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far-right rhetorics and deconstructions in Brazilian educational policies

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Brazil's education policy has historically been marked by significant inequalities in access and quality, particularly affecting the most vulnerable populations. Over the past two decades, Brazil has implemented substantial changes aimed at reducing inequality, promoting inclusion, and addressing racial and gender disparities. However, the rise of radical right-wing populism, particularly under President Jair Bolsonaro (2018-2022), resulted in a shift in educational policy. This article examines how radical right groups have influenced education policy in Brazil. Bolsonaro's administration, supported by conservative and religious groups, sought to reverse progressive policies related to gender, sexual orientation, and ethnic diversity and inclusion. These changes reinforced societal norms, traditional values, and nationalism, rejecting multiculturalism and adopting forms of othering. The findings are based on previous research that involved qualitative analysis of documents and interviews.

Keywords: Brazil, education policy, ethnic diversity, gender, radical right-wing populism

Historically, Brazil's education policy is characterized by great inequalities in students' access, especially in early childhood, quality, and graduate rates, which affect the most vulnerable. However, Brazilian basic education has undergone essential transformations in the last 20 years. Only in 1996 did the Brazilian education law (Law of Guidelines and Bases) define mandatory access to school from the age of 7. Almost 20 years later, in 2013 (Law No. 12,796 2013), mandatory enrollment was extended from the age of 4 (early childhood education – preschool) to the age of 17 (High School) (Abrucio, 2010).

Other changes were key for increasing access, particularly revenue redistribution according to enrollments. As a result of these changes, the country managed to promote the inclusion of the vast majority of children and young people in basic education: it universalized primary education for children aged 6 to 14, 91% of children aged 4 and 5 are enrolled in preschool education and 91.9% of students aged 15 to 17 attend school (BRASIL, 2024).

In the 2000s, different initiatives prioritized diminishing inequality and promoting inclusion and diversity, focusing on racial equality, gender equality, and LGBTQ+ rights. Examples of this include teaching Afro-Brazilian and African history and culture in schools, the approval of the National Curriculum Guidelines for the Education of Ethnic-Racial Relations and the Teaching of Afro-Brazilian and African History and Culture Guidelines, the inclusion of indigenous history in the National Curriculum Guidelines for the Education of Ethnic-Racial Relations, and the creation of the Brazil Without Homophobia Program. This was included in the National Education Plan (PNE), created in 2014 by the government of President Dilma Rousseff, which established goals for the

inclusion of students with disabilities, strengthened rural education, indigenous education, and quilombola[1] education (Alves et al., 2021).

This path shifted with the rise of radical right leaders and groups, particularly with the election of Bolsonaro in 2018. Bolsonaro's rhetoric mirrors certain aspects of other radical right leaders and parties, leveraging various forms of 'othering.' Bolsonaro's rhetoric reinforces 'othering' through the dichotomy between 'the people' and 'the others,' leading to a polarization between those considered 'in' and 'out,' 'deserving' and 'undeserving,' 'moral' and 'immoral,' 'corrupt' and 'pure,' 'faithful' and 'atheists' (Benveniste et al., 2016; Muller, 2016; Speed & Mannion, 2017).

The radical right coalition formed by conservative and religious groups that supported Bolsonaro was able to block policies in previous both conservative and progressive governments (Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Lula, and Dilma), such as the Brazil Without Homophobia Program that sought to distribute educational materials that discussed issues such as sexual orientation and homophobia in schools. It also advocated changes to the policy bills that established the national elementary and secondary education curricula, both approved in 2016 and 2018 (Alves et al., 2021; Moeller, 2020).

In this article, we explain how these movements promoted specific discourses and influenced Brazil's education policy, often reinforcing traditional values, nationalism, and the preservation of societal norms, as well as removing policies related to gender, sexual and reproductive rights, and ethnic and racial relations. The findings presented here result from previous research, conducted over the last seven years, from a critical discourse perspective, in which we analyzed education policy through the qualitative analysis of documents and in-depth interviews.

The Relevance of Education Policies for Radical Right Populism

Over the past few years, there has been a significant surge in populism worldwide, spreading across continents, political systems, and cultural settings. Populism lies in the assertion of championing the interests of the ordinary people against perceived corrupt or elitist establishments. Typically, it involves the criticism of established institutions and traditional modes of political representation while catering predominantly to the demands of a specific societal group (Hawkins & Kaltwasser, 2017).

According to the text from Pelinka (2013), right-wing populism can be defined as any form of populism that targets an ethnically, nationally, or religiously defined 'other.' This means that right-wing populism involves rallying support by portraying a particular group or group as threatening the dominant or majority population's values, identity, or interests. This often involves scapegoating and fostering an 'us versus them'-mentality, based on characteristics such as ethnicity, nationality, or religion (Salmela & von Scheve, 2017).

Recent research by Berg, Jungblut and Jupskås (2023) suggests that radical right movements have extended their interest to education policies. This trend can be attributed to various factors. Firstly, education is a policy area that these movements seek to leverage to expand their appeal to mainstream voters, which is an essential factor in their growth (Fischer, 2020; Peker, 2021). Secondly, studies indicate that education significantly impacts voter preferences and behavior (Belfield, 2003). Despite this, there remains a notable gap in research on the education policies offered by right-wing parties. Lastly, there are fundamental ideological differences between right-wing parties and the liberal values traditionally woven into education systems, which drive them to

challenge and potentially reshape educational standards to align with their ideologies. This includes promoting monocultural approaches over multicultural ones, as highlighted by Alves et al. (2021), Knijnik (2021), and Peker (2021).

Right-wing populists view education as crucial in rebuilding societal hegemony, demonstrating a keen interest in education policies (Apostolidis, 2022; Apple, 1998). They aim to influence the education system through curricular transformation (Hussain & Yunus, 2021), which involves a shift towards monocultural approaches. This entails suppressing the inclusion of diverse gender, ethnic, and cultural perspectives in favor of the narrative of a unified people (Alves et al., 2021). Furthermore, these movements seek to introduce historical inaccuracies (Kohl, 2021) and eliminate critical thinking skills among students, as highlighted by Porpora (2020) and Knijnik (2021). These actions point to a concerted effort to shape the education system to align with their ideological beliefs and values.

Recent studies show similarities between radical right political parties' education proposals and radical right governments' education policy changes in various countries. They advocate and promote changes related to three dimensions: populism, following the divisions between pure people and others, including forms of othering; nativism, with the rejection of diversity and multiculturalism; and authoritarianism, in which they promote policies that reinforce order, authority, and conservatism in school (Berg et al., 2023; Gruber & Schnell, 2023; Mattei & Bulli, 2023).

Radical Right Populism in Brazil's Education Policy

Before the beginning of Bolsonaro's government, he and his supporters gained centrality in the debate on education. In 2008, the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education developed the School Without Homophobia (ESH) project – part of the Brazil Without Homophobia Program – which proposed combating homophobia in schools based on sexual diversity as a democratic value. However, since its creation, the project has been the target of criticism from conservative sectors, accused of peddling 'indoctrinating' material and playing party to a 'gay dictatorship'. It was Jair Bolsonaro, until then an insignificant federal deputy, who gave the material the pejorative nickname "gay kit" and mobilized (with popular pressure and political blackmail) ultra-conservative and/or religious politicians to veto the circulation of these teaching materials in 2015, via the argument that these materials signified 'propaganda of sexual orientation' (Carreira, 2015). This conservative coalition articulated the removal of the terms gender and sexual orientation from the Municipal, State, and National Education Plans (PNE) and prevented any debates on gender and sexuality in the school environment (Alves et al., 2021).

A few days before the second round of elections that elected Bolsonaro as president, the Evangelical Parliamentary Front (*Frente Parlamentar Evangélica*, FPE) – a cross-partisan parliamentary coalition called 'Evangelical Parliamentary Front' (EPF) – launched a manifesto called "Brazil for Brazilians," which stated that the new objective of educational policies in Brazil was to "free public education from the authoritarianism of gender ideology, the ideology of pornography and give families the right to sexual education for their children and adolescents. Defend the child's right to innocence as a universal human right" (Chamber of Deputies, 2018).

Various changes were promoted in Bolsonaro's administration. Policies concerning gender, sexual, and reproductive rights, as well as ethnic and racial relations, were removed from national agendas,

entailing the dissolution of federal agencies responsible for these policies. Precisely because it represents a symbolic and material advance in the formulation of educational policies with attention to valuing diversity and minorities (Alves et al., 2021), the Secretariat for Continuing Education, Literacy, Diversity and Inclusion (Secadi) was dissolved on the second day of Bolsonaro's government (Segatto et al., 2023). Secadi was created in 2004, being responsible for implementing policies related to special education, education for ethnic-racial relations, rural education, indigenous education, Quilombola education, education in human rights, gender and sexual diversity, combating violence, environmental education, youth education and adults, and education of incarcerated people. Secadi also participated in the School without Homophobia Program (Carreira, 2015).

Moreover, the 'No Party School' movement was a powerful conservative coalition between students and parents who proclaimed being 'deeply concerned about the political and ideological influence that is pervasive in Brazilian schools, ranging from primary education to higher learning.' This initiative, established in 2004 by a conservative Roman-Catholic lawyer, is grounded in religious beliefs that prioritize the traditional family and actively challenge gender recognition. The movement promoted policies that oppose critical thinking within educational institutions, and it has gained significant traction in recent years, advocating for a 'de-ideologized' teaching approach that denounces the influences of Marxism and gender ideology at schools (Segatto et al., 2021). However, Bolsonaro's government was not able to approve new policies such as homeschooling and 'No Party School,' as it lacked support in the National Congress (Alves et al., 2021; Segatto et al., 2023).

Bolsonaro's government also proposed the new policy of 'Civic-Military Schools,' seeking to reinforce order and discipline in schools by reallocating school management to the military. Although it was implemented in a minor number of schools as a national policy, it was also adopted by subnational governments (Gomes & Segatto, 2024).

Bolsonaro and his supporters' discourse relies on 1) binary constructs, such as framing conflicts as 'us' versus 'them' and distinguishing between 'deservers' and 'non-deservers'; and 2) an anti-pluralistic perspective, rejecting the existence of ethnic, racial, or gender diversity. This approach manifests in the use of 'othering' safeguarding the idea of 'the traditional family,' based on the division of biological sexes and traditional gender roles for women as mothers and wives while targeting progressive educators, women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and people of color through rights restrictions and control over educational spaces and policies (Alves et al., 2021; Segatto et al., 2023).

Final Remarks

In 2022, Bolsonaro failed to secure reelection, and Lula emerged victorious in the elections, assuming the presidency in 2023. This shift brought different national policies back onto the agenda, and federal agencies were reconstructed. However, despite Bolsonaro's loss, he retained a significant base of voters and supporters. Some of his supporters won the elections in state and municipal governments, underscoring the enduring influence of the radical right in Brazil.

Thus, examining radical right governments becomes imperative. The emergence of the radical right is intertwined with expanding conservative Pentecostal and Neopentecostal groups nationwide. Their increasing involvement in politics, marked by the election of politicians aligned with these

religious factions and their alliances with other conservative groups, underscores this trend. Analyzing the intersections between religious and conservative actors, their values, and discourses is crucial for understanding policy shifts, particularly education. Moreover, it seems fundamental to understand the role of uncivil organizations and their different features, ideas, discourses, and practices in influencing public policies.

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1. Communities formed by Africans and Afrodescendants in the mid-1500s to escape slavery and avoid being recaptured.