

Democratic Management in Times of COVID-19: Perspectives and Challenges for Brazilian Public Schools

Ana Carolina Carius

Universidade Católica de Petrópolis

Brazil

Abstract

This paper discusses the issue of educational management in a challenging scenario: the closing of Brazilian schools due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Through an exploratory research, in a documentary character, the articulating role that educational management has been developing together with the families of students was evaluated, with the aim to guarantee their access to remote activities during this period, and their maintenance and organization by part of higher departments. Under the clipping of two official documents of the state of Rio de Janeiro, Deliberation No. 376 of the State Council of Education of the state and Resolution No. 5843 of the Secretary of State for Education, it was possible to identify a greater concern with access to content, either through technological mediation or printed material and with “supervision” of teachers and students, to the detriment of strengthening aspects relevant to democratic and participatory management. No references to management or direction were found in the documents under analysis, nor ways to consolidate the participation of all actors involved in the teaching-learning process. The absence of dialogicity with all parties led us to a traumatic and exhausting process for everyone involved. Therefore, the need to rethink the pedagogical practices involved in this pandemic period is discussed, based on the difficulties listed by students, families, teachers and managers, in order to consolidate the contribution of all, in a democratic way, even if there is no social interaction between those involved at the time.

Keywords: Closing of schools; Democratic and participatory management; Family-school relationship; Democratization of internet access; Right to education.

1. Introduction

March 13, 2020 represents a milestone for education worldwide. Although schools closed on several other occasions, it was the first time that schools in more than 170 countries closed at the same time (Choi et al., 2020). Another novelty was the uncertainty about the time needed for closing. In many locations, schools have not reopened, despite the fact that a year has passed.

Technological advances experienced by society in recent years make us reflect on the classroom format of the school as we know it until March 2020. Edméa Santos (2014) conceptualizes online education as “the set of teaching-learning actions, or curriculum acts mediated by digital interfaces that enhance interactive, hypertextual and mobile communicational practices” (Santos, p.63, 2014). Although the use of

technologies in education has been around since the 1980s, their use in a context of total closure of schools is unprecedented.

Manuel Castells (2019) defends a new paradigm for information technology in the 21st century. The author describes five characteristics for the new paradigm that is taking shape. The first characteristic refers to the fact that information is raw material. Technologies act on information. The second feature concerns the penetrability of the effects of new technologies. All our processes of individual and collective existence are shaped by new technologies. The school is certainly in this group. The third characteristic refers to the logic of networks in any system or set of relationships, using new information technologies. Again, the school's participation in this process can be seen. The fourth feature is flexibility. Organizations and institutions can be modified and even altered by reorganizing their components. Therefore, given the closing of schools, the physical school was reorganized and the roles of the main actors: teachers, students, managers and families were reorganized in this process, in a network. Finally, the fifth feature is the increasing convergence of specific technologies into a highly integrated system, in which old technological trajectories are literally impossible to distinguish separately. In this sense, it is observed that several changes arising from the closing period of schools will certainly be absorbed in the practices of both teachers, managers, students and families, so that the old and the new will work in sync, it is not possible to distinguish that there was of what will be.

Considering the paradigm shift for information technology proposed by Castells (2019), the research object of this work is democratic management, in line with cyberculture, in times of the COVID-19 pandemic. José Carlos Libâneo (2018) associates organizational culture with the idea that organizations are marked by social interactions between people, highlighting the informal relationships that occur at school, in addition to a merely bureaucratic view of the institution's functioning. Therefore, the research question that this work intends to answer is: How to think about a democratic management without social interactions between people? In order to answer the research's guiding question, the general objective of this work is to evaluate, in official documents, the attributions of managers of the state network of Rio de Janeiro. As specific objectives, it is intended to analyze the conception of democratic management in an adverse scenario, in which the absence of interaction between the actors involved compromises basic characteristics of democratic and participatory management.

2. Thinking about democratic management in a school upload context

Lemos (2013) defines the upload of various organizations, individuals, institutions, among others, as the exit of these actors from physical space strictly for cyberspace performances. Pierre Lévy (2010) defines cyberspace as a new space for communication, sociability, organization and transaction, as well as a new market for information and knowledge. Santos (2014) establishes cyberspace as the internet enabled by human beings, who produce, authorize and constitute communities and social networks through and with the mediation of digital network technologies. In both descriptions, the internet is considered a crucial element for the existence of cyberspace, just as it is from the network relationships established in cyberspace that changes in society are underway (Castells, 2019).

The school, as a physical space destined to the development of cognitive, social and attitudinal aspects,

saw itself, with its closure due to social distancing, resignified when seen in cyberspace. At first, there were many difficulties to consolidate pedagogical practices by teachers, remote classroom routines by students, organization of physical space and time to support students by families and, no less challenging, dialogicity with families, logistics of materials and classes, organization of administrative routines and support to teachers by the school management. For Libâneo (2018), schools are organizations and the interaction between people stands out in them, for the promotion of human formation. How to define interaction between people in cyberspace?

Barry Wellman (2001) discusses network communication in a personalized way. In fact, from individual technological artifacts such as a smartphone, the individual is able to access other individuals with similar interests, regardless of their spatial location. The internet on a mobile device has revolutionized the way individuals communicate. Wellman (2001) describes the creation of so-called cyberplaces: spaces for individuals with the same interests, such as Facebook communities, for example, that relate to each other regardless of their geographic location. Virtual classrooms on platforms like Google Classroom are spaces restricted to individuals with common interests, who communicate and share experiences. Therefore, they can be considered cyberplaces aimed at remote learning within cyberspace. Another example in this regard is the creation of WhatsApp groups for specific classes of a teacher, parents of a school with the management team, in order to discuss remote activities, difficulties, results and consolidation of interactions between individuals, in a way virtual. Béch  (2020) even reports the importance of whatsapp for the maintenance of remote university activities in Cameroon. In other words, the creation of educational cyberplaces in cyberspace provided the maintenance of virtual interactions between individuals.

The work by Silva and Alves (2020) discusses the need for continuing education to adapt active teachers to the new model of society, in which technology has modified and modifies social relations, as described by Castells (2019). The COVID-19 pandemic and the closing of schools only accelerated the process of adapting teachers. What was seen in 2020, however, was a “rush” to train teachers in a minimum time, and many teachers “learned by doing”. In fact, there is an urgent need for continuing education, both for higher education and basic education teachers. Corroborating the view of Silva and Alves (2020), the work of Santos and Machado (2020) discusses teacher education from the perspective of active methodologies and information and communication technologies (ICTs). The need for reflection on innovative pedagogical practices was accelerated with the closing of schools. It is not known, however, which practices will last in the post-pandemic of COVID-19.

Therefore, is it possible to establish a cyberplace aimed at virtual interaction, in the impossibility of social interaction, in order to maintain democratic management in a school? For Libâneo (2018), a democratic management must be aligned with a participatory-democratic conception. In this sense, decision-making takes place collectively, in a participatory way, with a direction aimed at the collective and not individually.

The main difficulties for the exercise of democratic and participatory management in the face of social distancing are listed, the social interaction necessary for the exercise of democracy. When thinking about the upload of the actors involved by the physical school (managers, teachers, students and family members), it is not guaranteed that everyone will be included in the cyberplace restricted to the school environment due to several dynamics: lack of technological devices for internet access, the own restricted internet access,

availability for virtual participation in housework, work, among others. There is also the unilateral way in which remote activities were inserted in the daily lives of all actors. There was no time for dialogue, especially from the government, with managers, teachers, students and their families, in order to observe crucial issues for the maintenance of remote activities, family members were not consulted about their new role in the education of students. Many parents and guardians are not prepared to support students. As for teachers, little offer of training and lack of technological support (devices and internet) made many teachers seek improvement and invest in technological tools so that their classes were better and more productive. The management, responsible for dialogicity between the actors, in many cases was also not consulted and only “complies with orders” from higher bodies. Given this complex picture, this work discusses the Deliberation of the State Council of Education (SCE) of Rio de Janeiro no. 376, of March 23, 2020, which guided the actions of the state regarding remote education, including educational institutions private companies headquartered in the state and Resolution No. 5843, of May 11, 2020, which guides the member units of the SEEDUC Network (State Department of Education) on the development of non-presential school activities and regularization of the functional life of servers, in character of exceptionality, as long as the isolation measures foreseen by the state authorities remain, such as preventing and combating the coronavirus (COVID-19). In the light of these two documents, the possibilities of exercising democratic and participatory management are evaluated in light of the closing of schools and social distancing.

3. Methodological path of the research

Considering the difficulties inherent to social distancing, which directly impact field research, it was decided to carry out an exploratory research, delineated through documentary research. According to Gil (1999), exploratory research has the main purpose of developing, clarifying and modifying concepts and ideas, with a view to formulating more precise problems or researchable hypotheses for further studies. As the issue of the pandemic is recent and studies are being built for a short time, it is observed that exploratory research is the most appropriate for the topic.

Gil (1999) defines documental research as that elaborated from material without analytical treatment or that can be re-elaborated according to the research objective. The author also highlights that documentary research is very similar to bibliographic research, differing only in the sources.

4. Results and discussions

In light of the two documents chosen for analysis in this work, we opted for the content analysis of Bardin (2011). According to the author, content analysis is close to document analysis in some aspects. Document analysis is, for Bardin (2011), an operation or a set of operations aimed at representing the content of a document in a different form than the original, in order to facilitate, in a later stage, its consultation and referencing. More objectively, the clipping of information, division into categories according to the criterion of analogy, representation in a condensed form by indexing, is identical to the message processing phase of certain forms of content analysis (Bardin, 2011). Therefore, the categorical analysis by themes was chosen in the reading of the two documents, considering the perspective of management in both.

Figure 1 presents a flowchart highlighting the themes under analysis in both documents.

The first observation in both documents is the absence of the term “management” or “direction”. SCE Deliberation 376 identifies many attributions to educational institutions in general but does not refer to specific actors such as teachers, students, family members or managers. On the other hand, Resolution 5843 of SEEDUC was concerned with organizing the work of the state network, concerned with describing the platform that would be used, how the allocations of students and teachers would be, and how it would “supervise” the teaching work. Also in this document there is no reference to the term “management” or “direction”.

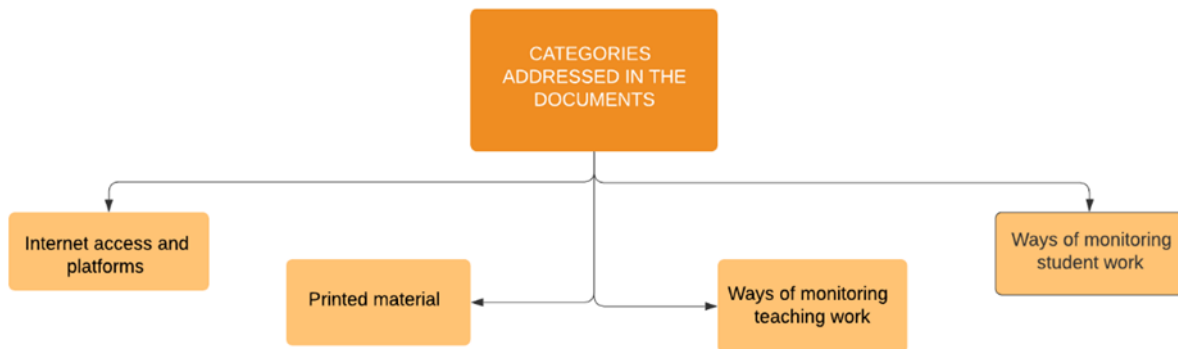


Figure 1. Themes under analysis in both documents.

As for the topic “Internet access and platforms”, Table 1 identifies the terms in both documents related to the topic.

Table 1. Excerpts in both documents related to the themes.

	“Internet access and platforms” and “printed material
Deliberation No. 376 of the SCE	Art. 1 - "The institutions linked to the Education System of the State of Rio de Janeiro, public or private Basic Education and public Higher Education will be able to reorganize their school activities, based on their pedagogical projects, to be carried out by the students and education professionals in special residential arrangements."
SEEDUC Resolution 5843	Art. 2 - "During the validity of the exception measures established to fight and prevent the contagion of the coronavirus, the pedagogical activities will be carried out, primarily, through technological mediation or from the use of complementary means in order to ensure the maintenance of the teaching-learning process and the establishment of a new study routine. Art. 3 - Technological mediation will be made possible through access to the educational platform, which constitutes an integrated cloud-based communication and collaboration solution, consisting of a set of tools and developed so that teachers and students can learn, innovate, collaborate, interact and cooperate, as active agents in the construction of their own knowledge."

SCE Deliberation No. 376 does not, at any time, list the mandatory use of online or internet platforms in the maintenance of remote activities, leaving each educational institution in charge of adapting the so-called activities under a special home regime. Resolution No. 5843 of SEEDUC includes the use of online

platforms, with the need for internet access, leaving other forms as a complement to the use, say, “official” of tools for technological mediation. It is noteworthy that there was no incentive on the part of the state government of Rio de Janeiro to purchase mobile internet, both for students and teachers. As a result, many students were excluded from the educational process due to the lack of internet in various locations, as well as due to the absence of technological devices for access (smartphones, tablets, notebooks, personal computers).

The second topic under analysis, printed material, is implicitly related to the excerpts described in Table 1. Deliberation No. 376 of the SCE left open the question of the form of linking activities in a special household regime. Note that the terms “technological tools”, “internet”, “technological mediation” do not appear in this document. However, SEEDUC Resolution 5843 assigns priority access to technological mediation, and other forms, such as printed material, are complementary to it. The Rio de Janeiro State Department of Education distributed, throughout 2020, printed handouts to students, regardless of whether they have access to the internet or not.

Table 2 lists excerpts from the two documents related to the monitoring of teaching and student activities.

Table 2. Monitoring of teaching and student activities.

	"Forms of monitoring teaching work" and "Forms of monitoring student work"
Deliberation No. 376 of the SCE	"Basic education institutions must, with the participation of their faculty, plan and organize school activities to be carried out by students outside the institution, indicating: a) the objectives, methods, techniques, resources, as well as the expected workload of the activities to be carried out in person by the students, according to the age group; b) forms of monitoring, evaluation and proof of the accomplishment of the same by the students."
SEEDUC Resolution 5843	"Art. 4 - The autonomy of the teacher in choosing and posting content is guaranteed, provided that the provisions of the BNCC Guiding Document and the Basic Curriculum are respected. § 1 - It is recommended that the teacher plan their classes in advance, systematizing the contents, selecting the activities to be proposed, as well as the complementary materials (short videos, texts, websites, among others), to achieve of the curricular components with quality. § 2 - The teacher must prepare and make available to his class, a minimum of 1 (one) and a maximum of 3 (three) activities per class, always considering that the student will carry out all activities autonomously. § 3 - All activities posted by the teacher will be registered in a pedagogical monitoring report, integrating the calculation of the annual workload. § 4 - The access and activities posted by the professors will be considered effective exercise for functional purposes, as long as they are supervised and documented."

From Table 2, it is possible to observe, once again, an expansion of possibilities by Deliberation 376 of the SCE, with regard to teaching work. In fact, the highlighted excerpt relates the obligation of teachers to plan and organize the home activities that will be sent to students, as well as ensuring and observing the participation of students in this process. However, SEEDUC Resolution 5843 explains the activities that teachers need to perform (including the number of activities that should be posted, formats and sizes of videos, among others), giving less autonomy to teachers. There is a concern with validating the workload and how to fulfill work activities, which does not occur in Deliberation 376 of the SCE.

The last term under analysis "form of monitoring of student work" can be analyzed from the excerpts described in Table 2. According to Deliberation No. 376 of the SCE, it is up to educational institutions to carry out the monitoring, evaluations and proof of activities remote facilities carried out under special household arrangements. In SEEDUC Resolution 5843, the registration for the calculation of the annual workload of the subjects will be carried out through a pedagogical monitoring report, prepared by the professor, for the students and classes to which he is regent.

As the topic under discussion in this work is democratic management in times of social distancing and closing of schools, it can be seen, in both documents, that there is no reference to how the collegiate meetings of the councils would be held (Association of Parents and Teachers, Class Councils, MCOED – Municipal Council of Education, among others) during this period. In addition, there is no reference to the use of technological tools so that such councils, which enable participatory management, can continue exercising their activities with the same frequency in order to contribute with suggestions and demands at this very new and difficult time for all actors involved.

5. Conclusion

The present work investigated, through a documental analysis of two official documents of the state of Rio de Janeiro, the participative democratic management under the clipping of the closing of schools due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

When performing the content analysis by themes, it was found that the emphasis given by the documents referred to four themes: use of technological tools for pedagogical mediation, printed material for students who do not have access to technological tools and/or internet, ways of monitoring teaching work and ways of monitoring student work. There are no explicit records of management or management attributions in the two documents. There is also no reference to the functioning of collegiate bodies such as the Association of Parents and Teachers, Class Councils, COMED – Municipal Council of Education. The question that arises is whether the virtual interaction between the actors involved can, in fact, reproduce the social interaction lost due to the closing of schools. Was there an effective creation of a cyberspace representative of democratic and participatory management? Except for isolated initiatives, there was no such concern in a systematic way by official government agencies, answering the research question of this work. It is observed that actors participating in face-to-face activities are not always those who participate in virtual activities. It is necessary to assess the role of new technologies in social interactions, under the perspective of democratic and participatory management, so that democratic advances achieved over the years are not lost due to new forms of socialization and interactions between human beings and

technological artifacts.

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