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# CONCEPTIONS OF DEMOCRATIC SCHOOL MANAGEMENT: PHENOMENOGRAPHIC STUDY WITH PUBLIC SCHOOL PRINCIPALS[1]

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**ABSTRACT:** Given the scarcity of empirical studies on democratic school management in Brazil, the objective of this research is to analyze, according to phenomenography, the different conceptions of democratic school management and their implications for management practices of public school principals. Data collection used in-depth individual interviews with 19 principals of municipal elementary schools. Data were analyzed using a phenomenographic protocol established in the literature. We traced three different conceptions of democratic school management: (1) as fulfillment of roles; (2) as input for decision-making; (3) as meeting the needs of the community. The main contribution of this research is to show how these conceptions lead school principals to adopt different democratic management practices. Another contribution is to provide an alternative interpretation of the role of street-level bureaucrats and other actors who modify public policies when implementing them. The findings also show that the promotion of participation, through dialogue, fosters organizational authorship. Finally, phenomenography is presented as a promising research method for the field of school management.

**Keywords**: democratic school management, public school, school principals, participation, phenomenography.

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## CONCEPÇÕES DE GESTÃO ESCOLAR DEMOCRÁTICA: ESTUDO FENOMENOGRÁFICO COM DIRETORES DE ESCOLAS PÚBLICAS

**RESUMO:** Diante do número limitado de estudos empíricos sobre gestão escolar democrática no país, o objetivo desta pesquisa é analisar, à luz da fenomenografia, as diferentes concepções de gestão escolar democrática e suas implicações nas práticas de gestão dos diretores de escolas públicas. Os dados foram obtidos por meio de entrevistas individuais em profundidade com 19 diretores de escolas municipais de ensino fundamental. Os dados foram analisados a partir de protocolo fenomenográfico consagrado na literatura. Foram identificadas três diferentes concepções de gestão escolar democrática: (1) como cumprimento de papéis; (2) como insumo para a tomada de decisão; (3) como atendimento das necessidades da comunidade. A principal contribuição desta pesquisa é mostrar como essas concepções induzem os diretores escolares a diferentes práticas de gestão democrática. Outra contribuição é oferecer uma interpretação alternativa à atuação dos burocratas de nível de rua e de outros atores que modificam uma política pública ao implementá-la. Os achados também mostram que a promoção da participação, por meio do diálogo, fomenta a autoria organizacional. Finalmente, apresenta-se a fenomenografia como método de investigação promissor para o campo da gestão escolar.

**Palavras-chave:** gestão escolar democrática, escola pública, diretores de escola, participação, fenomenografia.

## CONCEPCIONES DE GESTIÓN ESCOLAR DEMOCRÁTICA: ESTUDIO FENOMENOGRÁFICO CON DIRECTORES DE ESCUELAS PÚBLICAS

**RESUMEN:** Dada la escasez de estudios empíricos sobre gestión escolar democrática en el país, el objetivo de esta investigación es analizar, a la luz de la fenomenografía, las diferentes concepciones de gestión escolar democrática y sus implicaciones para las prácticas de gestión de los directores de escuelas públicas. La producción de datos se realizó a través de entrevistas individuales en profundidad con 19 directores de escuelas primarias municipales. Los datos fueron analizados utilizando un protocolo fenomenográfico establecido en la literatura. Se identificaron tres concepciones diferentes de gestión escolar democrática: (1) como cumplimiento de roles; (2) como insumo para la toma de decisiones; (3) como satisfacción de las necesidades de la comunidad. La principal contribución de esta investigación es mostrar cómo estas concepciones inducen a los directores de escuela a diferentes prácticas de gestión democrática. Otro aporte es ofrecer una interpretación alternativa al rol de los burócratas de calle y otros actores que modifican una política pública al momento de implementarla. Los hallazgos también muestran que la promoción de la participación, a través del diálogo, fomenta la autoría organizacional. Finalmente, la fenomenografía se presenta como un método de investigación promisorio para el campo de la gestión escolar.

**Palabras clave:** gestión escolar democrática, escuela pública, directores de escuela, participación, fenomenografía.

## INTRODUCTION

Studies on democratic school management in Brazil usually associate it with the various transformations that have occurred within the scope of public management, as part of a broader context of economic, political and social changes (Drabach & Souza, 2014). The notion of democracy in school management was introduced in the Constitution of Brazil (1988) and in Federal Law No. 9,394 (1996) – Law of Guidelines and Bases of National Education – and in state and municipal laws of the country. Despite the current legislation, the exercise of democratic school management is experienced in different

ways in the daily routine of schools (Lück, 2013). Between the legal principle and the concrete reality of public schools, democratic management can occur in different ways, due to contexts that may facilitate or hinder it (Paro, 2016).

Democratic school management is not an easily understandable concept. The difficulty lies in the conceptual association between two terms belonging to seemingly antagonistic fields – management and democracy. While the first is associated with technical matters, the second is related to politics. Paro (2016) says that school management studies usually emphasize the technical dimension to the detriment of the political dimension. Hardy and Clegg (1999) say that, for a long time in organizational studies, politics was considered as an illegitimate means of using power. Several authors in the field of management viewed politics as an anomaly that should be purged from the organizational sphere.

This apparent antagonism may be related to the views on management disseminated by orthodoxy within the scope of Administration. In this field, management usually assumes the characteristics of that which is conventionally called managerialism, or management – a set of processes that are static, rational, ordered and given a priori (Cunliffe, 2014). According to Watson (2005), it is a systems-control approach, in which the managerial work would be to conceive and control an organization so it achieves the determined purposes. In turn, Libâneo (2018, p. 102), who discusses management in school settings, argues it is a rational-scientific approach. According to him, the school is "taken as an objective and neutral reality, which operates rationally; therefore, it can be planned, organized and controlled, so as to achieve higher rates of effectiveness and efficiency." In summary, this approach to management considers organizations as entities separate from the managers who manage them (Watson, 2005).

Researches in the field of democratic school management seem to corroborate this antagonism. Fonseca and Oliveira (2009) point out the existence of a predominant view, which restricts management to standardized managerial practices with the use of tools. Paro (2016) says that school management has been conceived consistently with business management, emphasizing prescriptive models to achieve results. This manner of thinking school management is reinforced by the governance models of the educational system, which establish a set of indicators that both direct and restrict managerial practices (Gorur, 2018).

However, some researchers in the field of school management have studied the subject from the perspective of management conceptions that reject prescriptive and normative approaches to *management* and focus on the daily routine of schools. Moura and Bispo (2021) used the perspective of sociomateriality to study school management based on practices, in order to understand how management is, in fact, rather than how it should be. Poubel and Junquilho (2019) studied school management as a relational and emerging process. Junquilho, Almeida and Silva (2012, p. 330) proposed a look into the daily routine of a school so as to understand the "arts of doing" school management. In this article, we adopt the same ontoepistemological assumptions. Organizations and managers are not considered as separate entities, but as being mutually and daily constituted through the relationships and interactions between human and non-human actors.

Similarly, in this article democracy is not considered as an abstract, fixed and established concept, as a given reality to be achieved by force of law, but as a daily collective construction dependent on participation, not a determined state aspired to be reached (Lück, 2013).

Founded on these assumptions, we conducted a phenomenographic research with public school principals in the municipality of Serra, state of Espírito Santo, Brazil. Phenomenography is an appropriate methodology to approach school management in its relational and emerging dimension, as it seeks to understand the peculiar ways in which school principals experience it. In addition, as widely documented in phenomenographic studies, people's different conceptions about what they do lead them to develop and mobilize different knowledges (Marton, 1981) and competencies (Sandberg, 2000; Amaro, 2020) to act on these realities.

The objective of the study is to analyze, according to phenomenography, the different conceptions of democratic school management and their implications for the management practices of public elementary school principals in the municipality of Serra, ES, Brazil.

This article contributes to filling three research gaps in the field of democratic school management. As for the first gap, the article contributes to a shift from the prescriptive and normative

view of management, prevalent in field studies, to a view that incorporates the relational and emerging aspects (Poubel & Junquilho, 2019). The second gap concerns the limited number of empirical studies in the field (Oliveira & Vasques-Menezes, 2018). As for the third gap, of a methodological nature, we aim to present phenomenography as a promising method to empirically approach the school management phenomenon.

## SCHOOL MANAGEMENT, MANAGERIALISM AND DEMOCRACY

Educational and school management, focusing on education systems and school units, respectively, have been consolidated as a field of study in the academic literature in Brazil (Simielli, 2022) and abroad (Hallinger & Kovačević, 2019) throughout the twentieth century. While the international literature has indicated a paradigm shift from school administration to school leadership (Hallinger & Kovačević, 2019), in Brazil there has been a shift from the idea of school administration to a new conception: school management (Poubel & Junquilho, 2019).

This transition in the Brazilian context began in the 1980s (Simielli, 2022). The authors prior to this period built the field of school administration founded on the oeuvre of Frederick Winslow Taylor, Henry Fayol and Max Weber (Sander, 2007). According to Junquilho, Almeida and Silva (2012, p. 330), the so-called pioneers of theorization in the field of school administration sought inspiration from classical administration "to inform the administrative practice of school organization, in accordance with the business efficiency and productivity standards." However, the business focus of school management, which favored the technical dimension to the detriment of the social dimension, came to be criticized. During Brazil's redemocratization period, a series of debates conducted by educators and researchers led to the rise of the political dimension in the field. At this time, school administration began to be called school management (Pobel & Junquilho, 2019; Simielli, 2022).

Despite the inclusion of the political dimension, which led to the consolidation of democratic school management as the field of study with the largest number of publications in the country (Souza, 2019), Brazil's public administration reform functioned as a counterflow. The so-called New Public Management, influenced by the neoliberal changes in the US and British public sectors, significantly changed the bureaucratic model in force (Paiva, 2009) and led to the adoption of management principles from the private sector (Abrucio, 1997).

The influence of the business management technologies intensified with the rise of the managerial model (management), whose focus would be to make public administration more strategic, in order to achieve more efficient and effective results (Paz & Odelius, 2021). In this context, Brazil's public education system underwent a restructuring that emphasized three main aspects: decentralization, autonomy of schools, and participation of civil society in management (Krawczyk, 1999).

Decentralization, which is one of the pillars for accomplishing democratic school management, provided for a redistribution of the decision-making power that, until then, was concentrated in few individuals (Baczinski & Comar, 2016). However, Arruda and Colares (2015) say that decentralization came with control mechanisms, through the standardization of administrative and pedagogical procedures. While the expectation was that decentralization would enable the existence of groups with political and pedagogical autonomy to define, plan and decide their objectives and actions (Baczinski & Comar, 2016).

Lück (2013) says that autonomy is a continuous process of building shared actions, for which there must be accountability in a transparent manner. Therefore, it is a constituent phenomenon of school community participation. According to Dourado (2012, p. 80), it is what can be called "individual and collective responsibility" and that has administrative, legal, financial and pedagogical dimensions. Paro (2016) says that the accomplishment of autonomy depends on the participation of the entire school community.

However, the ideas of decentralization, autonomy and participation occur in a managerialist context, in which there is always the risk of re-signification of the democratic principles of school management. In this context, community participation can only occur in the execution of tasks already defined a priori and autonomy ends up assuming only the meaning of accountability (Drabach & Souza, 2014). Thus, the State, through decrees and ordinances, maintains centrality in the school's direction, and

autonomy, in practice, materializes in a continuous monitoring of the functioning of schools (Nascimento & Guimarães, 2018). The managerialist model ends up reinforcing the rationalization of resources and the accountability of the local and school community (Silva, Silva & Santos, 2016).

Despite criticism, managerialism gradually gained momentum and transformed the basic principles of democratic management into business management actions that reduce the complexity of schools to a set of measurable indicators (Gorur, 2018). Education comes to be viewed as a market system, driven by the productivist logic that ends up restricting the role of the school community (Nascimento & Guimarães, 2018).


## DEMOCRATIC SCHOOL MANAGEMENT BEYOND MANAGERIALISM

Poubel and Junquilho (2019) underscore the prevalence of the prescriptive and normative nature in the literature on school administration. This prevalence can be observed since the first texts on the subject in Brazil, which, based on the Taylorist principles of scientific management, prescribed a set of technical activities for principals to achieve the purposes established for the school. This way of conceiving school administration prevailed in the literature between the 1930s and 1980s (Souza, 2012). From then on, the authors began to use the term school management to also refer to the political dimension of management, in order to incorporate the social aspects. These are the aspects that gave rise to the notion of democracy in school management (Paro, 2016).

Although these debates have provided contributions to the field of school management, there is still a tendency to consider management in a prescriptive and normative way. Management is often presented as a means to an end (Poubel & Junquilho, 2019) and as a set of principles that indicate how school management should be, not how it is (Moura & Bispo, 2021).

This way of conceiving management has been heavily criticized. Cunliffe (2014) calls it management, an ideology in which it is considered as a set of rational and ordered processes. According to Pollitt (1990), the ideology of management is based on the assumption that it is a set of beliefs and practices capable of effectively solving social and economic problems. Thus, there is a reduction of social life to the technical dimension.

Watson (2005) points out that, in this systems-control conception, the organization is viewed as an objective and neutral entity and that management is like a set of processes designed to achieve certain purposes. Libâneo (2018), who discusses management in the educational field, says that this rational-scientific model ends up conceiving schools as neutral and objective entities, with principals being responsible for rationally planning, organizing and controlling their resources to achieve high levels of efficiency and effectiveness.

Cunliffe (2014) proposes the term "managing" so researchers overcome the ideology of management and focus on a dynamic, unfinished, collective and emerging process. In this context, management is no longer viewed as a set of prescriptions and models of action of an actor (manager), but comes to be seen as an emerging social practice, dependent on socio-historical contexts. In the school setting, it would imply assuming a relational ontology (Sandberg, 2000), in which school organizations and principals are not considered as separate entities, but as being constituted mutually and daily through relationships and interactions.

This way of conceiving management brings it closer to the concept of organizational authorship, that is, the way managers and other organizational members try to build, through dialogical practices, a shared sense of who they are and what the organization is about (Cunliffe, 2009). This means considering people as authors of their work and capable of taking responsibility and contributing constructively to the objectives of the organizations of which they are part (Gorli, Nicolini & Scaratti, 2015).

Conceiving management as an emerging and relational process (Cunliffe, 2014) brings it closer to the idea of democratic management, which advocates the participation of the school community in the various processes that constitute the reality of the school (Oliveira, 2018). At the same time, it does not consider democracy as something given or to be achieved by force of law. Instead, democratic management is considered a collective construction, based on participation (Lück, 2013).

## METHODOLOGY

This study is characterized as phenomenographic, a qualitative approach to research whose main objective is to map the different ways that certain phenomena can be experienced by individuals (Marton, 1981). Phenomenography adopts the relational ontology in which subject and object are assumed as two inseparable entities through experience (Bowden, 2005). Although little known and used in management studies in Brazil (Santos, Leal, Alperstedt & Feuerchütte, 2018), phenomenography has shown great potential to study different organizational phenomena (Amaro, 2020).

The field chosen consisted of the municipal elementary schools (EMEFs) in the municipality of Serra, Espírito Santo, Brazil. Serra is the most populous city in the state of Espírito Santo (IBGE, 2023) with 521,000 inhabitants. It has 139 education units, divided into 74 municipal early childhood education centers (CMEIs) and 67 municipal elementary schools (EMEFs), according to information from the municipality's Human Resources Management and Statistical Coordination. The choice of this city was due to the fact that it has adopted, since 2015, a school principal selection model with participation of the school community (parents, students, local community, school board members and public servants) in order to democratize the admission for management positions.

To choose the research subjects, the school principals, we followed the recommendations of Sandberg (2000), which suggests seeking the greatest possible heterogeneity among the participants. Thus, among the 67 principals, the criteria to ensure heterogeneity included: gender, age, training, and time of experience in the position. A total of 19 principals participated in the research, whose anonymity was ensured by codes (D1 to D19), being 8 men and 11 women, aged 36–57 years, with various trainings (Pedagogy: 6; Physical Education: 3; Letters: 3; History: 3; Mathematics: 2; Accounting Sciences: 1; Visual Arts: 1); 9 are in the first term, 6 in the second and 4 in the third (the term of principals is of 3 years).

We adopted in-depth individual interviews, which is the predominant data collection method in phenomenography, which aims to explore the respondent's experience of the phenomenon under study (Amaro, 2020). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews were conducted remotely, in the first half of 2021, using the Google Meet platform. A pilot interview was conducted to improve the interview guide initially developed and minor modifications had to be made. The interviews were transcribed literally and resulted in 218 pages.

As this is a research with human beings, the project was submitted to the Research Ethics Committee of the Federal University of Espírito Santo and fully approved. The interviews were only initiated after the project was approved by the Department of Education of the city of Serra. Before each interview, an Informed Consent Form was sent by e-mail to the principals who would participate in the interviews, informing them of the objectives, procedures, as well as the risks and possibility of, at any time, expressing interest in not participating. The interviews were conducted only after their consent.

The main objective of data analysis in phenomenographic research is the construction of description categories, that is, the mapping of the respondents' different conceptions of the phenomenon under study (Sandberg, 2000). After mapping the conceptions, we built the results space, establishing the logical relation between the conceptions of the phenomenon. This relation is inclusive and hierarchical, that is, the conceptions are presented in increasing order of complexity (Amaro, 2020). The data analysis process followed the protocol recommended by Amaro and Brunstein (2020), which includes the following steps: familiarization, compilation, condensation, preliminary grouping, preliminary comparison and category naming.

Considering the need to ensure data reliability, we adopted two of the strategies suggested by Korstjens and Moser (2018). Credibility was sought through the strategy of prolonged engagement – the interview guide had several questions that encouraged respondents to give examples that supported their statements – and persistent observation – one of the authors built the description categories and the other played the role of devil's advocate, reviewing the entire process until a final codification was reached. To ensure reliability, all research steps were reviewed by one of the authors in order to verify their alignment with the phenomenographic design of the research.

## RESULTS

After the data processing and analysis process, we traced three conceptions of democratic school management: Conception 1 – Democratic management as fulfillment of roles; Conception 2 – Democratic management as input for decision-making; and Conception 3 – Democratic management as meeting the needs of the community. Chart 1 summarizes the variation of the conceptions based on some dimensions and the managers who predominantly presented such conception.

Chart 1 – Conceptions of democratic management

| DIMENSIONS | CONCEPTIONS | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | **1** Democratic school management as fulfillment of roles | **2** Democratic school management as input for decision-making | **3** Democratic school management as meeting the needs of the community |
| Description | It is achieved through the fulfillment of roles by the actors of the school community | It is characterized by the survey of information for decision-making | It is characterized by listening to the community to make decisions and meet their needs |
| Central view of principals | They expect members of the school community to take responsibility and fulfill their roles | They dialogue with the school community to survey opinions and define a course of action | They dialogue with the school community to meet their needs, in order to make the school a pleasant setting |
| Interaction | Low - little utilization of participation mechanisms | Recurring - dialogue is constant and peer discussions lead to solutions and ideas | Intense - creation of opportunities and greater interaction, resulting in partnerships with the school community |
| Autonomy | Conditioned on fulfillment of roles and rules | Open space for discussions and change in decisions | Guidance for achieving results and, to achieve them, "circumventing" rules |
| Focus of management | It aims at the achievement of pre-established results based more on norms and rules than on consensus | It aims at the promotion of participation and the collective exercise of power in specific situations | It aims at the promotion of participation and the collective exercise of power, in order to attract people to school |
| Vision of management | Management is based on control and seeks to achieve objectives and goals in a planned manner | Management is based on dialogicity and adaptable according to the reality of the school | Management is based on dialogicity and on shared and collaborative construction of reality |
| Participation | Participation is the duty and responsibility of members of collegiate bodies | Participation is elicited by demand from work or higher bodies | Participation is elicited through social and/or playful activities |
| Interpersonal relationships | Mediated by roles; Greater emphasis on processes | Mediated by dialogue; Greater emphasis on people | Mediated by dialogue; Emphasis on building "bridges" between school and community |
| Representative speech | "[...] democratic management is that, everyone within that group has to be responsible for their part in their area." | "It's you starting to listen, starting to understand what each sector wants, so you can create alternatives." | "[...] We have to listen to the sides of those who want to talk, [...] and try to get them into the school. It is necessary to lower these walls, which have always been very high." |
| Managers | D4; D6; D10; D15; D17 | D2; D3; D7; D8; D11; D14; D16; D19 | D1; D5; D9; D12; D13; D18 |

Source: Prepared by the authors

The notion of democracy in school management was introduced in the Federal Constitution (1988) and in Law 9,394 (1996) – Law of Guidelines and Bases of National Education (LDB). The LDB establishes two instruments of participation as means for the exercise of democratic management: the collective construction of the pedagogical project and the school council. In both, it is fundamental the participation and involvement of the entire school community, which includes "teachers and professionals who work at the school, enrolled students who attend classes regularly and parents and/or guardians of the students" (Eça & Coelho, 2021).

In Conception 1 – Democratic school management as fulfillment of roles, these mechanisms established in the legislation assume a peculiar nuance. Instead of instruments that promote participation, they become control mechanisms. For principals who share this conception, democratic school management is an ideal that can only be achieved if each one fulfills their role, their duty. Participation is transformed into the fulfillment of a set of responsibilities and duties by the school community. Participating in the school council or student union does not only give people the legitimacy to exercise power, but the duty to exercise it.

> And democratic management is that, everyone within that group has to be responsible for their part in their area. Along with that, of which I am critical, we are part of the School Council and then there is all that idea that the council is this and that. But whenever there is something at school, the council is rarely called upon. To present, to discuss, they always call the figure of the principal, right. (D4)

This speech is revealing. While this principal demands that each council member fulfills their role, he ignores the role of representative of the organization in activities of a legal and social nature. In many cases, this managerial role ends up being interpreted as justification for authoritarian actions.

> I don't like to use authoritarianism, I never did. To me, it's always by convincing that we work. But there are times when you need to use the position and the rules of the game so you can do it, understand that the school is a whole and I cannot harm the entire group because of one individual. (D6)

It is possible to perceive the discomfort of being viewed as authoritarian. That is when the rules come into play to justify actions considered authoritarian. It is the use of norms and regulations as a source of power identified by Morgan (2002). It is as if they say: I am not authoritarian, but rule-abiding.

Those who share this conception tend to circumscribe participation to institutionalized spaces, which are the school council and the student union. These spaces are often used to legitimize decisions made previously. Abers and Keck (2008) showed that the creation of institutional instruments for participation in decision-making processes generates an expectation of opening of participation spaces for previously excluded groups. However, this type of strategy is one of the factors that make the participation of popular strata in decision-making processes so uneffective.

In Conception 2, democratic school management is conceived as input for decision-making. The relation of power and authority based on rules and norms is replaced by awareness of the need for dialogue. Principals who share this conception encourage the school community to participate and express their opinions. According to Souza (2009), democracy requires willingness to deal with contradiction. This openness ends up promoting greater participation and the rise of ideas that serve as input to the decision-making of principals.

> Therefore, democratic management has to be transparent and it has to be open to everyone. We have to have this dialogue. You know, this dialogue is important, even for you to consolidate, right. When you have to make some decision, take some action, you need everyone's support, you need everyone to be with you. (D11)

> Sometimes it may seem like a great idea to me, but if the group doesn't think so, let's do it another way, you know? We are always dialoguing with everyone. It isn't just my decisions that count, but those of the collective. It is my responsibility, as a principal, to implement them. (D19)

These excerpts represent well what is central according to those who share this conception. Principals seek to provide democratic spaces for participation to inform their decision-making, but also as a means to gain support from the school community. However, such spaces are restricted to times when there is some demand from higher bodies. The content of the discussions, to a large extent, is related to social activities, such as parties, events or collective efforts.

Participation is low in issues related to pedagogical and budgetary issues. Principals attribute that to the parents' low educational level, lack of ideas, or social status. The solution presented is to take previously defined solutions for the group to give their opinion on it. These principals did not indicate strategies to foster participation of the school community.

> They participate, but often go as listeners. That's what I told you, I already have to go with something. Go with the problem, but go with a solution too. But for them everything is very good. I don't know if it's the neighborhood. Because there's not many suggestions, I don't know if it's because they don't think very, like, big, you know. (D3)

These socioeconomic barriers to participation have been discussed by some authors. Lück (2000, p. 80, our translation) recognizes that, "the lower the socioeconomic level of parents, the quieter their behavior." However, she says that "the participation of parents needs to be built within school management, in order to create a positive setting, communication and cooperation between the school and the parents." Consistently, Colares, Pacífico and Estrela (2009) say that promoting the participation of parents contributes so they recognize their importance and assume responsibility for finding ways to transform their reality.

This is one of the main points that differentiates Conception 3. Principals who share this conception seek the participation of people in order to engage them so they feel part of a community. Differently from Conception 1, participation is not understood as a duty, nor does it serve only — as in Conception 2 — to inform the decision-making process. The main focus of encouraging participation is to meet the needs of the school community and develop a sense of belonging. To this end, principals use formal and playful tools to attract and listen to the community, such as zumba classes, female empowerment lectures, bread baking workshops, among others.

> We have to listen to the sides of those who want to talk, listen to all sectors of a school, as I said there are several, and try to get them into the school [...] the first thing I did when I entered the school was a research, a field research with teachers, a field research with the community, a field research with parents and students. (D1)

This conception has other characteristics that differ from the previous ones. First, in the impulse to meet community needs, principals sometimes come up with solutions outside of norms and rules. For example, Principal D1 informed that she sought the Department of Education to request budget for the construction of a playground, but the requests were denied, because only the Municipal Centers for Early Childhood Education (CMEI) have playgrounds and the principal's school is an EMEF - Municipal Elementary School. However, due to considering the demand important for the community, the principal sought resources and means to make the playground project viable:

> The first thing the students asked me for was a playground. I went there, asked SEDU. SEDU said no, EMEFs cannot have a playground. Then I said: I'll have to build a playground. Then at the time there was that park that was closing and I asked for some equipment, but they didn't give them. And then I got free wood from a pulp company, called the parents, along with my husband, to build a beautiful wooden playground for the children. (D1)

The needs of the community are also met with their involvement. What follows the diagnosis is the engagement in the collective construction of what is desired for the school. An example is given by a principal asked to build a vegetable garden for the school.

> That was interesting, we called the people of the maintenance team of the Catholic church located near the school here. They came to help us build a vegetable garden for the students. In this place, there was the use of drugs on weekends. (D13)

Another interesting characteristic is what principals who share this conception consider as community. Several schools face the problem of violence in their surroundings and one of them had several pieces of equipment stolen. The principal went to some adolescents and young people involved in drug trafficking to find out what they would like the school to have. They replied that they would like to use the school court at night to play soccer. Instead of making the case a police matter, the problem was solved dialogically, which is a characteristic of this conception of management.

> I opened the school at night, do you know why? As many things are stolen, sometimes I have to negotiate a little with the boys on the street [...] so they go there and get the stolen objects back to me [...] the police do not manage to get this material back [...] then I go there and talk to them. Then, what they asked me was: "Come on, lady, would you open the school at night for us to play soccer?" What does it cost? It costs nothing, it only cost to have a security guard to open it. [...] Then I asked for a security guard for the school. (D1)

According to this principal, these unorthodox practices generate criticism from peers, who fear that opening the dialogue too much may lead to the loss of the principal's authority. According to Dourado (2012), democratic management was created to overcome authoritarian practices, but the lack of maturity of the subjects who are part of this process of change still remains rooted in the history of authoritarianism in school management.

## DISCUSSION

One of the central objectives of a phenomenographic research is to establish the results space that shows the hierarchical relation between the conceptions traced (Marton, 1981). In this study, Conception 1 was considered the least complex way to experience democratic school management. Conception 2 is presented as a more complex way of experiencing it than Conception 1. Conception 3 is considered the most complex way and incorporates the previous ones.

To clarify the criteria used to establish this hierarchical relation between the conceptions, it is necessary to take a step back and revisit the ideas of democracy and participation. It is important to emphasize that democracy is a continuous construction, which requires participation, and not an end state to be reached (Drabach, 2014). Although democracy and participation sound synonymous, it is necessary to establish a difference between the terms. According to Lück (2013, p. 54, our translation), "although democracy is unachievable without participation, it is possible to observe the occurrence of participation without democratic spirit."

Lück (2013) defines ways of participation that were used as criteria in this research to define the results space. The ways proposed by this author are presented in increasing degrees of intensity. Participation can occur as: (1) Presence – it is understood as being a member of a collegiate body, regardless of the quality of participation; (2) As verbal expression and discussion of ideas; (3) Representation – participation occurs through someone chosen to speak for a category; (4) Decision-making – participating is being enabled to give an opinion in decision-making processes; (5) Engagement – encompasses the previous four and adds involvement with the actions necessary to implement the decisions made. The data showed that, as the conceptions of democratic management advanced from the simplest (Conception 1) to the most complex (Conception 3), the ways of participation also tended to advance from the least to the most intense.

Participation as presence, as discussion of ideas, and as representation seems to be strongly associated with Conception 1. Principals who share it regard as extremely important the duties related to roles of members of school councils or student unions. In doing so, they associate democracy in management with the opportunity of participating in representative groups, not with the quality of participation itself. The fact that individuals do not exercise their rights nor fulfill their responsibilities makes democratic management a utopian ideal — something unattainable. However, no action is taken to determine the causes of low participation and, thus, foster participation. The opportunity was given for the expression of ideas. The fact that people do not participate is not viewed as a problem of the principal, but of individuals who do not play their roles.

In this point, conceptions 1 and 2 differ. While the first associates participation as presence and as representation with an individual responsibility of members of representative groups, which weakens participation as a discussion of ideas, those who share conception 2 see in these roles a great opportunity for other ways of participation. By promoting constant dialogues with the school community, they end up creating space for participation as verbal expression and discussion of ideas. This is one way to qualify participation as presence and as representation. Encouraging people to express their ideas means taking an active role in building democratic management. Rather than waiting for people to assume their roles, encouraging dialogue can help people who feel disfavored in society to have a voice. Obviously, these dialogues risk transforming the possibility of speaking and expressing oneself into evidence of democratic management, even if such opinions do not impact the school's decision-making processes (Lück, 2013).

Nevertheless, there is virtue in encouraging people to express their opinions to inform the decision-making process. Participation spaces are opened, although shared decisions are mostly related to operational issues, such as holding parties and campaigns. In the most important decisions, such as financial ones, principals present ready proposals and interactions end up serving only to legitimize decisions made previously.

Principals who share conception 3 are similar to those of conception 2 as to the types of matters that are the subject of conversations and deliberations. However, participations as verbal expression and discussion of ideas and as decision-making present an important difference. The motivation for promoting dialogues is associated with the desire to meet the needs of the community in order to make the school a place where people want to be.

Although distinct, these ways of experiencing democratic management present a common problem, which is the difficulty of promoting participation as engagement. However, it is likely that this is a broader phenomenon, that it is a reflection of Brazilian society. In the 2020 report of the Democracy Index, of the British magazine The Economist, which measures the degree of democracy of 167 countries, Brazil occupies the 52nd position, classified as a flawed democracy. Among the five criteria analyzed, which are scored from 0 to 10, political participation appears with 6.11 and political culture with 5.0 (Araújo, 2020). Although there has been an increase in the participation of civil society in political processes since the 1988 Federal Constitution, there is still a long way to go for the country to rise as a full democracy.

Torres (2001) notes the role of education in the formation of citizens. According to him, individuals are not born participatory subjects, but it is in the polis that they need to learn to participate. An active civil life is a social construction dependent on education for its exercise. Thus, principals are faced with a paradox: participation is fundamental for the construction of democratic education, but the latter is indispensable for the learning of participation. While those who share conception 1 solve the paradox by considering individuals responsible, principals who share conceptions 2 and 3 try to foster participation with playful activities and other devices. Everyone's frustration with low participation seems to be related to the fact that their specific actions encounter obstacles that are structural. The school, as a historically and socially situated unit, shares the same potential and difficulties of the society of which it is part (Paro, 2016).

However, this paradox does not exempt the role of educational institutions in promoting conditions that foster and encourage participation, as according to Souza (2009, p. 128, our translation) "thinking about democracy requires thinking about the real possibilities of its actualization."

Figure 1 – Relation between conceptions of DSM and ways of participation
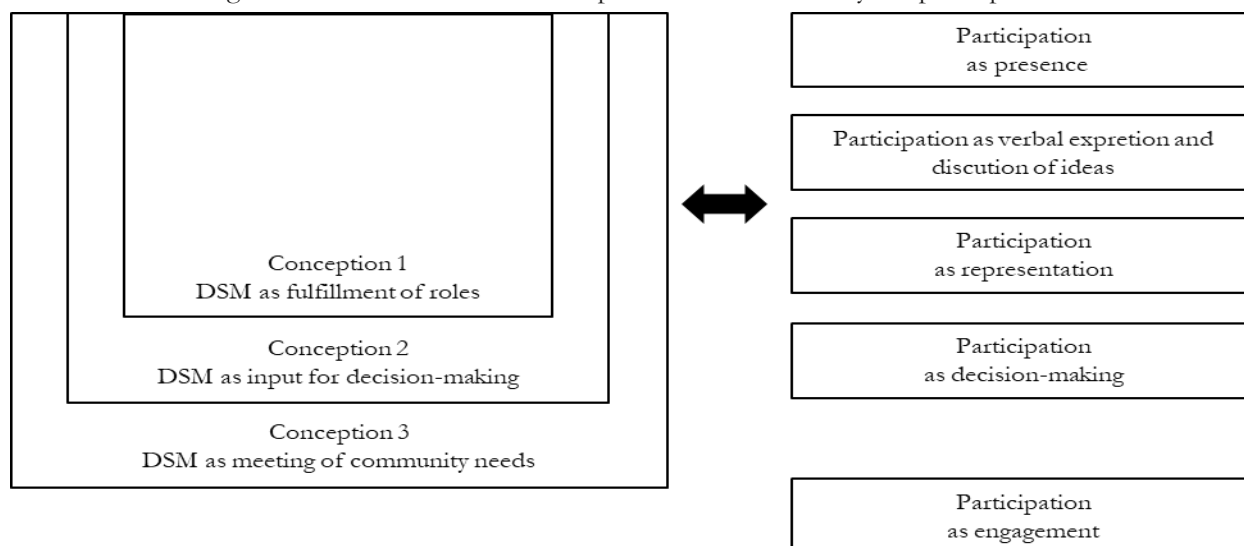


Source: Prepared by the authors.

Figure 1 shows the relation of the conceptions of democratic school management (DSM), presented in the results space that establishes their hierarchical and inclusive relation, with the ways of participation proposed by Lück (2013).

**FINAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Considering the limited number of empirical studies in the field (Oliveira & Vasques-Menezes, 2018), this research aimed to analyze the different conceptions of democratic school management and their implications for the management practices of public school principals. To this end, we adopted phenomenography, whose central assumption is that a phenomenon can be experienced in different ways by a given group of people (Marton, 1981; Bowden, 2000).

The results show that democratic management can be experienced as: (1) fulfillment of roles; (2) input for decision-making; (3) expretion. The results space presenting these conceptions enables observing, first of all, the different ways that a legal principle (democratic school management) can be experienced. These findings are consistent with what is pointed out by researchers that study the stage of implementation of public policies. Bonelli, Fernandes, Coêlho and Palmeira (2019) say that studies prior to the 1980s adopted a top-down approach: a political group (formulating agents) creates the laws and another group (bureaucrats) implements them. More recent studies have shown the important role played by the actors responsible for implementation, called street-level bureaucrats. Rather than a top-down process, implementation came to be viewed as a process of rebuilding policies by their implementers.

According to Bonelli, Fernandes, Coelho and Palmeira (2019), since then, those who are at the forefront of public policies have received special attention from scholars. The different conceptions that principals (street-level bureaucrats) share significantly impact the way democratic management is implemented. This finding shows that conceptions, among other factors discussed by these authors, play an important role in the implementation of democratic management, as school principals are key actors in the process of building a democratic culture. Between the legal principle and the concreteness of public schools, democratic management can occur in different ways. And the school principals' conceptions of democratic management are one way to explain that.

The conceptions of democratic management — despite impacting the practices of principals in different ways — are historically and socially situated. This means that the degree of democracy experienced in schools is limited and enhanced by structural factors beyond the control of principals. Their actions occur within a system of legal determinations from higher departments and bodies. Dourado (2012, p. 82) says that schools are subordinate to an education system and, therefore, must comply with the norms and laws that regulate this system. As pointed out by Libâneo (2018), schools

have a relative autonomy. The State maintains itself as regulator, monitoring and controlling their operation (Nascimento & Guimarães, 2018). Parente (2017), when analyzing the organization of the work of school principals, showed how excessive formalism and the influence of higher bodies significantly impact their activities.

However, it is necessary to recognize that dialogue — which is a central dimension of conceptions 2 and 3 — enables a set of possibilities for the construction of democratic and participatory spaces, which can provide the formation of citizens that are more critical and participatory in social life. Through dialogicity, principals and school communities can become aware that they are authors of the organizational reality of which they are part. On this point, there is consistency between the concepts of organizational authorship (Gorli, Nicolini & Scaratti, 2015) and democratic management. If the latter is enabled by the participation of school community members in school management, continuous dialogue is fundamental for raising awareness of organizational authorship.

Two important issues need to be highlighted in the results of phenomenographic researches (Feldon & Tofel-Grehl, 2018). According to these authors, the studies are ideographic — the results space graphically presents the conceptions and establishes the relation between them — and nomothetic — to what extent the conceptions traced and the relations between them are generalizable. In this regard, it is necessary to be parsimonious in relation to the results space shown in this study. This is a limitation of every initial phenomenographic study on a phenomenon (democratic management) that can be overcome with other researches on different public education levels (elementary, secondary, and higher education), so the results space of the phenomenon is confirmed or expanded. This procedure is consistent with the phenomenographic tradition. For example, the results space of teachers' teaching conceptions proposed by Trigwell and Prosser (1996) was reviewed and consolidated by studies carried out in several institutions around the world.

Another limitation of this study was to adopt only school principals as the analytical unit of the phenomenon. Other findings and insights may emerge if there is consideration of conceptions of other community members who are also part of school management. As pointed out by Bonelli, Fernandes, Coelho and Palmeira (2019), street-level bureaucrats — who, in a school, consist of principals, coordinators, pedagogues, teachers, administrative technicians, doorkeepers, school food workers, general operational staff and other actors (parents and students) — play an important role in the construction of the school's organizational reality.

One last point should be noted. When this research was planned, there was an assumption that the conceptions of democratic management — as they impact the practices of principals — had some relation with school results measured by the Basic Education Development Index (IDEB). However, the analyses did not enable the establishment of such relation. Thus, it is believed that this management approach, which creates democratic spaces and times, has a more direct relation with the formation of citizens (Paro, 2016) and not necessarily with student performance measured by indicators that end up reducing the school reality (Gorur, 2018). Further research may examine factors — or variables, in the case of quantitative research — that directly impact these indicators.

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## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Author 1 – Project coordinator, with active participation in data analysis and final draft review.
Author 2 – Data collection, data analysis and draft writing.
Author 3 – Active participation in data analysis and final draft review.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest in this article.