on_education
Journal for Research and Debate

civic-military schools in Brazil: feminist lenses to uncover a patriarchal, white supremacist, and queerphobic project

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This article examines the rise of conservative policies in Brazilian education, particularly since 2014 when teachers became targets of accusations related to "ideological indoctrination" and "gender ideology." The Non-Partisan Schools Movement has significantly contributed to fostering a climate of distrust and the militarisation of education has gained momentum under Jair Bolsonaro's presidency (2019–2022). Focusing on the Civic-Military Schools Program (PECIM), the article employs relational and feminist lenses to analyse the arguments of conservative supporters. Although the policy does not overtly promote anti-gender or anti-feminist rhetoric, its documents and implementation reveal underlying biases. While militarisation is framed as a means to improve educational quality, results indicate a dangerous initiative involving untrained military personnel, abusive behaviours, and practices that undermine the self-esteem of girls, queer and Black students. An intersectional feminist perspective, therefore, is fundamental to highlighting contradictions in conservative discourse and interrupting their policies.

Keywords: Anti-gender agenda, Brazil, Conservative policies, Intersectional feminism, Militarisation of Education

In Brazil, in recent years, especially from 2014 onwards, public schools have been subjected to harsh attacks through the figures of their teachers (Miguel, 2016; Penna, 2017). Conservative movements have begun to encourage the denunciation of teachers primarily on two issues: the so-called 'ideological indoctrination' and 'gender ideology' (Miguel, 2016). Educators have started to be exposed on social media and persecuted, through recordings made by students in the classroom and screenshots of posts from their private social media accounts. Such persecutory mobilisation was, to a large extent, spread by the actions of the Non-Partisan Schools Movement [*Escola sem Partido* (EsP) in Portuguese] in the civil and political arenas of the country (Hypolito & Lima, 2021). That has been crucial in creating a climate of distrust towards teachers, which in turn has led to the proliferation of policies aimed at controlling the work of teachers.

In this context of conservatism and control towards education, the militarisation of public schools in Brazil is advancing. We understand that the conservatism Brazil has been experiencing is not something new but rather a movement that has been rearticulating (Hall, 1980) historically conservative aspects of our society. It gained significant prominence and strength since the election of Jair Bolsonaro, who served as the president of Brazil from 2019 to 2022. Bolsonaro was a captain in the Army until the 80s and, since his entry into party politics, has held positions favourable to the military dictatorship, militarism, and the political and ideological persecution of so-called 'leftists' or 'communists.' This context of his trajectory is relevant especially because, in

the present paper, we turn our attention to the Civic-Military Schools Program [Programa Nacional das Escolas Cívico-Militares (PECIM) in Portuguese], which was created by the Bolsonaro government in the first year of his presidency. In addition to contextualising the policy, we focus on the relational and feminist thematic analysis of the arguments that are used by conservative agents to defend it. Even though the militarisation of Brazilian public schools has not been defended from an openly anti-gender and anti-feminist bias, through its speeches, codes of conduct and implementation it is possible to observe such a bias being mobilised.

Thus, a significant part of the motivations behind this work is also aligned with the struggle to halt the advancement of the conservative movement within the scope of education. Following Apple, Au, and Gandin (2011), we align ourselves with the field of critical analysis in education, understanding that we need to highlight the relations of exploitation and domination in which these educational policies and agendas are embedded.

The present work begins with a brief contextualization of the ongoing research entitled "The Conservative Alliance, the State and Educational Policies in Brazil,"*1* which we base our discussion on here. Both the historical background of the issue motivating the investigation and the theoretical and methodological tools being used are delineated, demonstrating how thematic and relational analyses of arguments in defence of conservative agendas were made. Next, we dedicate special attention to the advancements of the anti-gender and anti-feminist agenda, which permeate and sustain the conservative advancement in the Brazilian educational context. Through the lenses of intersectional feminism, we then seek to demonstrate the contradictions within the conservative discourse that advocates for the improvement of educational quality through the militarisation of schools and, in reality, has promoted not only conservative ideals and practices but also sexist, anti-feminist, racist, and queerphobic ones. In a country with a history of countless human rights violations under a military dictatorship, we consider scientific work to identify and interrupt the insertion and reproduction of authoritarian values in the field of education to be urgent.

The Conservative Discourse on the Militarisation of Public Schools: An Analytical Axis of Research on Conservatism in Brazilian Education

One of the analytical axes of the research "The Conservative Alliance, the State and Educational Policies in Brazil" has been the investigation of the agents involved in implementing the Civic-Military Schools Program (PECIM). More than that, we have been analysing the arguments these subjects use to gain support – focusing on better understanding what are the ideas that are convincing to the general public.

Civic-military schools are non-militarised institutions with retired military agents who act as educational and disciplinary managers and/or monitors. During Jair Bolsonaro's federal administration, this policy was promoted by conservative agents as a 'successful' strategy to restore good results, safety, and neutrality in Brazilian public education. These are features they claim to be lost "because of the democratisation of education", in Bolsonaro's words (2019 – data from the research available on demand). Without a specific political-pedagogical project, the PECIM was characterised by the "infiltration" of military agents into school spaces, promising discipline, and funds to improve schools' structure and materials – a sum that was not fully delivered.

During Bolsonaro's government, around 200 schools were militarised through the PECIM (Basilio, 2023). These were not new public schools, but existing ones that were militarised by integrating

reserve military personnel into them. Although the government of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2023–2026) revoked the decree that implemented PECIM as a national education policy, the existence of these schools was not prevented. Since state and municipal governments have autonomy under the Brazilian Federal Constitution, there are still programs in action, including some with specificities that directly confront democratic principles of public education. State or municipal public schools should, in principle, have universal access – a legal principle established by the Federal Constitution. In Brazil, children and teenagers are eligible to enrol in any public school without any type of selection. However, there are militarisation programs that include criteria for admission, such as the case of the Military Police Schools of Bahia (Polícia Militar da Bahia, 2022).

In our research, we dedicate ourselves to analysing arguments in defence of conservative policies in Brazilian education, including the PECIM. 231 excerpts from online posts, talks, and videos were examined[2] through relational and thematic analysis.[3] According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis constitutes a qualitative research method that identifies, analyses, and produces patterns of meaning (themes) in research data. Relational analysis, in turn, is a theoretical-methodological tool of critical educational studies (Apple et al., 2011; Moeller, 2018), which implies the observation and analysis of the contradictions inherent to social phenomena in education from a counter-hegemonic perspective. Through this analytical practice, 10 themes and two sub themes were created within which excerpts of conservative agents' speeches can be grouped. Speeches specifically related to the militarisation of public schools were identified under themes such as 'discipline,' 'patriotism and civism,' 'freedom,' 'quality,' 'security,' 'national development,' and 'combat against ideological indoctrination.' Although we don't have space here for a detailed analysis of excerpts collected in the research, in the next paragraph we exemplify, through a passage, the analysis conducted, showing that different themes appear in the same speech. The analysed statement is from Ibaneis Rocha, former governor of the Federal District, where civic-military schools were widely implemented. Ibaneis asserts that the militarisation of schools is about:

> Bringing discipline to education and bringing back civic values to children. This excellent education provided in the Military Police and Fire Department schools must be extended to all our schools in the Federal District. This, for me, is a commitment, as it is the third biggest problem we have in the Federal District, the education of our children. (Rocha, 2019 – data from the research available on demand)

The first theme that can be highlighted in the statement above is the issue of discipline. The argument used by conservative groups links discipline to hierarchical relationships, under the shadow of the military model, for maintaining both school and social order. This tactic sometimes incites the need to control what they consider as student insubordination, characterising teachers as their victims due to disrespect for figures of authority. It also implies that teachers may not have the capability to discipline students, hence the perceived necessity of introducing military personnel and militarised culture into schools.

The second theme concerns the restoration of social order. When Rocha mentions that militarised schools will "bring back civic values to children," he presents a conservative argument that appeals to the rhetoric of declining morals and worsening misconduct in society. That is often associated with patriarchal, Christian, cis-heteronormative, and nationalist values supposedly being corrupted by the advancement of progressive policies in various, albeit diffuse, social spheres. Their

perspective is that there was a glorious (and idyllic) past "where institutions actually functioned" to be reclaimed, which could justify intervention – with education being one of the most powerful fields of action.

The third theme is patriotism and civic duty, as he emphasises the need to revive civic values. This argument emphasises the valorisation of national symbols and social order, aiming to educate citizens who love their homeland and respect this very specific political culture.

Lastly, the fourth theme is quality, referenced in the passage where Ibaneis Rocha states the need for the excellent education present in Military Police and Fire Department schools to be extended to all schools in the Federal District. According to him, one of the major problems is the education provided in non-militarised institutions, thus mobilising the common sense idea of lack of quality in public schools. From a conservative perspective, education quality relates to acquiring competencies and skills that will enable children and youth to become part of the productive cycle of society, with the pathway to the job market being most frequently cited. The discourse reflects education as a means rather than an end in itself. Quality is thus validated by numbers, through large-scale assessments and results. There is a focus on both curriculum and infrastructure, as well as the lack or inadequacy of school staff. School inefficiency or ineffectiveness are identified as flaws to be corrected.

Through the results – including the excerpt mentioned above, as well as its brief analysis – one can observe that despite the conservative discourse having a strong appeal in convincing the implementation of the PECIM, the presence of neoliberal arguments is also notable. This is the case of the theme of 'quality' that appears in the excerpt above. However, neoliberal arguments are activated through other themes, such as 'freedom' and 'development' – which are not usually aligned with a strict conservative ideology. This characterises, therefore, the 'conservative modernization' agenda in education, as proposed by Apple (2003) and incorporated into our theoretical framework. While hegemonic alliances campaign for the rescue of traditional conservative ideals, they also appeal to the modernization of education – which denotes an inherent contradiction in these movements in the educational field.

Another contradiction lies in the fact that despite the anti-gender and antifeminist agenda being central to conservative movements worldwide, it does not appear as a frontal flag for the militarisation of public schools in Brazil. Through our analysis, however, we aim to demonstrate manifestations of underlying patriarchal, White Supremacist, and queerphobic ideologies in this context. Before we dive into these analyses, we briefly present what is the anti-gender and antifeminist agenda and how it has been shaping educational reforms in the Brazilian context.

Anti-Gender and Antifeminist Agenda: A Conservative Movement Against the So-Called 'Gender Ideology' in Schools

The conservative narrative of 'gender ideology' was created in the 1990s by the Vatican and appropriated by the Brazilian conservative movement in recent decades. As a way of interrupting the advances of feminist and LGBTQIA+ movements and the debates promoted by them in the educational field, conservative groups have dedicated themselves to the distortion of knowledge constructed by women's, feminist and gender studies. The political and educational mobilization for a more inclusive pedagogy has been lightly associated with indoctrination and even paedophilia. In response to these acts, many teachers in Brazil have been self-censoring, as a Human Rights Watch

report (HRW, 2022) points out. Although the ban on the alleged 'gender ideology' in schools was considered unconstitutional by the Federal Supreme Court in 2020, daily life in Brazilian schools has been permeated by the threat to teachers who dare to exercise their constitutional right of the freedom to teach.

This wave has been also called an anti-gender and antifeminist agenda since many of its followers insist that what should be banned from schools is gender itself as well as allegedly malicious feminist teachers. For Garbagnoli (2016), the category of gender materialises the threat to Christian values that the Catholics had already been observing in the 1990's since their belief system was being challenged in a historical moment of transformations. The author argues that the Vatican chose 'gender' as the emblem of theories that challenge traditional sexual order, considering such a challenge as a threat to the social order. The expression 'gender ideology' emerged then as a synonym for Feminist and/or Gender Studies and was formalised by the Catholic discourse, uniting religious and non-religious conservatives against feminist and LGBTQ+ demands.

In Brazil, this narrative gained momentum from 2010 onwards, especially regarding educational policies such as the National Education Plan that was under evaluation to be implemented during the 2014-2024 period. Religious and conservative groups began to oppose the inclusion of gender equality in these policies, articulating to alter or omit passages promoting such agenda. These groups expressed concern about a supposed 'contamination' in the education of children and adolescents, who would be vulnerable to educators interested in subverting the values of their families through the so-called 'gender ideology'. It was through this narrative that a previously unknown group began to gain popularity and influence in the political and educational scene. The Non-partisan School Movement (Movimento Escola Sem Partido [ESP] in Portuguese) expanded nationally by combining the anti-gender agenda with its original demand to combat 'Marxist indoctrination' in schools. From there, the 'gender ideology' narrative not only acquired the status of truth in political and popular discourse, but also has been causing moral panic among conservative families and politicians.

Although extremely popular, bellicose and effective in its purpose of mobilising followers, the anti-gender agenda has not been a frequent argument in the conservative defence of the militarisation of Brazilian public schools. This is an educational policy that has mainly triggered demands related to safety, discipline and quality of education, as previously presented. We argue, however, that through intersectional feminist lenses it is possible to make visible not only their prejudiced and exclusionary biases but also their symbolically and physically violent effects.

Civic-Military Schools in Brazil as Patriarchal, White Supremacist, and Queerphobic Project

Brazilian Black feminists have been historically denouncing the deep connections of Brazilian society and culture with sexism and racism (Bento, 2022; Gonzalez, 1984). The myth of a racial democracy has been dismantled by them together with the necessary understanding of the particularly vulnerable position in which Black women are put when the dynamics of gender, race, and class encounter. Black people (Black women especially) are frequently domesticated by Whiteness, framed in images of control (Collins, 2019). We argue that the Civic-Military Schools Program (PECIM) has shown effects in that direction.

First, we turn to the documents that regulate the PECIM to draw attention to its rules, standards,

dress codes and sanctions. Militarised schools incorporate rituals similar to those of barracks, with the use of uniforms, saluting, and classes of civics. It all relates to military discipline. In the name of this specific disciplinary concept, a standardisation is implemented, which extends even to aesthetic aspects. Clothing, hairstyles, and the expression of political ideas are expected to be standardised, silenced or even punished as disciplinary transgressions (Goiás, 2018).

According to Santos (2020, n.p.), "… the documents as a whole, reveal a militarised and police-like daily life, as well as a doctrinal nature of the proposal, from a conservative perspective … ." Through feminist lenses, we also observe a specific emphasis on adjusting behaviours to traditional gender roles, perpetuating a patriarchal, cis-heteronormative, and police-like culture. Dress codes and rules disproportionately target girl students (even though boys are too prohibited from using accessories such as bracelets and earrings), disregarding diversity in school communities, including gender, ethnicity, culture, religion, and sexual orientation. These strict standards and sanctions stifle individuality, diversity, multiculturalism and the free circulation of ideas and beliefs.

While the conservative discourse announces military discipline as a factor in improving quality in schools, we have been noticing the palpable setbacks it has been representing to a democratic and diverse education. It should also not be overlooked that the schools in which this policy has been implemented are public schools, with a largely poor and black student body (INEP, 2021; Moreira, 2017). In this sense, the seams between neoliberal and conservative ideals become more explicit, showing what kind of subjects the policy proposes to discipline. The analysis of a speech given by Bruno Engler in 2019, a far-right State deputy, can be illustrative of that. He says:

> These are schools [public ones] with no *discipline* at all, where even *crimes* occur inside, and therefore, they are in no condition to create a *proper environment for learning*. The idea is to hand them over to the care of the Military Police … . In this environment, a structure with hierarchy and discipline is established (Faria, 2019, online).

In his words, we can observe three of the arguments mapped by us being used: discipline and safety in the sense that schools have not been successful in controlling students. Quality in education is a way of saying that hierarchy and order are the necessary tools to provide a safe space for good teaching and better results. All of these are arguments that have connected to common sense and the real insecurities of people, therefore becoming more popular and accepted. At the same time, through feminist and intersectional lenses, one can question: When he says that public schools lack discipline and that crimes occur in them, which bodies are the protagonists of these experiences and that need to be disciplined? When he addresses a proper environment for learning, what does he have in mind? As mentioned, the student body of public schools in Brazil is mostly made of lower-class Black children and youth. So, disguised as a concern with quality, order and discipline, lies an understanding that *these* are the students who should be controlled in order to receive the education they consider the most adequate for this public.

In recent years, Black girls have been prevented from attending classes at civic-military schools in different Brazilian cities because their hair was not styled according to the institutions' norms (Alfano, 2023; UOL, 2022). Although the military argument is based on the importance of aesthetic standardisation as part of institutional organisation (discipline), through the contributions of Black

feminists like bell hooks, it is possible to challenge this claim. Historically, Black hair has been portrayed as ugly or dirty, leading not only to discrimination but also to the internalisation of racism by individuals who feel compelled to hide their physical characteristics by straightening their hair. According to bell hooks (2005), this is an attempt to conform to the White beauty standard, which can have severe impacts on self-esteem – notably the self-esteem of Black girls. In the case of schools that prohibit the free expression of personality through hairstyle, oppression is produced in its cruellest sense by penalising those students who dare not fit into the White Supremacist standard.

Such a standard can also be identified in a speech given by Abraham Weintraub, a former Minister of Education during Bolsonaro's presidency. He claimed that

> The civic-military school is a rescue, precisely, of all that brought us here. What is ugly remains ugly, and what is beautiful remains beautiful; right is right and wrong is wrong. The lines and discipline they [the military] bring us regarding respect for teachers, family, parents, mothers, respect for public money, saying no to graffiti, no to vandalising, no to destroying public property (which is the result of taxes that we sacrifice ourselves to pay). This type of respect is visible in the civic-military school. Respect for the flag, for past and present sacrifice, and the sacrifice they [students] will have to make. (Weintraub, 2018 – data from the research available on demand)

Although it is not explicitly said in Weintraub's words, it is possible to identify White Supremacy being triggered when he says "saying no to graffiti", for example. Historically, graffiti is an art form that comes from Black and peripheral communities as a way of expressing social criticism through street walls. Associating that in the same sentence as vandalism gives a clear message of disregarding graffiti as an art form – therefore, disregarding its artists as people who deserve to be heard or considered. The same goes for the affirmation of "what is ugly remains ugly". Weintraub here is triggering the commonsense idea of an idealised past in which things were prettier and better – an idyllic past, as put by Apple (2003). Considering Brazil has been experiencing a moment of strong popular mobilisation connected to Black, feminist and LGBTQIA+ movements, it is no wonder that the privileged groups feel displaced or wronged. They claim society has lost its 'right and wrong' patterns – wrong here being the ones who dare to be themselves, should it be in terms of Women's liberation, sexual freedom or fighting for racial equality. A Black girl who fights to escape the images of control society imposes over her (Collins, 2019) is unacceptable and must be disciplined and domesticated – that is one of the underlying goals of projects such as PECIM.

Disguised as a concern with quality, neutrality, and order ('modernization'), relies on the anti-feminist, anti-Black and queerphobic conservative understanding that public school students (mostly lower-class Black children and youth) 'should know their places.' According to Bolsonaro himself, "You've got to put the importance of civic-military values into these kids' heads the way it was during the military regime […]" (Gullino & Soares, 2019, n.p.).

Although not recognized as such by Bolsonaro and his supporters, the military regime he refers to concerns the period of dictatorship experienced in Brazil between 1964 and 1985. Among the endless brutal attacks on human rights carried out during the dictatorship, the strong censorship, including the presence of 'censors' in classrooms are memories still alive in the collective Brazilian memory. It is now common knowledge that the discipline linked to moral and civic education was

guaranteed at the expense of fear and punishment – often fatal ones – of those who thought differently and dared to express it. The dictatorship was particularly cruel to Brazilian women. Brazilian feminist authors have made the theoretical and political effort to rescue and rewrite history, emphasising the violence experienced by women due to the hierarchical and dichotomous power structures established in this historical period, such as masculine/feminine and public/private (Alves, 2021; Saffioti, 2013; Teles, 2015).

Although feminist resistance has been seen, recognized, and echoed with the effects of resistance and revolution during and after the military dictatorship, women were undeniable victims of this period. Surveillance, silencing, torture, and rape were not uncommon practices during this time – practices that subjugate and dehumanize women.

Remembering the dictatorship as an inherent part of military history and culture is also essential when considering the diversity of sexuality and gender identities. During the military dictatorship in Brazil, homophobia was intensified, with systematic repression of homosexuals by the state's repressive apparatus. Gay activists were humiliated and tortured, while shows featuring travestis and transgender individuals were censored, and publications on LGBTQIA+ sociability were prohibited. This persecution is described by researchers in the field as a State policy (Quinalha, 2021), emphasising that even after the dictatorship period, the LGBTQIA+ community continued to be marginalised and their experiences neglected in historical reports. Police raids aimed at 'cleansing,' resulting in arrests, torture, and extortion. Homosexuality was considered subversive and a threat to morality, leading to institutionalised discrimination. Although not an 'extermination' policy, homophobia was undoubtedly a State policy during the dictatorship. Nowadays, although less often explicit about their perception on this topic, conservative agents can occasionally be caught making statements like Bolsonaro's, in which he stated that schools should not "teach children that being gay is normal" (Matos, 2022, n.p.).

Although many of their perpetrators and defenders remain free, the echoes of the dictatorship on women and LGBTQIA+ people have not been forgotten. Alongside this historical demand for feminist and queer reparations, it must be noted that the militarisation of public schools carries within it this legacy of patriarchal, homophobic, racist and misogynistic violence – a violence that is often reactivated in more 'subtle' forms, but just as dehumanising.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we can understand the civic-military schools as a dangerous ongoing project. This relates specifically to 1) Besides not possessing training as educators, many military agents who have been inserted into school spaces are in fact abusers (Caldas, 2023); 2) Both the rules of conduct and the military's practices have constituted attacks on self-esteem of black students, and the silencing of their own blackness; 3) Military dynamics are neither educational nor democratic, but we recognize, even more, that there is a legacy of the military dictatorship, which was especially cruel towards women and queer people. In this, we see the military dynamics in schools as an attempt to update a rigid patriarchal, racist and queerphobic control over youth. It is an exclusionary, authoritarian, violent and, ultimately, criminal project.

We understand that delving deeper into feminist studies is a fundamental factor in challenging this type of conservative educational policy. By examining historically silenced yet revolutionary perspectives, it becomes possible to bring to the surface the intentions underlying discourses of

modernisation, quality, and safety that surround Brazilian education. While military discipline is portrayed as a solution to educational problems, it is evident that there is a very specific project targeting students from historically vulnerable communities – girls, Black youth, and young members of the LGBTQIA+ community. Civic-military education aims to stifle diversity and reinforce sexist, cis-heteronormative, and racist standards. Feminist studies and movements have the potential to elucidate many of these elements and provide strengthening tools for their combat.

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Recommended Citation

Dalmaso-Junqueira, B., & de Lima, I. G. (2024). Civic-military schools in Brazil: Feminist lenses to uncover a patriarchal, white supremacist, and queerphobic project. *On Education. Journal for Research and Debate*, *7*(20).
https://doi.org/10.17899/on_ed.2024.20.3

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1. Project funded by the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq).
2. We acknowledge and thank the students that were part of the process of collection and analysis of these data: Gabriel Dias dos Santos, Jaqueline Garske Ferreira, Willian Dalmagro Braga e Arthur Grigolo dos Santos.
3. All excerpts used in this article were taken from YouTube videos, Facebook or Twitter posts, and reports containing the direct transcription of statements made by the conservative agents that were mapped in a previous stage of the investigation. Indirect citations from news reports, for example, were not used.