

Educational management and schooling in crisis contexts and regulation

Abstract

The text highlights the complexity of power relations in educational management and schooling, emphasizing the importance of resisting authoritarian forms of regulation with innovative practices that promote freedom and autonomy in management and schools. Currently, the field of education is under pressure from global political and economic movements that seek to impose a centralized management logic based on objective results, thus affecting the autonomy and creativity of schools. Although schools constitute spaces of freedom and autonomy, they face institutional contradictions and significant challenges in management. Despite these challenges, it is understood that there are still spaces for innovation.

Keywords: education, global political, economic movements, social life, circulate, systems of influence, contradictions, knowledge, discourses, interests games, ideas, control mechanisms

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Introduction

The theme of management, in some way, has been addressed by humans since the creation of the notion of property and its exercise in the remote times of collective social life. This notion is thus inextricably associated with senses of power, control, governance, and so many other forms of regulation produced throughout human history to designate the ways of organizing social coexistence. In the realm of sociability, there is no record of any experience of lasting coexistence without some form of government. Historically, all attempts to construct models of collective life thought free from any regulation and standardization have remained solely in the realm of ideals. Power relations are immanent to life, therefore, they are constituent of the very idea of human collectivity.¹

Foucault, one of the most important intellectuals in the field of studies involving the theme of power relations, coined the concepts of biopower and biopolitics, with which he seeks to understand the practices, emerged in modern Western society, aimed at managing and regulating human life processes, as well as the forms of social control exercised by the State. For Foucault, power over life is established as a way of managing populations, taking into account their fundamental biological reality. Through it, a significant contingent of knowledge, laws, and political measures has been established in our societies since the 17th century, aiming at controlling phenomena such as urban agglomeration, epidemics, transformation of spaces, liberal organization of the economy, etc.¹

“What makes power remain, that it is accepted, is simply that it does not weigh only as a force that says no, but that, in fact, circulates, produces things, induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse; it must be considered more as a productive network that crosses the entire social body than as a negative instance whose function is to repress.” (FOUCAULT, 1971, p.48).

Operating with this concept, associated with others from the same field of analysis, Foucault and several other researchers have sought to understand the complex processes that shape collective life in different societies over time (biopower), and also the ways in

which the State activates and mobilizes its political body to maintain order within relationships in societies (biopolitics). The State, by appropriating control over the power relations that govern life in society, materializes itself in institutions, and thus materializes its strength, dominates, and regulates bodies, educating them to be useful to society (FOUCAULT, 2015).

From these matrices derive the academic insistence of scholars from various scientific fields to explore other aspects of this same problem, among which, the idea of governmentality, sovereignty, discipline, management, and governance. And in this same scope, understanding private power, political power, state power, power in geopolitical scales, etc.

Power is precisely the informal element that passes between forms of knowledge, or beneath them. That is why it is said to be microphysical. It is force, and relation of force, not form. And the conception of power relations in Foucault, extending Nietzsche, is one of the most important points of his thought.²

Both Foucault's concept of biopower and biopolitics, and other definitions produced in the world of science aiming to expand understanding about the “what” and “how” of power relations, are fundamentally interesting to education and, by extension, to schooling processes, especially because both constitute spaces that deal with the idea of power in at least three dimensions: of subjectivities, socialities, and institutionalities.

Education is a field in which power relations circulate and are produced in varied forms and intensities, and the school constitutes a territory/place in which these relations are (re)constructed and mobilized gaining materiality. In this sense, thinking about educational and school management means considering that they bear the marks of these typically human forces that Foucault talks about, environments in which exchanges circulate, systems of influence, contradictions, knowledge, discourses, interests games, ideas, control mechanisms, etc.

From this perspective, it might be appropriate to highlight three inseparable questions: How have we been thinking and mobilizing notions about power relations in this place called school? And how have school management activities been operating with this notion

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from the place they occupy in this secular institution? How have educational and school managers positioned themselves in the face of external pressures that generally seek to prioritize performative administrations, centralizing strategies, result-based management, accountability, etc.?

Before proceeding, I suppose it is worth another observation regarding Foucault's concept of power when he relates it to the idea of freedom. He says that power relations can only exist when subjects are free. If one, between the two, is at the other's disposal becoming their thing, an object upon which they can exert infinite and unlimited violence, there will be no power relations. Therefore, for power relations to be exercised, there must always be, on both sides, at least a certain form of freedom.³

The school is, or should be, a place for the exercise of freedom, the construction of autonomies, relationships, exchanges, dialogue, coexistence, the expansion of conditions for social life, the development of creativity, the production of knowledge and culture, however, the collectives that compose it continue with the challenge of understanding and dealing with these power relations and mobilizing themselves more freely towards the objectives of this important educational institution.

Santos Guerra⁴ in discussing the theme of school organization, points out that there are a series of contradictions in it that, in my understanding, are intimately linked to the question of power relations. He says that the school is a hierarchical institution, but one that aims to educate in and for citizenship; a heteronomous institution, but one that claims to develop its own autonomy and that of individuals; an institution that should educate for life, but that subordinates itself to moral values and social habits; an institution with abundant norms, however, it aims to develop participation and innovation; an institution that transmits hegemonized standards, but dreams of transforming society; an institution of forced recruitment, yet aims to educate in freedom; an institution with a hierarchical epistemological conception that insists on developing creativity; a sexist and racist institution, but aims to educate in diversity, and a strongly tiered institution, which contradictorily aims to develop an educational democracy.

The contradictions pointed out by Santos Guerra are widely accepted both in the academic environment and by educators, who in recent years have made efforts to make the school a more open place for diversity, more identified with the singular and collective life of people, where coexistence of difference, multiculturalism, free expression, plurality of ideas and thought, etc. are allowed. In Giroux's expression,⁵ a democratic sphere, of resistance, and of the exercise of possibilities.

But, as is inherent in the movement of history, there are always obstacles and challenges along the way, new correlations of forces, other interests games - movements that bring to the stage the antagonisms and contradictions of social life. In this dialectical movement, education and schools continue to build their experiences, always amidst these tensions, with direct repercussions on the daily lives of teachers, managers, students, and so on.

Broadly speaking, researchers have been highlighting in their works the strengthening of political and economic movements engendered by global political networks⁶ and international organizations, whose discourses seek to hegemonize certain senses to concepts considered valuable to the field of education in general, curricular politics, and school management in particular, invisibilizing some historical gains, especially advances regarding contemporary critical pedagogical thought and democratic management.

The pressures from these economic organizations, international political networks, and other groups of liberal and conservative matrixes cross the world spaces from the transnational to the local scale. In this work, they mobilize media discourses, distribute and reterritorialize curricular guidelines, induce educational reforms, pressure national and local governments to implement large-scale external evaluation systems, and even sell solutions to so-called school performance problems.

These are movements that wield significant political force alongside national and local governments, as they present themselves as protagonists of what is most modern, innovative, and efficient for education. This discursive structure has been impacting, in various forms, on school management spaces, shifting action perspectives in pedagogical projects, whether in the field of evaluation, curricular organization, knowledge selection, learning, and even in teaching activity itself.

In summary, these are new forms of power that impose themselves, oriented in the logic of the top-down type relationship, in a rationality that values the universal over the particular, the result over the process, the merit over the collaborative, utilitarian and functional reason over broad formation. It is a perspective that risks the search for management modes built based on circulating, fluid, horizontalized, creative power relations, as Foucault speaks of.

This context, taken by discourses with more regulatory and authoritarian tones, gradually occupy spaces in the daily life of the school, invisibilizing and even erasing possibilities of autonomy, creativity, and originality, given that they condition any local initiative to the expectation of efficiency and results in the state-almost-market logic. Schools need to reinvent themselves in innovation, without adhering to perspectives and interests that control and regulate them.

Faced with this scenario, but taking into account the forms of resistance and possibilities always open to educational institutions, we must ask: Are there still free spaces for innovation outside this rationality, or are there only a few cracks through which the sun of free thought and creative action can penetrate?

If we consider, as Vasquez (2007) understands, that innovation consists of the possibility of exercising onto and socio-creative freedom and that this free deliberation and the exercise of choice are watched and regulated, a process that Marcuse⁷ defines as disappointing freedoms, it seems coherent to us to think it is indeed an immense challenge to manage collective processes in an innovative way. Would the school, therefore, have yet another contradiction to manage? I think yes, a gigantic challenge for managers and all other education professionals!

In any case, the doors never close definitively. Human attitudes, especially those designed and carried out for people's formation, as is the case with schools, will always be to some extent a possibility of (re)creation, of (re)invention. Taking up Sánchez Vázquez again, we would say that the challenge, from this perspective, is to guide actions by the idea of creative praxis, rather than repetitive. To do so, it is necessary, among other aspects, to understand that not every discourse that hegemonizes itself as the representation of the new, avant-garde, and efficient, brings with it the content of innovation outside the logic that constituted it. In various circumstances, they may mean the refoundation of the old, seductively clad in new language strategies, denying, even, the possibilities of healthy and positive exercise of the power relations that Foucault talks about.⁸

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Conflicts of interest

The author declares there is no conflict of interest.

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