

Democratic management in dispute in the practice of Educational Management Technology: Contingent articulations of democracy

A gestão democrática em disputa na atuação da Tecnologia de Gestão Educacional: articulações contingentes da democracia

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Abstract

This article analyzes the performance of democratic management in a Full Citizen School of the State Education Network of Paraíba subjected to Educational Management Technology - EMT (*Tecnologia de Gestão Educacional* - TGE). The investigation links Laclau and Mouffe's (2015) Discourse Theory with the Theory of Practice (Ball; Maguire; Braun, 2021) to understand curricular policies as contingent discursive processes that are formed in the practices through which they are interpreted, translated, and put into action. The study uses analysis of records produced through interviews conducted in 2024 with twelve people working at the investigated school. From this perspective, EMT is understood as an educational

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policy, whose intelligibility is produced in the very process of action to the extent that the subjects recontextualize its guidelines in the routines and relationships that organize the school's space-time. The analysis shows that management emerges as a key point in connecting the meanings attributed to the policy, producing interpretations of democracy often linked to participation guided by the organization and functioning of the school. At the same time, the evidence indicates that these attempts at stabilization are not fully realized, since different interpretations and positions continuously reopen the debate over the meanings of management and democracy. Thus, EMT's operation reveals itself as a contingent process of articulation in which different projects compete for the dominance of the meanings that come to shape school life.

Keywords: Democratic management; full-time school; radical democracy; action.

Resumo

Este artigo analisa a atuação da gestão democrática em uma Escola Cidadã Integral da Rede Estadual de Ensino da Paraíba submetida à Tecnologia de Gestão Educacional (TGE). A investigação articula a Teoria do Discurso de Laclau e Mouffe (2015) com a Teoria da Atuação (Ball; Maguire; Braun, 2021) para compreender as políticas curriculares como processos discursivos contingentes que se constituem nas práticas por meio das quais são interpretadas, traduzidas e colocadas em ação. O estudo mobiliza análise de registros produzidos através de entrevistas realizadas em 2024 com doze sujeitos que atuam na unidade investigada. Nessa perspectiva, a TGE é compreendida como uma política educacional, cuja inteligibilidade se produz no próprio processo de atuação na medida em que os sujeitos recontextualizam suas diretrizes nas rotinas e nas relações que organizam o espaço-tempo escolar. A análise evidencia que a gestão emerge como ponto nodal na articulação dos sentidos atribuídos à política, produzindo leituras da democracia frequentemente associadas à participação orientada pela organização e pelo funcionamento institucional da escola. Ao mesmo tempo, as evidências indicam que essas tentativas de estabilização não se realizam de forma plena, uma vez que diferentes interpretações e posicionamentos reabrem continuamente a disputa pelos significados da gestão e da democracia. Desse modo, a atuação da TGE revela-se como processo de articulação contingente no qual diferentes projetos disputam a hegemonização dos sentidos que passam a organizar a vida escolar.

Palavras-chave: gestão democrática; escola integral; democracia radical; atuação.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, we have been developing research that understands curriculum policies as discursive practices influenced by hegemonic disputes. We start from the assumption that no policy is established as a neutral expression of technical rationality, but rather as the result of contingent articulations that aim to stabilize always provisional meanings. Studies by Honorato, Ventura, and Silva (2024), Honorato et al. (2025), Silva et al. (2025), and Chagas et al. (2024) show that

curriculum reforms presented under the banner of innovation and modernization attempt to fix particular meanings, as if they were necessary consensuses, and produce effects of universalization that hide their own claim to discursive universality.

Similarly, when we look at Comprehensive Education (CE) in Full Citizenship Schools (FCSs), we see that the promise of full development exists alongside conflicts that reveal the impossibility of any closed totality in educational discourse and reaffirm the incomplete and contested nature of any curriculum framework (Rodrigues; Elias; Honorato, 2024; Calabria, Chagas, Rodrigues, 2025). These studies helped us understand the curriculum not as a neutral tool for pedagogical organization, but as a battleground for the meaning of society (Honorato; Ribeiro; Pereira, 2024).

It is precisely in this investigative movement that we start to argue that management policies should also be understood as curriculum policies. If, as Garduño and Honorato (2024, p. 5) claim, “curriculum policies encompass all programs, strategies, and actions that directly or indirectly influence the curriculum,” then organizing school schedules, defining monitoring tools, setting decision-making protocols, and establishing accountability criteria are not operations external to the curriculum, but practices that create meanings about participation, authority, and legitimacy.

In a previous study, when analyzing Educational Management Technology (EMT), we argued that its management model contends for the hegemonization of a specific meaning of democracy, anchored in managerial principles that challenge the agonistic dimension of democratic management (Rodrigues; Honorato; Chagas, 2023). From this perspective, management is no longer seen as just an administrative arrangement and is instead placed within the field of curriculum policies, where the contours of the political in the school are always defined contingently.

This understanding becomes more consistent when linked to the idea of curriculum as a relational field for producing meaning. From this perspective, curriculum policies are not carried out by automatically applying guidelines or linear causal chains, but through shifts that reshape their own conditions of intelligibility (Honorato; Ribeiro; Pereira, 2024; Garduño; Honorato, 2024). This is the point where the dialogue with Ball, Maguire, and Braun's (2021) Theory of Action (TA) becomes

crucial, because such policies only come into existence to the extent that they are carried out in school contexts through a process of interpretation-translation⁵ which occurs under specific conditions. So, meanings, including those that define what counts as democracy, emerge from this process of action and are produced, challenged, and temporarily stabilized in the concrete dynamics of the school. Politics, therefore, doesn't end with the normative text; it becomes real in the practices that make it work, where guidelines take on meanings that weren't guaranteed beforehand.

It is in this field of connections that we place the expansion of FCSs in the state network of Paraíba and the adoption of the EMT, materialized in the School of Choice Notebooks. In a previous study, we showed that the EMT is not limited to organizing administrative procedures, but works as a discursive articulation that seeks to make a specific model of democratic management dominant, which is anchored in managerial principles and a neoliberal rationality that prioritizes goals, performance, and accountability (Rodrigues; Honorato; Chagas, 2023). Even though the 1988 Federal Constitution (CF/1988) and the Law of Guidelines and Bases of National Education (*Lei de Diretrizes e Bases da Educação Nacional* - LDBEN) list democratic management as a core principle of public education, the incorporation of this framework changes the ways people participate and make collective decisions, shifting democracy from its plural and conflictive nature to a logic focused on efficiency and control. What's at stake, therefore, isn't just adopting an organizational model, but the battle over defining the very meaning of democracy within curriculum politics.

So, we start from the understanding that democracy doesn't have an essential content; it is always the result of contingent arrangements that seek to stabilize meanings amid antagonisms. In other words, it is a contested signifier whose content is constantly challenged by different societal projects trying to dominate certain interpretations of the political (Laclau; Mouffe, 2015). In this context, the rationale behind EMT comes close to a neoliberal twist on democracy, where participation is redefined as co-responsibility for goals and adherence to pre-established protocols (Chagas, 2024). The space for collective deliberation tends to be reshaped by the

⁵We use the interpretation-translation approach to emphasize the relational and inseparable nature of these processes, indicating that giving meaning to policies and putting them into practice in schools are part of the same movement of producing the discourse of policy in schools.

logic of results-based management, affecting even what counts as political in the school.

Given this scenario, we ask: How does the democratic management in a Full Citizenship School subjected to EMT operate attempts to dominate certain meanings of democracy, and what shifts emerge from this process? If these meanings are produced in the practices that make them workable, the investigation couldn't be limited to just a normative analysis of policy documents. That's why the goal is to analyze the role of democratic management in a Full Citizenship School in the State Education Network of Paraíba under EMT, seeing it as a space for contesting the meaning of democracy and for producing shifts in this process.

Given the above, and in dialogue with the theoretical position taken in this text, the analysis is not conceived as an external application of a method to a pre-given object, but as a situated practice of problematization. In this sense, we adopt a post-qualitative approach, anchored in post-foundational thinking, which understands theory-method-analysis as inseparable dimensions of the investigative process. Within this horizon, we use Discourse Theory (DT) as a perspective that allows us to understand curriculum policies as a field of struggles over the meaning of the social, and Actor-Network Theory (ANT) as an analytical tool to track the processes of interpretation-translation through which the guidelines of the Education Management Technology (EMT) become operable in the school. By questioning the role of democratic management in this context, the study aims to contribute to the debate about the struggles over the meaning of democracy in public education and highlight its place in the field of curriculum policies.

To develop this discussion, the article is organized into three sections, in addition to this introduction. In the first, we present the onto-epistemological-methodological path that guides the research, situating the study within the post-foundational horizon and discussing the contributions of DT and ANT to the analysis of curriculum policies, as well as the procedures for producing and analyzing the empirical material. In the second section, we analyze the interviews conducted with individuals working in a full-time school in the Paraíba state network, aiming to understand how, within the context of policy implementation, meanings are attributed to EMT, school management, and democracy. Finally, in the concluding remarks, we revisit the central argument of the article and discuss its implications for

understanding the disputes surrounding democratic management in curriculum policies.

FOR A RELATIONAL ONTOEPISTEMOLOGICAL: RESEARCH AS A NETWORK OF DISCURSIVE MEANING

The term onto-epistemological-methodological makes it clear that, in this study, ontology, epistemology, and methodology are not separate aspects of research, but are seen as interconnected dimensions of the same theoretical-analytical practice. With this wording, we aim to move away from the tradition that separated theory and method, turning methodology into a technical procedure relatively independent from the conceptions of reality that support it. As St. Pierre (2018) argues, part of the humanistic qualitative tradition actually carried out this separation, draining it of its ontological commitments. By taking on this perspective, we state that every methodological decision is already shaped by a certain understanding of the world and that investigating simultaneously involves taking an ontological and epistemological stance. By using this combined formulation, we indicate that there isn't a method that gets added on later to theory, since every investigative practice is already involved in a certain ontology of the social.

It is within this horizon that we place our dialogue with post-structural and post-foundational thought, particularly with Laclau and Mouffe's (2015) Discourse Theory (DT). From this perspective, the social is not given, but an effect of articulations crossed by antagonisms in which signifiers, like democracy, have no essence or fixed meaning and are shaped in struggles whose stabilization depends on hegemonic practices (Honorato et al., 2025). Such practices always operate partial fixations precisely because antagonism prevents any definitive closure of the social. We thus assume that there is no ultimate foundation capable of guaranteeing social order or the truth of policies, and every attempt at fixation relies on discursive operations that are always contingent and open to shifts (Honorato et al., 2025). This ontological understanding is crucial to how we conceive research itself.

If the social is produced relationally and contingently, knowledge also cannot be understood as a faithful representation of a reality outside of research. The assumed ontology, therefore, produces direct epistemological implications. As Lather and St. Pierre (2013) argue, by moving away from representationalism and

subject/object dichotomies, the method stops functioning as a neutral application of techniques and becomes part of the process of constituting the object being studied. In the Brazilian context, Macedo and Silva (2021) expand this discussion by questioning the notion of “data” as transparent evidence, pointing out that research involves inserting oneself into the networks of meaning one seeks to analyze, rather than simply describing them.

This is where the notion of curriculum as a network of discursive meaning becomes crucial. As Honorato, Ribeiro, and Pereira (2024) explain, the curriculum, in this sense, isn't a space that policy reaches; It's the very network of meaning where policy becomes understandable. It's a discursive web, crossed by hegemonic operations that try to stabilize meanings and by shifts that prevent them from being fully fixed. Understanding the curriculum as a network means recognizing that school management is directly involved in this production of meanings. It's not about looking at management as an administrative dimension outside the curriculum, but as a practice that works within this network and competes for meanings of participation, legitimacy, and democracy. It's in this context that the managerial rationality of EMT tries to link certain meanings and create centralizing effects. So, policies can be seen as discursive practices that try to stabilize certain meanings while shifting or excluding other possibilities, showing that the order that appears as natural actually comes from always precarious and contestable hegemonic struggles (Honorato; Ventura; Silva, 2024).

This understanding opens up space to draw on the contributions of radical democracy as an analytical framework for thinking about disputes around school management. Inspired by this reference, we understand democracy not as a state of consensus or harmony, but as a permanently open process, marked by the presence of difference and by the struggle between projects seeking to dominate the social space (Laclau; Mouffe, 2015; Mouffe, 2005). From this perspective, democratic vitality depends precisely on recognizing conflict and antagonism as constitutive dimensions of political life, a condition that allows for the emergence of multiple demands and voices within the school. Far from representing an anomaly to be overcome, dissent thus constitutes the very ground on which disputes about the meanings of democracy, participation, and school management take place.

It is precisely in this chain that the methodological dimension is defined and where discourse analysis (DA) integrates into this research. If we understand policy as a discursive practice and democracy as a contested signifier, we cannot reduce them to normative texts that are simply implemented in schools. By arguing that policies are produced in institutional contexts through situated processes of interpretation-translation, understood as practices through which meanings are articulated and provisionally stabilized, we shift the notion of linear implementation and focus on localized versions of policy that take shape in the school. Your mobilization, therefore, does not constitute an external methodological addition, but an analytical operator consistent with the post-foundational perspective that guides this investigation, unfolding, on the empirical level, the relational and contingent ontology that has supported the text since its introduction.

Consistent with this position, the research *corpus* was made up of interviews conducted in 2024 with twelve participants (students, teachers, staff, and members of the management team) who work at the school under investigation. Participation was voluntary, with explanations provided about the research objectives, and anonymity and confidentiality of the information were ensured. To protect the participants' identities, fictitious names were used throughout the text. These materials aren't seen as external instances that would reveal politics in its real form, but as surfaces where it is put into action and contested through discussion. The presence of participants in different institutional roles isn't meant to exhaust the discursive field, but to test various conditions from which democratic school management is understood and practiced. The analytical focus is, therefore, on the ways democratic management plays out in the school context, highlighting both the recurring patterns of managerial logic and the shifts that challenge its stability.

The analysis focused on the context of professional cultures, understanding it, in dialogue with DT, as a constitutive dimension of what we call politics. Professional cultures are not seen as stable identities or homogeneous sets of values, but as discursive sedimentations that organize repertoires, expectations, and ways of giving meaning to school and management. So, it's not really a space for receiving politics, but one of the networks where meanings temporarily stabilize and at the same time become open to shifts. By mobilizing this dimension of AT, we shift the focus from implementation to the operations through which certain meanings of democracy try to

become central in the school space, which always happens contingently and without the possibility of full closure. Thus, professional cultures are understood as a field of contest where attempts at stabilization and movements that reopen the debate around democratic management are in tension.

MEANINGS IN DISPUTE IN PROFESSIONAL CULTURES

The EMT doesn't show up in the empirical material as a set of administrative guidelines with a previously fixed meaning, but as a policy whose meanings are continuously produced in the discursive connections that run through the school organization. So, what emerges isn't a description of a pre-given model, but the discursive production of meanings that try to organize the school's institutional experience. In this sense, recognizing, defining, or even ignoring the policy already counts as a way of producing meanings about it within the institution.

From this perspective, it becomes analytically relevant to look at the positions from which individuals talk about politics. Ball, Maguire, and Braun (2021) highlight this point by stating that policy actors are always positioned. This idea helps us understand that politics is not understood in the same way by everyone working in schools, since the ways they interpret and implement it are influenced by the discursive positions that shape the institutional organization. In the empirical material analyzed, this difference becomes particularly clear when participants are asked to talk about EMT.

"I don't know" (Letícia, student 1);

"No, I don't know it" (Gisele, student 2);

"No, not yet. I've heard the name, but know it in depth, no" (Aline, staff 1);

"Yes, I know all the management tools we work with: action programs, learning guides, elective syllabi, the school action plan. So, I have knowledge and I also monitor these tools" (Fernanda, pedagogical coordinator);

"EMT is the issue of management technology. It allows the school to be managed with the principal, with the pedagogical coordination, you know? Then there's the coordinator... the CAF, right, which is the administrative part, and along with the teachers... Then there's... of course, within the management itself, the technology has area coordinators who also end up working with the other teachers in each area: languages, exact sciences, humanities, and technical" (Otávio, Chemistry teacher with a diverse background);

"It's a little, right? Since I'm very young, I'm still learning a lot and every year I learn... I mean every year, right? But with each passing month I learn a

little more, especially about the EMT” (Antônio, technical foundation teacher and president of the school board).

When considered together, these statements show that politics doesn't circulate as a discourse repertoire equally recognized among the different groups in the school. While students and staff show either a lack of knowledge or only superficial contact with politics, those directly involved in the pedagogical and administrative management more frequently use terms and tools associated with its organizational grammar. The educational coordinator mentions action programs, learning guides, and institutional plans, while Teacher Otávio describes the organizational structure of the management model itself. More than showing different levels of familiarity with the policy, this contrast reveals that the very understandability of the EMT is unevenly spread among the professional cultures that make up the school.

This heterogeneity in policy makes up the first analytical move of this section. Policy doesn't show up as a cohesive unit equally recognized by all school actors, but as a discursive repertoire that circulates differently through the school's work networks. In this way, those directly involved in pedagogical and administrative management tend to use the tools and concepts that structure the management model more comfortably, while other parts of the school community relate to policy more indirectly. Far from being just a circumstantial fact, this dynamic shows that the meanings of EMT are produced within the institutional relationships themselves, which organize the school context; and within them, different professional positions draw on distinct repertoires to interpret and implement policy (Honorato; Ribeiro; Pereira, 2024).

It is precisely this unequal distribution of understanding of policy that helps make sense of the next step in the analysis: The central role of management in the participants' statements. When asked to talk about how the school is organized, the subjects often use terms related to leadership, coordination of institutional activities, and the management of teaching processes. So, the analysis shifts from the question “who recognizes the policy?” to another analytical question: “Around which key ideas is the organization of the school being described?” At this point, management emerges as a key element in connecting ideas about the school. This understanding aligns with studies that see curriculum policies as contingent discursive processes, in

which meanings are continuously reinterpreted by the people involved in their creation and circulation (Rodrigues; Elias; Honorato, 2024).

“Actually, managing, right? I think that's what managing is, knowing how to lead, how to organize the school, you know? Because if not, if a person doesn't have that leadership aspect and doesn't know how to run a school, it falls apart. The school ends up having just the figure of a principal. But it doesn't move forward, right? Many times, the management aspect leaves a lot to be desired, you know?” (Otávio, Chemistry teacher and from the diversified base);

“In my mind, he is an inspiring leader. People talk a lot about the servant leader, but I think the general manager is an inspiring leader. As for his role in the EMT, he is really the person who handles the PDCA of everything. Because, from him, this general manager's analysis affects the entire organizational structure, CAF, the work team, CAF subordinates, and the school's pedagogical actions” (Juliana, school principal);

“Ah, it's a very important role because we... Without them, we wouldn't, it wouldn't work, right? So, the entire organizational part depends on them and having a good look at them to make it flow” (Antônio, teacher of the technical base and president of the school council);

“Basically organize the whole school. Not just in the democratic area, or in teaching, the reports, but also through everyone's respect. A lot of things. Basically build the school from scratch; these are the school's pillars. For me, that's it” (Leticia, student 1);

“The school administration, students, staff, the issue of food, the issue of responding to parents' requests, also the whole organization of the school, pedagogical. Which is important for the school” (Roberta, employee 2).

In the statements above, management is associated with ensuring the school runs smoothly and coordinating institutional activities. The principal is described as the person responsible for connecting the pedagogical and administrative work, making sure the school is organized. More than just describing institutional roles, these statements discursively shape management itself as the organizing core of school life, that is, as a central point around which different aspects of policy try to come together (Laclau; Mouffe, 2015).

This centrality becomes particularly clear in the words of Director Juliana when she says that the manager carries out the “PDCA of everything.” By using this expression, she frames management work within a logic of planning, monitoring, and continuous evaluation of institutional actions. At the same time, by replacing the term “servant leader,” present in ICE materials, with the idea of an “inspiring leader,” she doesn't break from the discourse of the model but rather reframes it in another way. This shift shows that the policy isn't simply reproduced in the school setting but is interpreted and put into practice by the people who use it, while still keeping its overall meaning (Rodrigues; Elias; Honorato, 2024).

In this regard, management starts to operate as the organizing core of school policy, helping to stabilize the concepts of organization, leadership, and institutional coordination. As Rodrigues, Honorato, and Chagas (2023) argue, when analyzing the EMT, the model competes to dominate a specific way of understanding democratic management, linking it to principles related to accountability, administrative efficiency, and monitoring institutional actions.

It is in this context that democracy emerges, in the interviews, as a contested concept. In the participants' statements, it is often linked to participation, freedom of expression, and the ability to make choices. However, these meanings are strongly connected to how the school functions and to collaboration in the activities that make up its daily routine. The important analytical shift, then, isn't about spotting the absence of democracy in people's speech, but about understanding how it gets redefined within a chain of meaning guided by the organization and smooth running of the school.

“Democracy is a system that we assume should provide equal conditions for everyone. And, for sure, these participation processes strengthen democracy. In fact, the sustainability of democracy should be this participation from everyone. In decision-making, in the processes of choosing leaders. So, participation is essential for the full exercise of democracy” (Patrícia, Portuguese Language teacher with a diverse background);

“Like, in the community... Democracy, like, having the right to make choices. In school, that has to happen. It's not going to encourage certain choices from the students. And I think it happens a lot in the state, in the state school, democracy. Students nowadays have a lot of freedom of expression. Which is really important” (Roberta, staff 2);

“The more people participate, the more we can make society more democratic, and even more so within the school, which is important for everyone's role. So, for the student, the teacher's voice, the voice of the administration, and the coordination in general” (Gisele, student 2);

“I think I take the issue of democracy very seriously, democracy with responsibility. Democracy has to have a purpose, it has to have a focus, it can't just be, oh, there has to be democracy. Yes, there has to be democracy. But all those responsible in the school should have their free will. But that free will comes with responsibility. And this democracy, exactly, has to happen, should happen for the smooth running of the school. The democracy of being able to speak, to listen, to give your opinion, to take action and develop it in the school, and to have support for your action. And I think that's what democracy is. It's having your free will, but having it responsibly” (Fernanda, pedagogical coordinator).

The statements show that democracy is linked to participation and the expression of different voices, but also to responsibility, focus, and the smooth

running of the school. In this process, democracy tends to be understood less as a broad sharing of decision-making power and more as participation guided by institutional functionality. In this way, the term democracy works as a point where different meanings come together, bringing participation, responsibility, organization, and collaboration onto the same discursive surface (Laclau; Mouffe, 2015). This interpretation is similar to the reading proposed by Rodrigues, Honorato, and Chagas (2023), who argue that, within the EMT, democracy functions as an empty signifier capable of bringing together different demands around a common discursive chain without ever fully fixing its content.

The concrete way in which this rearticulation of democracy takes shape becomes even more visible when participants describe the participation practices present in the school.

“Yes, there is family participation in bimonthly meetings, parent meetings. And sometimes, when events from the different areas here at our school happen, yes. Sometimes parents participate, both by actively presenting or bringing something, as well as by participating, watching along with the students” (Cristiano, Math teacher);

“I participate a lot. There’s always a leaders’ meeting here to... to talk about how the classes are going, what needs to be passed on to the classes, the students’ performance, tests, assessments to see how the students are doing, ask questions, they have questionnaires about the teachers, if the teachers are actually teaching, everything, everything, basically everything gets discussed. They’re always there with us” (Letícia, student 1);

“In the games, the students make sure everyone participates. The meetings have almost all the parents. There are a lot of dads around here. The trips. Let me think. I believe that’s mostly it, right? Because for the events, since everyone is always here at the school, when there are events, everyone always comes. Everyone is always there. Um... there’s a science fair, everyone participates. I think this is a school that really works as a team. Everything runs very much together” (Aline, staff member 1).

The statements indicate that participation in the school mainly happens through meetings, school events, family gatherings, and collective activities organized by the administration. What stands out, however, is not just the presence of these spaces, but the specific way in which participation makes sense in people's accounts. Formally established collegial bodies for collective decision-making, like the school council, appear quite minimally in participants' narratives. Instead of participation structured through shared deliberative bodies, what emerges are spaces for dialogue and listening that are organized based on the administration's own institutional dynamics.

This dynamic becomes even more evident when participants describe how decisions are made at school.

“In a way, it ends up being collective, right? The planning itself, the activities that the school is going to carry out are activities that are built, right? With the entire teaching staff, right? With everything. Oh, of course, the management and the teaching staff are planning so that the whole school community can also participate, right?” (Chemistry teacher and from the diverse foundation);

Yes, the school community does participate. It’s something we have here at the school. Always, in every action we take here, everyone is involved, parents, teachers, staff, students, the management team. So, this community participation is really fundamental to the foundation, right? For our school to truly grow, and, how can I put it? For it to bear good fruit, you know? (Fernanda, pedagogical coordinator);

“We’re deciding collectively about, I don’t know, stuff like what time we arrive or what clothes we wear, the uniform. There are decisions that are made, you know, by everyone together. Yeah, definitely. We were also thinking about building the Student Council again. So, a bunch of students got together in the auditorium to talk about building the Student Council, the terms of the Council itself, we decided how many people are going to be in the Council, what the Council is going to be like, how many people need to be on the committee, everything decided by us” (Letícia, student 1);

“So, there are times when people from different groups, you know, teachers, students, sit together to decide things. There’s... there’s the leaders’ meeting, where we, the students who aren’t leaders, pass on our requests to the leader, and they have the meeting with the coordination, with CAF, with everyone. Besides the Student Council, which is where students really take on that role of giving voice, you know, saying what we need, going after it and pushing for it” (Gisele, student 2);

Yes. There’s always the meeting with the leaders, which they have in the classroom, right? Each leader with their group, who reports to management, and they make the decision together. Since there’s the meeting with the teachers and also the meetings with the staff. Then everyone brings their agenda, you know? So we can reach a consensus (Aline, employee 1).

The statements suggest that requests and suggestions usually circulate in teacher meetings, student gatherings, or chats with the management team. Still, the reports indicate that final decisions tend to stay with the leadership team. So, participation mostly shows up as a chance for people to speak up and contribute, while the actual institutional outcomes remain managed by the school administration. This highlights that the kind of participation envisioned by the EMT is a type of mediated participation, people can voice concerns, make suggestions, and push for things, but the final decisions stay in the hands of the school leadership.

Even so, attempts to stabilize these meanings don’t happen without cracks. The interviews show that teachers and staff also recognize other spaces for collective organization, like the union, while students mention the student council as a space for

representation and advocacy. These spaces suggest that politics doesn't unfold in a linear way, but is continuously reinterpreted and contested by the people involved in its everyday practice (Ball; Maguire; Braun, 2021). In this sense, political action takes place amid the paths, experiences, and roles of different school actors. It's in this area of contestation that the meanings of management, participation, and democracy try to stabilize without ever fully settling, since school practices themselves keep reopening the competition over what politics actually means.

So, what this section shows is that the EMT aims to dominate a specific grammar of management and democracy, guided by organization, accountability, and institutional monitoring, but this attempt to set things in stone is always contingent and affected by shifts that happen within the contexts where they operate.

(NEVER SO) FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study examined how the role of democratic management in an FCS subject to EMT takes part in the debate over the meaning of democracy within the public school. By following the processes through which this policy becomes understandable in the school, the research aimed to move away from views that see management as just an administrative aspect, placing it instead in the realm of curriculum policies, understood as a space for producing and contesting ideas about how school life is organized.

The analysis made it possible to understand that what comes to exist as democratic management in schools doesn't result from the straightforward application of a pre-defined model. The instruments and categories used by EMT become workable through interpretation-translation processes carried out by the people involved, and they show that the meanings of policy are shaped by the discursive connections that cross the school context. In this process, management emerges as a key point for organizing these connections, helping to stabilize certain interpretations about leadership, participation, and guiding educational work.

However, the very dynamics of how policy operates show that such stabilizations are always temporary. When interpreted by people from different professional backgrounds, the policy comes to exist through context-specific readings that continuously reopen the field of meaning of democratic management. In this process, what seems like a relatively stable school organization is less a foundation

of the policy and more a contingent attempt to organize the field of institutional practices.

Placing democratic management within this context of contingency allows us to recognize that what's at stake isn't just the adoption of certain management tools, but the struggle over defining the meanings that come to shape democracy itself within public schools. Far from working as a fully settled principle, democracy appears as a contested concept, whose understanding is produced through the ways we try to organize, even if only temporarily, the relationships between participation, authority, and running school life.

In this context, democratic management stops being understood as a fully stabilized institutional form and starts being seen as a space for contesting the meaning of politics in public schools. The strategies that try to fix certain interpretations of democracy within the EMT always turn out to be partial and temporary, since the processes of interpretation-translation that make up political action continuously reopen the field of meaning for democratic management. So, rather than pointing to the consolidation of a management model, the analysis shows that what's really at stake in the full-time schools of Paraíba is the very struggle over the meanings that end up defining democracy in schools, reaffirming the contingent and relational nature of curriculum policies.

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