this process? What additional elements contributed to the implementation of reforms at the state level?

Horizontal (state-state) relations allowed states to build consensus and diffuse ideas and policies. In this context, both vertical and horizontal intergovernmental relations influenced states, though in different ways. Both were crucial for states with low administrative capacity and no policy legacy. However, in states with a policy legacy, horizontal policy diffusion played a more significant role than national coordination in driving policy changes. While horizontal intergovernmental relationships do not possess the same financial and administrative reach as national coordination in unequal federations, they have important implications for the diffusion of policy ideas, the establishment of joint implementation partnerships, and intergovernmental advocacy. The involvement, and in some cases the mediation, of nongovernmental organizations served as a mechanism for outsourcing capacity, which was particularly significant in contexts with low administrative capacity.

Moreover, the role of political leaders and bureaucrats varied across states. In those where the implementation of changes was at more advanced stages, these actors played a key role in mobilizing others, persuading them of the merits of specific reform ideas, and building consensus around the proposed changes. These processes were essential for reducing ambiguity by building consensus and establishing clear definitions on key issues such as curriculum and pathways, and for mitigating conflict and resistance by legitimizing the changes and convincing principals, teachers, and students. However, this process largely excluded actors who strongly opposed the reform, such as unions and universities.

This study shows that the intersections between actors, ideas, and federal dynamics are key to understanding subnational policies in federal countries. Ambiguous and conflictual policies can lead significant variations in subnational policies, thereby limiting the effectiveness of national coordination mechanisms. In the case of Brazil's secondary education reform, state policies were also influenced by local factors. Future research is essential to further explore how these factors shape subnational policies in other contexts characterized by other ambiguous and conflictual policies within complex and unequal systems.

The change in the federal government in 2023 reignited the debate over secondary education reform. President Lula's administration faced pressure from various social movements and civil society organizations to revoke the 2017 reform and eliminate the associated national legislation. However, the Ministry of Education (MEC) did not abolish the reform but instead proposed a reformulation through the approval of Law N° 5,230/2023 and Law N° 14,945/2024, which included changes to minimum annual hours and mandatory courses – issues that have been highly contested. Future studies should further examine the implementation of these new changes, as well as other recent changes not covered in this study, such as teacher training and career development.

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