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To Freire or not to Freire: Educational freedom and the populist right-wing ‘*Escola sem Partido*’ movement in Brazil

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This article addresses key topics of academic freedom and critical pedagogy during a time of right-wing populist politics. The rise of the far-right politician Jair Bolsonaro to Brazil’s presidency in 2019 was accompanied by a vow to eradicate any vestige of the ideas of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire from the country’s schools. Bolsonaro’s campaign was supported by ultra-conservative groups that have as their core mission a traditional Christian and anti-Communist educational agenda. At the forefront of these groups is the influential and conspicuous ‘*Escola sem Partido*’ (ESP) movement that has forcefully campaigned against Freire’s critical pedagogy across the country and promoted physical and online abuse of teachers since 2014. This article asks how Freire’s philosophies can be an ally in the struggle for democratic education in the current political climate in Brazil. It employs a method of dialogical narrative to bring Freire’s theories and critical methodology to life and test their potency against the ESP educational philosophies. It initially employs Freire’s core ideas to examine the ESP policies and parliamentary bills. In the second part, it analyses documents and online content produced by civil society resistance to ESP pressures. The findings show the vitality of Freire’s pedagogical philosophy to empower oppressed communities in their demands for quality education. The narrative concludes by demonstrating the vital role of the critical consciousness process and of Freire’s pedagogy of freedom to support ongoing struggles by teachers and communities to block ESP attempts to abolish critical thinking in Brazilian public education.

Keywords: Paulo Freire; critical pedagogy; pedagogy of freedom; *escola sem partido*

Introduction

‘Brazilian education lives a climate of dictatorship’. That was the headline of the international section of the influential Spanish newspaper *El País* on 31 May 2019. This authoritarian context within the country’s educational sector can be linked to the election of far right-wing populist politician Jair Bolsonaro as Brazil’s president in 2018. After 14 years of left-centred governments, Bolsonaro was elected as a consequence of an enormous rightist wave that, exploiting the economic crisis and unprecedented levels of urban violence in the main cities, was pushing to implement a conservative neoliberal agenda in the country. In 2015 and 2016, millions of Brazilians, instigated by right-wing mainstream and social media channels, flocked to the streets to demand the impeachment of then president Dilma Rousseff, due to the

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corruption allegations engulfing the federal government. Roussef was finally impeached in mid-2016 and since then the relatively unknown federal representative Jair Bolsonaro jumped to stardom, winning the 2018 presidential elections with his homophobic, racist and pro-military speeches that resonated with traditionalist sectors of society.

Bolsonaro was voted in on a political platform that comprised both a neoliberal economic programme and a conservative agenda endorsing outdated moral values. This neoliberal programme consists, on the one hand, of fast-tracking the privatisation of public assets such as large state companies; and on the other hand, reforming the pensions system and implementing severe cuts in public funding for health and education, including public universities, hence allowing private groups to profit in these markets. Together with these profound economic changes, ultra-conservative groups sustained Bolsonaro's candidacy as he vowed to carry out educational reforms that would place the military inside schools. Military reserve teams, rather than educators, would be sole instructors of the mandated curriculum, using authoritarian and disciplinary methods to transform students into passive recipients of whatever they were told by their new tutors. At the core of these educational changes was Bolsonaro's plan to ban any vestige of Paulo Freire's democratic philosophy in Brazilian schools, plans that were celebrated by the conservative groups.

Paulo Freire was a Brazilian educator whose work became the utmost global reference of critical and dialogical pedagogy (Giroux, 2006). Freire (2000) considered education a practice of freedom and a powerful tool for resistance against social and cultural oppression. Freire developed critical pedagogies that, by using problem-posing methods, give voice to all students (Giroux, 2006, 2011). Freire was a severe critic of the 'banking' concept of education, where students are considered empty vessels with zero knowledge and the teacher's task is only to fill these vessels with previously made information (Freire, 2000). Freire's democratic pedagogical philosophies and dialogical methods have always been demonised by Brazilian right-wing groups, who blame his ideas for the failure of Brazil's education system. These groups advocate for traditional pedagogies where hierarchy and instruction prevail over dialogue and critical thinking (Paulino, 2018). As Freire's dialogical methods increase social consciousness and give background for political action, non-democratic groups see Freirean pedagogies as the 'enemy' to be defeated (Ribeiro, 2018). In 2012, the National Parliament passed a bill that proclaimed Freire the 'patron of Brazilian education' (Gadotti, 2016). This decree inflamed the rage that old-fashioned groups have against Paulo Freire and his pedagogies.

At the forefront of these traditionalist groups is the influential and noticeable '*Escola sem Partido*' (ESP) movement, with its ultra-conservative Christian, anti-Communist and anti-Freirean educational agenda. In Brazilian Portuguese, '*Escola sem Partido*' translates literally as 'School without a Political Party'. The rationale behind the name is that, influenced by Freire's pedagogical methods, alleged partisan teachers were indoctrinating defenceless school children with 'cultural Marxism' (Penna, 2016; Paulino, 2018). The ESP claims that Freire's methods are behind all the 'communist' indoctrination children arguably receive in schools (Carvalho, 2012). Hence, the ESP would save the children from this 'brainwashing' school system by proposing and implementing 'politically neutral' schools in which teachers

deliver their instruction according to curriculum guidelines without expressing their opinions or influencing the students (Miguel, 2016; Paulino, 2018; Capaverde *et al.*, 2019).

In this article, by using Freire's own conceptual framework, I show how the ESP's hidden agenda is to abolish critical thinking and any form of contestation of the *status quo* in public schools and in the education of working-class children.

Since 2014, the ESP parliamentary subdivision (known as 'ESP programme') has been pushing for educational restructuring within several layers of government (cities, states and federal parliaments). Their proposals would abolish any academic freedom for teachers inside classrooms (Ramos, 2016; Penna, 2018b). Furthermore, the ESP civil branch (branded 'ESP movement') has been using its strong online presence to promote witch-hunts against 'left-wing' educators; also protesting at school gates to physically intimidate teachers who, according to the ESP, deliver political ideology to their students (Macedo, 2018).

Teachers, teachers' unions, parents, students, politicians and academics across Brazil have been resisting ESP moves and methods (Guilherme & Picoli, 2018; Macedo, 2018). From online platforms such as 'Teachers against the ESP' or 'Parents for Democracy' to parliamentary battles and street protests, Brazilian educational communities have tried to fight against the ESP ideology of 'politically neutral' schooling. Brazilian academia has also responded to the ESP movement; organising academic conferences, writing and publishing dozens of peer-reviewed papers, book chapters, five Master's theses, a Ph.D. dissertation and three books, in the past 5 years. These works all attempt to analyse, explain and counteract ESP methods and ideology. They also challenge the ESP philosophy of inhibiting academic freedom behind its assumptions that left-wing teachers indoctrinate their students with their political views (Capaverde *et al.*, 2019). However, amongst all this academic production over the past 5 years, while two papers (Ramos & Santoro, 2017; de Genova Ferreira & de Souza, 2018) do mention the 'Freire-ESP' connection, only one peer-reviewed article (Ribeiro, 2018) has attempted to present the relationship between Freire's ideas and ESP ideology.

Using Freire's dialogic methods, Ribeiro (2018) seeks to advance the complex relationship between Freire and the ESP. However, Ribeiro's (2018) study presents ESP and Freirean ideas in two distinct sections, without using Freire's propositions to clearly counteract the ESP ideology. Despite the fact that Freire features in ESP material as the main 'enemy' to be defeated, Brazilian academia is yet to produce an in-depth study of the ESP (both at the national and the international level) that features Freire's philosophy at the forefront of its analysis.

This article aims to fill the gap by asking how Freire's philosophies can be an ally in the struggle for democratic education in the current political climate in Brazil. By allowing Freirean and ESP philosophies to speak to each other, displaying them side by side, identifying their differences and teasing out their contrasts—as well as applying Freire's dialogical methods to deconstruct ESP ideology—this study enlarges the visibility of the debate both on the theoretical and the political/pedagogical terrain. The article uses a dialogical method initially to examine the ESP educational programme, and subsequently to discuss civil society's resistance to ESP political moves, with a particular focus on the research community. These analyses are essential to

our understanding of conservative attempts to destroy Freirean emancipatory schooling in one of the world's largest democracies; they also speak to a larger international debate on trends in public, civic and political education (Buenfil-Burgos, 1997; Apple, 2013; Kane, 2013; Witschge *et al.*, 2019).

I begin with a short discussion of some key Freirean concepts, such as the pedagogy of autonomy (Freire, 1998a) and understandings of teachers as cultural workers (Freire, 1998b). Then, after a concise explanation of the dialogical narrative employed in this article, I critically analyse the historical roots of the ESP since its inception in Brazil, through key ESP documents and online material. I employ primary and secondary sources to review ESP propositions and I use a narrative method (Riessman, 2011) to construct a dialogue between Freire's ideas and those of the ESP. To complement the policy analysis, I then employ Freire's work to discuss civil society's resistance to the ESP's political strategies. Freire's concepts (specifically the *oppressed struggle against the oppressors*) are embedded in this second part of the narrative, which aims to analyse through Freirean lenses the political strategies that teachers and academics across Brazil have been implementing to fight ESP witch-hunts of teachers and to overcome the ESP troops in parliament.

The article concludes that despite the efforts of Brazilian extreme right-wing populists to terminate his work and destroy his educational legacy, Freire is more alive than ever in his home country. As long as the ESP proposals and methods propagate fear and oppression among Brazilian educators, Freire's conceptual tools remain powerful elements to critically analyse and fight back against oppressive educational agendas.

Becoming teachers: autonomy and culture makers

Freire demonstrated a continuing and profound commitment to teacher education. He believed that nobody is born a teacher, nor are they ready to be an educator even after their initial teaching training; rather, they are in a permanent state of learning. Two actions are needed in the constant quest to become a teacher: practice and reflection on practice (Freire, 1998a). In the teacher training workshops he delivered around the world, Freire allowed teachers to create and experiment with their pedagogies which were observed by their peers, who in turn produced in-depth notes that served as a foundation for 'pedagogical circles': conversations that followed teachers' own practices to support the formation of their own educational theories. Freire was adamant that educational theory and practice walked alongside each other. Then theory would transpire, 'soaked in well-carried out practice' (Freire, 1998b, p. 21).

The emergence of theories embedded in and applied to local contexts is a key component of Freirean pedagogical philosophy. Freire did not want to be copied or exported, as it is 'impossible to export pedagogical practices without reinventing them' (Macedo & Freire, 1998, p. xv). Moreover, his approach was to ensure that the pedagogies developed through critical observations of practice would be strong enough to counteract any mechanical repetition of models of instruction (Betti *et al.*, 2015); instead, these pedagogies would create progressive education movements which would enhance students' autonomy. By autonomy, Freire meant the capacity of teachers to keep students' curiosity alive while simultaneously stimulating their

aptitude to take risks and explore the world; Freirean autonomy is sharpened in the learning process through ‘comparison, repetition, observation, indomitable doubt, and curiosity not easily satisfied’ (Freire, 1998a, p. 32).

To bring autonomy to the classroom, teachers and students must initially become conscious—the *conscientização* process—that they live in a world where standardisation and homogenisation of social practices is a norm that oppresses the free cultural expression of their communities (Betti *et al.*, 2015). Teachers then need to assist their students to ‘live with and learn from what is different’ (Freire, 1998a, p. 24). Freire emphasises that autonomy is not to be lived by each individual alone; true autonomous education is a collective experience that associates social awareness with empowerment and community action against social oppression (Aronowitz, 2015).

Freire uses these three components—collective autonomy, critical reflection of practice and the creation of local theories embedded in teaching practices—to compare the work of teachers to the labour of cultural workers (Shudak, 2014; Darder, 2017). The pedagogical circles in which teaching practices were discussed after classes permitted teachers to move beyond their concrete world to the world of concepts—a journey that Freire (1998b, p. 83) called ‘from reading the world to reading the word’. By allowing enough distance from the practice itself in order to better reflect upon it, this movement enabled teachers to generalise and conceptualise their practices, hence producing the cultural theories that would be the foundation of their pedagogies. In this sense, they were not only reflecting on their teaching practices, they were also producing new culture.

In Freire’s conception, when teachers create culture they intervene in the social life of students and their communities (Freire, 2004b; Kane, 2013). It is important to understand that (Freire, 1998a,b, 2000) considers that these interventions must be towards preparing autonomous citizens who have the right to plan and decide their lives by themselves, and that decision-making can only be learnt in the process of deciding (Freire, 2004b; Giroux, 2010b). Therefore, teachers need to ensure that children practice choice and decision-making with their peers.

Freire’s ontology hence announces that all teaching, embedded in a particular culture, is a social act that can only be produced in a communal context. At the core of this ontology exists a deep understanding that teachers only become teachers in an endless dialogical relationship with their students. Legitimately prepared dialogical educational settings enhance the ‘becoming autonomous education’, which is the opposite of a neoliberal market-oriented education based on memorisation and standardised testing (Giroux, 2011). This is why true dialogue—which in Freire’s philosophy is a social act—is the key to achieving autonomy in each and every teaching practice.

The dialogical method: ‘to Freire or not to Freire’

Freire’s dialogical method originates from his deep belief in education as a tool for collective transformation and social emancipation (Giroux, 2010a; Ribeiro, 2018). For Freire, dialogue is not an ordinary chat around people’s lived experiences (Macedo & Freire, 1998; Betti *et al.*, 2015). Freirean dialogue does not bear any resemblance to ‘group therapy’ where individuals talk about their daily issues. It aims

to enrich the relationship between teachers and students, where the one who teaches learns while teaching, and the ones who learn teach whilst learning (Freire, 1998a; Aronowitz, 2002). Reflection and political action are the ground of Freirean dialogue; dialogue in Freire is a social praxis informed by local contexts and knowledge (Freire, 2000; Giroux, 2011). As it cannot be imitated but needs to be reinvented by every teacher within their diverse cultural circumstances, Freirean dialogue can also be called an ‘antimethod pedagogy that refuses the rigidity of models and methodological paradigms’ (Macedo & Freire, 1998, p. xii).

In this article, I use Freirean lenses to craft a dialogical narrative between antagonistic political–pedagogical forces. As a Brazilian citizen living abroad, I have closely followed the political disturbances that have been shaking my home country since 2013 (Knijnik, 2018; Jourdan, 2018). In 2013 I witnessed thousands of people, including several acquaintances, take to the streets of the main Brazilian cities to claim the advancement of the progressive social changes (Singer, 2013). A few years later, I also closely observed millions of Brazilians taking to the streets to demand the impeachment of Dilma Roussef, the first woman to be elected for the Brazilian presidential cabinet. Protesting against alleged corruption scams of Roussef’s government, these right-wing marchers also asked for the restoration of the military dictatorship that endured 21 years in the country (1964–1985), leaving behind corpses that are yet to be found by their families (Knijnik, 2018).

During the past 5 years, I have undertaken systematic data collection on the educational echoes of these political turbulences, gathering information about events and facts from online primary sources such as websites, articles and social media platforms (including video material). My focus has been the main actors discussed here: the ESP (both civil and parliamentary branches), its supporters, and the civil society organisations and activists who combat the ESP, including movements such as ‘Teachers against the ESP’, ‘School without a Gag’ and ‘Parents for Democracy’. My main primary sources have been online material published on the ESP websites and the website of the ‘Teachers against the ESP’, a civil movement founded by Professor Fernando de Araujo Penna, an educational researcher with a prolific scientific output on the ESP. The primary data sources have been complemented by secondary ones, predominantly 32 peer-reviewed papers, 11 book chapters and 3 books produced by Brazilian academia on the ESP topic. I also collected and analysed newspaper interviews on the ESP and with the ESP’s founder.

The collected written and audio-visual materials comprised sets of narratives from a diverse community of storytellers and formed my primary research data (Miller & Glassner, 2011; Riessman, 2011). The narratives were initially thematic, classified into two large categories, representing the antagonistic groups within the country’s political educational scenario: one more aligned with progressive educational views and the second associated with conservative educational propositions. Since this first categorisation, it was clear that Freire’s philosophies were central in both sets: on the one side, the progressive category employed expressions such as ‘emancipatory education’, ‘democratic schools’ and ‘dialogue’ that belong to the Freirean lexicon; in the ESP supporters category, there were usually derogatory comments about Paulo Freire, stating that his methods were the source of every evil in Brazil’s education, even when their knowledge of Freire’s work was superficial or based on preconceived

ideas disseminated through social media ‘memes’ (Penna & Salles, 2017; Ribeiro, 2018).

As Freire’s ideas were undoubtedly key to both sets of narratives, my next step was to draw a conversation between each set of data and Freire’s main pedagogical concepts; in other words, I traced a parallel between the core Freirean thoughts and the narratives in the two main sets of data. I used those Freirean concepts to examine and assess the arguments within those sets of data, which enabled me to question and come to conclusions about the validity of the claims each data set made in light of a Freirean critical analysis (Freire, 2000; Miller & Glassner, 2011). On completion, I had created an active dialogue between Freire and the narratives of the key actors of the current polarised educational scenario in Brazil.

The key point of this dialogical methodology is its capacity to bring Freire’s theories to life and to test their potency against the educational philosophies manifested in my data sets. In the data discussion, for instance, ‘banking education’ becomes a conversational topic in which the dialogue between the ESP’s views and Freire’s concepts further clarifies both approaches and demonstrates the justifications for their respective political choices and actions (Macedo & Freire, 1998; Freire, 2000). These dialogues thus allow me not only to provide description, but also to speculate about conceptualisations of education and citizenship in an era of populist politics (Giroux, 2011; Miller & Glassner, 2011).

What follows is a series of dialogues where the main concepts and actions of the ESP, its founder and its partisans are confronted with Freire’s emancipatory educational ideas. In a second stage, the ESP opponents enter the conversation too. The dialogical narratives are presented to facilitate the method of reading the world and the word (Freire, 1998b), towards the ‘*conscientização*’, when citizens formulate concepts and imagine their *untested feasibility* (Freire, 2000; Paiva, 2002; Knijnik, 2013).

ESP: students’ indoctrination and banking education

In 2003, Miguel Nagib, a lawyer and district attorney for the São Paulo state working in the national capital of Brasília, was furious when his daughter came home from school and told him that her history teacher had compared Che Guevara to Saint Francis of Assisi (Bedinelli, 2016; Moura, 2016). He then wrote a letter addressed to the teacher proclaiming that he ‘had been following for some time your tireless efforts to indoctrinate the children of the Sigma school, pushing onto their fragile minds your world vision (...) to build a better world’ (Nagib, 2003). Nagib then printed hundreds of copies of the letter and handed them to parents at the school gates. The repercussions among members of the school community, however, were mostly against him and favourable to the teacher (Bedinelli, 2016). In response, and inspired by the US Non Indoctrination movement, Nagib founded the ‘School without Political Party’ movement (ESP) in 2004. It aimed to stop what he considered the political and ideological indoctrination of children by teachers, and to retain the rights of parents over their children’s moral and religious education (Bedinelli, 2016).

Penna and Salles (2017, p. 27) argue that, as Nagib’s story has never been verified, it remains the ESP ‘foundation myth’. Nevertheless, the authors claim that the ESP has a ‘double birth certificate’, as immediately after distributing his letter at the school

(but not handing it personally to the history teacher), Nagib contacted the notorious right-wing US-based Brazilian ‘philosopher’ Olavo de Carvalho, who then published an article in support of Nagib (Moura, 2016; Penna & Salles, 2017). Titled ‘The intellectual rape of childhood’, Carvalho’s piece deems Nagib’s letter a document of extreme relevance to understanding the Brazilian social context; he adds that the Brazilian public and private schools are ‘training centres to nurture communist youth who were ready to snitch on their parents’ (Carvalho, 2003).

Despite attracting some attention over the years, mostly following complaints about sex education materials produced by the government to fight homophobia in schools during 2011 (Penna & Salles, 2017; Paulino, 2018), the ESP remained relatively dormant for nearly a decade (Moura, 2016). It was only with the massive street protests from 2015 onwards, promoted by political right-wing forces that wanted to topple Dilma Rousseff from the presidency, that Nagib and the ESP agenda gained national notoriety. The ESP programme fit well with a movement that had a clear conservative agenda, based on traditional values that included the return to an old-fashioned education, where topics such as gender, democracy or critical thinking had no place (Daltoé & Ferreira, 2019; Salles, 2017). Since then, the ESP has increased its membership and its ramifications within civil society and among politicians, with several parliamentary candidates using ESP ideologies, slogans or simply its name in their quest for election at all levels (Moura, 2016; Daltoé & Ferreira, 2019). The ESP also used the street demonstrations to make its hostility towards Paulo Freire clear (Ramos & Santoro, 2017). In a singular case where people protested against an educator at political demonstrations, street marchers carried large banners reading: *No More Marxist Indoctrination in Schools! We’ve Had Enough of Paulo Freire!* (Ribeiro, 2018).

Student indoctrination and classroom brainwashing are recurrent topics in ESP discourse. These expressions reveal the presence in ESP thought of an educational concept that Freire (2000) names ‘banking education’: a belief that the student is an empty vase into which teachers will make deposits of knowledge. In the banking concept of education, teachers are holders of information while students initially know nothing; hence the teacher’s task is merely to transmit their knowledge to the students, who in turn should accept it without question (Freire, 2000; Giroux, 2010a).

Freire questioned the banking education model when he first trialled his dialogical method with illiterate impoverished Brazilian sugar cane workers (Freire, 1998a; Darder, 2017). In 1963, Freire and his team organised literacy programmes within small underprivileged communities of sugar cane workers in the Brazilian northeast. In this project (named the *Angicos*’ experience, after the city where it took place), Freire embedded participants’ everyday life practices into their literacy materials (Gadotti, 2014). This action made them perceive the value of their own knowledge and cultural routines, which were otherwise hidden or undervalued in their communities. In this process, *Angicos*’ participants were visibly recovering their ability to speak by themselves; it was the foundation of the *conscientização* process, which originates when groups—by gaining the ability to *name the word and their world*—regain their self-worth and can appreciate the possibilities and challenges that life brings to them (Gadotti, 2014).

For Freire, education is a social practice and the teacher's task is not the transmission of a body of past knowledge. Rather, based on his ontology, the learning process needs to be based on knowledge acquired from life experiences (Freire, 2000). Moreover, the dialogical methods that support this belief include teachers providing students with problem-solving situations; the learners are 'no longer docile listeners—but critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher' (Freire, 2000, p. 80). Thus, for Freire, student and teacher activities are complementary and mutually beneficial (Freire, 1998b, 2000).

In contrast, the ESP founder Miguel Nagib is obstinate that teachers brainwash children, instilling Marxist ideologies and political preferences in their young minds (Nagib, 2013; Morrone, 2016). Nagib's struggle is for the rights of students to not be indoctrinated by their teachers (Nagib, 2013). This educational concept, as already demonstrated, relies on a banking model, namely that students are mere repositories of teachers' knowledge and are not in a dialogical relation with them. The impact of the ESP's support of the banking model has had wider implications than a philosophical debate over diametrically opposed pedagogies. The ESP has hard-pressed the political powers of the country, with proposed parliamentary bills and executive orders aiming to transform ESP ideology into educational policy.

The ESP programme: Freire-fetishism no more

The bill

The ESP bill is a set of legal measures written by the ESP that 'aim to inhibit the practice of political and ideological indoctrination within classrooms and also to prevent the usurpation of parents' rights over their children's moral education' (Programa Escola sem Partido, 2015). The ESP programme website includes ready-to-use templates of this bill which, after minor adjustments, can be presented in cities, states or in the national parliament. The templates start with the following sentence: 'This bill establishes, in this city/state educational system, the School without Political Party program'.

With 11 clauses and several subsections, the bill enforces the ESP's banking education model. It considers the students malleable, controllable 'stuff' that can easily be influenced. The third clause of the bill states that 'it is forbidden [to the teacher] to employ techniques of psychological manipulation with the aim of garnering students' backing of a specific cause' (Programa Escola sem Partido, 2015). Clause 4 details the teacher's role, including: (1) '[the teacher] will not take advantage of the students as a captive audience to promote their own ideological, religious, moral, political, and partisan interests, opinions, views, or preferences'; (2) '[the teacher] will not favour or prejudice or constrain students on account of their political, ideological, moral or religious beliefs, or lack thereof' (Programa Escola sem Partido, 2015).

The wording of the bill clearly reaffirms the ESP's pedagogical view that teaching is a one-way route and that teachers have the power to inculcate any idea into the minds of their 'captive audience'. As Freire (2000, p. 73) states, in a banking education classroom 'the teacher knows everything and the students know nothing'. The students, hence, are passive subjects that can be victims of, as the ESP states,

psychological manipulation. According to the ESP, everything in the classroom happens in a perfect banking education model: the teachers have the control, can choose all content, and for the students there is nothing else left but to comply (Freire, 2000; Giroux, 2010b).

However, Freire's ontology aims to prepare students for freedom, not for submission (Giroux, 2011; Darder, 2017). Freire regards students as having an active voice in their destinies. In his utopia, Freire declares that the future to be constructed by communities is not 'inexorable; it is problematic' (Freire, 2004b, p. 105). A Freirean teacher, therefore, will share his/her voice with their students and envisage with them a world of opportunities (Freire, 2000, 2004b). This is exactly the opposite of the ESP beliefs. Instead of being 'manipulated' and 'compliant' in the banking model classroom, in the Freirean *conscientização* process, students read the world and the word (Freire, 1998b); they move, through the dialogical process, towards *untested feasibility* (Freire, 2000; Knijnik, 2013), towards a future that is yet to be imagined and that will surface through the changes they promote in their current lives.

The *conscientização* process is a political action that the ESP bill, in its turn, wants to prevent. In its third subsection, Clause 4 states that '[the teacher] will not make political-party propaganda in the classroom nor will it incite students to participate in demonstrations, public acts and marches'. Combined with the bill's Clause 8, 'it is forbidden for student representative groups to promote political-partisan activity', the ESP proposes a direct threat to the democratic rights of students to self-organise in order to demand better educational conditions. The ESP appears to be seeking to prevent social movements such as the 'Occupy Schools' movement that took place across Brazil in 2015, when public education high school students occupied their schools for several months to protest against government measures that would see the already problematic situation in their schools become chaotic (Catini & Mello, 2016; Brito, 2017).

The 'Occupy Schools' movement was supported by teachers' unions, teachers and parents as it was seen to offer youth an exceptional educational opportunity for civil exercise that prioritised citizenship ideals over the money-making interests of the government and private investors (Giroux, 2011). The students' political actions within the occupied schools were based on cultural pedagogical practices that put human relationships at the centre of their activities (Giroux, 2011; Aronowitz, 2015). As per Freirean methodological procedures (his pedagogical circles), the 'Occupy Schools' participants organised debates, reading groups, and music and drama workshops within the occupied schools, aiming to enrich social consciousness and human relationships (Freire, 2004b). Moreover, there was an opportunity for youth to experience democracy in their daily school lives.

The first state parliament to discuss the ESP bill was Rio de Janeiro in 2014, when it was introduced into the political agenda by the then state representative Flavio Bolsonaro. Flavio is Jair Bolsonaro's son and he is currently a senator. The president has two other sons; one is a Rio de Janeiro councilman and the other is a federal representative. The Bolsonaro clan is well aligned in their political ideologies and actions, voicing their support for the ESP ideology and bill numerous times. Since 2014, the ESP bill has already become an item to be discussed and voted on in the parliamentary agenda of seven Brazilian states (out of 27) and several cities across the country,

despite opposition from academia, teachers and parents' organisations; in addition, it received two favourable reports in the national senate (Moura, 2016; Penna & Salles, 2017). Nevertheless, in order to further understand the ESP's legal and political activities within the Brazilian government, it is important to look at its 'executive orders', which is another mechanism made available on the ESP website to expedite the adoption of their educational agenda by cities and states.

The executive orders

The ESP website also presents executive order templates within the programme's guidelines. It is explained that, as the ESP programme simply enforces already existing constitutional duties of cities and states (a statement which has been questioned by academia; see Miguel, 2016 and Moura, 2016), mayors or governors can avoid lengthy legislative debates by signing off on executive orders that will accelerate ESP implementation in local and state public schools. The only 'new obligation' created by the executive order is a poster that must be affixed in every public school classroom (Programa Escola sem Partido, 2015).

The colourful poster reproduced on the ESP website presents six points that are identical to the main clauses of the bill already discussed above. The poster's aim, according to the website, is 'to inform students of their right not to be indoctrinated and manipulated by their teachers' and to help students 'to "supervise" the conduct of the teacher in light of the duties provided in the poster' (Programa Escola sem Partido, 2015). The ESP acknowledges that the poster may create tension between students and teachers, as teachers are aware they might have 'problems' if a student believes the teacher is not behaving as required (Programa Escola sem Partido, 2015).

Pressure on teachers is also present in the ESP bill and executive order guidelines. Clause 7 gives students the right to film their teachers in the classroom, 'to enable the full exercise of the right of parents or guardians to be aware of the process and the quality of the services provided by the school'. This filming inside the classroom has already been deemed unconstitutional, as it goes against teachers' academic freedom and children's rights to privacy (Penna, 2016, 2018a,b; Ramos, 2016). Nevertheless, the ESP has created online channels so that students can send films anonymously, and then the movement uploads the films along with subtitles aimed to vilify Paulo Freire, such as 'look at the educational *freirephrenia* of this teacher' and 'we can't tolerate this Freire-fetishism anymore' (Ribeiro, 2018, p. 226).

These pressures on teachers represent an attack on the core tenets of Freire's pedagogical practices. Firstly, Freire (1998a,c) affirms that teachers and students must be in a respectful relationship. Teachers need to respect the knowledge students bring to the school, particularly the information that the working classes construct in their community practices. Then he argues that teachers and students, together, can build bridges between the knowledge expressed in the official curriculum and the knowledge that comes from students' lived experiences. Freire claims relevance for classroom conversations, for example, about the policies that 'neglect the poor areas of the city' (Freire, 1998a, p. 36). As if he envisaged the future ESP reaction to this type of pedagogy that builds connections between school content and students' everyday

lives, he concludes that a reactionary educator denies any links between schooling and the outside world, as they consider their role is ‘to teach and transfer contents’ (Freire, 1998a, p. 37).

Moreover, the tensions generated within classrooms by the possibility of students supervising and overseeing the teacher’s work also disrupt the bonds that may exist between teachers and students, and among students themselves (Freire, 1998a; Darder, 2017). The ties that are built upon dialogical practices can no longer exist if one side aims to control the other (Freire, 2004a; Ramos & Santoro, 2017). This is because Freirean dialogue is based on *trust* between the parties, which in its turn is founded on love, humility and faith (Freire, 2000; Darder, 2017). From these principles, a horizontal relationship is to be born between the parties, which is the product of this ‘dialogue-loving, humble (...) climate of mutual trust’ (Freire, 2000, p. 91). The lack of dialogue in a banking education approach—in Freire’s words, the ‘anti-dialogics of the banking method of education’ (Freire, 2000, p. 91)—will never generate trust.

Dialogue needs trust and unveils the truth (Freire, 1998a,b). By advocating a banking education method and by stimulating students to control, oversee, film and anonymously inform on their teachers, the ESP reveals itself as an anti-dialogic political movement (Carlotti, 2016; Capaverde *et al.*, 2019). Nevertheless, Fernando Penna, one of the leaders of the forces against the ESP, claims that the ‘pro-Freire’ groups must insist on dialogue with the ESP, as it is only through conversations that the intentions behind the ESP programme will be revealed (Penna, 2018a). Next, I look at how civil society has been trying to oppose ESP anti-dialogic strategies.

Resisting the ESP

The academic counterattack

Since 2015, academics across Brazil have produced research studies and essays to analyse and disrupt the ESP arguments and ideologies (Miguel, 2016; Penna, 2016, 2018a,b; Capaverde *et al.*, 2019; Daltoé *et al.*, 2019). In addition to denouncing what they call the authoritarian ESP ideologies and its project to undermine public democratic education and teachers’ work, researchers have more recently engaged in producing studies that promote pedagogical strategies to further public democratic education (da Silva & Batista, 2018; Penna & Ferreira, 2018).

One of the most prolific researchers on this topic is Fernando de Araujo Penna. Currently conducting and supervising research in democratic education, Penna barely mentions Freire in his works; yet his texts can be seen as Freirean. Penna and most other researchers employ terms such as *emancipatory education*, *teachers as educators not instructors*, *democracy in schools*, *threats to public education*, *dialogic teachers struggle against censorship in schools*, *resisting authoritarianism* and many other expressions related to Freire’s struggle against social and political oppression (Freire, 2000, 2004a) and his proposals for a democratic schooling that, based on dialogue, builds autonomous and conscious citizens (Freire, 1998a,b, 2004b).

Freire has always considered that teachers (including those at university) are at the front guard of the redemption of the oppressed (Freire, 2000; Shudak, 2014; Darder,

2017). Teachers, as cultural workers, can facilitate the oppressed to read the world and the word, to go beyond a fatalistic understanding of their future, to realise the obstacles that subjugate them (Freire, 1998a,c, 2000; Aronowitz, 2015) and to conceive a world of prospects, the *untested feasibility* that is yet to come, through dialogue (Paiva, 2002; Freire, 2004b). It is this dialogue with educational communities that has allowed Brazilian academia to go beyond its 'ivory tower' and create a Freirean awareness of the ESP project.

Teachers against the ESP: dialogue must win

The *Professores contra o Escola sem partido* (PCESP—'Teachers against the ESP') is a social movement that was born in 2015 at *Universidade Federal Fluminense* (in the Rio de Janeiro state) to resist the rapid growth of the ESP. Initiated by lecturers and students and led by the aforementioned Professor Fernando de Araujo Penna, the PCESP uses a range of social media and internet channels to disseminate their message. On the one hand, they closely follow all parliamentary attempts across the country to implement the ESP bill, providing documents and reports that argue the unconstitutional side of the ESP proposals and advocate for democratic education. On the other hand, they also provide scientific papers and other resources such as videos and podcasts to educate the community about the real intent of the ESP. According to the PCESP, the ESP wants to create anti-democratic schools and propagate hatred of teachers, demonising the profession to open room for private providers to enter the public education terrain (Carlotti, 2016; Professores contra o Escola sem Partido, 2016). The PCESP also provides channels for teachers to denounce censorship, harassment and other measures such as the sacking of teachers in private schools, promoted by ESP followers against teachers who 'dare' to teach topics related to Afro-Brazilian religions, political news or gender.

For Freire, pedagogies that reduce the teacher's work to mere instruction of curriculum content, that do not allow teachers to connect classroom topics to students' daily lives and that advocate the banking education model are anti-democratic by their very nature (Freire, 1998a, 2000; Giroux, 2010a). These pedagogies consider historical processes unalterable, hence social change cannot be promoted via any means (Freire, 2000).

In contrast, emancipatory pedagogies promote the *conscientização* process, where school communities, working together, can reimagine their life prospects (Freire, 1998c, 2000; Aronowitz, 2015); such pedagogies prepare critical learners who will conceive a problematic, not static, future (Freire, 2000; Giroux, 2011). *Conscientização* is what the PCESP have been encouraging with their advocacy of democratic education. The various conversations promoted by the PCESP through an array of social media channels are central to the creation of critical learners. The PCESP creates videos and podcasts as intellectual tools to facilitate teacher and student discussion on relevant issues for a democratic education and against the conservative trends of the ESP and the current government. For example, they provide a range of resources (videos, articles, podcasts) on their website for school communities to learn and talk in the classroom about topics such as gender, in order to encourage 'an ample and open debate about gender in the schools, promoting a feminist education,

against the ESP lgbtphobia and machismo' (PCESP website). Dialogue encourages the visibility of otherwise undetectable accounts of social discrimination (Paiva, 2002; Knijnik, 2013). Dialogue among several educational stakeholders is what the PCESP have been trying to promote since its inception (Penna, 2018a): dialogue about the antagonism towards teachers and educators, dialogue to demonstrate teachers' social and educational worth to society, and dialogue to show how the ESP proposals will in fact reduce the quality of education and threaten democracy in public schools. The PCESP continuous dialogue supports autonomous citizenship (Giroux 2010) in opposition to the submissive students that the ESP want in the classrooms.

Conclusion: an unfinished history

The mention of a 'dictatorship climate' at the start of this article was not accidental. During the period of military dictatorship in Brazil (1964–1985), freedom of speech inside and outside schools was banned. Teachers were stalked, persecuted, fired; academics went to jail, were tortured and killed. During this totalitarian rule, Paulo Freire had to seek political exile to avoid prison due to his 'dangerous' educational ideas of freedom and dialogue.

In this article, I have shown that the ESP aims to bring similar dictatorial practices to schools, including the repression of freedom of speech and the elimination of critical thinking. Mimicking the dictatorship that once forced Paulo Freire to seek political exile overseas, they also aim to, metaphorically, expel him from the country. As Freire has already passed away and this cannot be done physically, their objective is to ban his educational legacy, one which endorses teachers' worth and freedom, along with their capacity as cultural workers to promote dialogue and *conscientização* among school communities. These are precisely the values that the ESP programme aims to eliminate from Brazil's school system.

The move for more control (and criminalisation) of teachers' work has already been reported internationally (Apple, 2013; Chacko, 2018) within neoliberal contexts that, similarly to the Brazilian case, aim to further privatisation of schools, transforming them into a 'tool' to prepare obedient workers, not autonomous citizens. Further comparative research could look at these cases to trace their parallels and contrasts. However, the Brazilian case seems to be the only one in which the attacks are against one educator and his democratic educational philosophy: Paulo Freire, Brazil's education patron.

The civil and academic movements against the ESP have adopted a dialogic strategy and a move to further democracy within Brazilian schools in order to fight the authoritarian ESP proposals. This article hence claims the same tradition of critical pedagogy and democratic schooling that is under severe attack is the one containing the seeds to combat these assaults. By employing the Freirean 'anti-method' of critical dialogue, teachers and school communities will be able to construct their own methods to counter the dictatorial demands of the ESP and its supporters.

Further research needs to investigate whether, even without becoming official policy, the ESP's fear-promoting tactics have already impacted teachers' daily work. Additional examination is crucial to discover whether ESP ideologies and social media strategies have influenced current teachers to reduce or end their democratic

pedagogies to avoid being abused and exposed online. These are the challenges faced by Brazilian critical education in populist times.

Ethical guidelines

Ethics approval was not required to undertake this study.

Conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest in this study.

Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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