# ARTICLE

# Remote teaching as a compulsory alternative: public school under threat?

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#### ABSTRACT

This article is part of the disputes to hegemonize a particular sense of the democratic public school in times of coronavirus, in which distance education becomes a mandatory alternative to educational policy. Conversing with post-structuralist theoretical contributions, the paper aims to analyze the processes of signifying terms such as *universal access, democracy, school knowledge* and *learning* such as mobilized in 2020 in the Pedagogical Action Plan of the State Secretariat of Education of Rio de Janeiro. This analysis offers empirical evidence for an understanding of the effects of the intensification, in the current pandemic context, of the discursive articulation of neoliberal interests which put the school under threat. By developing such an argument, we seek to explore, beyond the language of denunciation, possibilities to reinvent a possible school *of afterwards*.

#### **KEYWORDS**

educational policies; curricular policies; democratic public school; distance learning; pandemic context.

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# ENSINO REMOTO COMO UMA ALTERNATIVA OBRIGATÓRIA: ESCOLA PÚBLICA SOB AMEAÇA?

#### RESUMO

O artigo inscreve-se nas disputas pela hegemonização de um sentido particular de *escola pública democrática* em tempos de coronavírus, nos quais o ensino remoto se tornou *alternativa obrigatória* para as políticas educacionais. Em diálogo com as contribuições teóricas pós-estruturalistas, o texto tem por objetivo analisar as disputas entre os processos de significação de termos como *acesso universal, democracia, conhecimento escolar, relação com o saber* e *com a aprendizagem*, mobilizados no *Plano de Ação Pedagógico* elaborado em 2020 pela Secretaria de Estado de Educação do Rio de Janeiro. A análise desse documento curricular oferece evidências empíricas para a compreensão dos efeitos da intensificação, no contexto pandêmico atual, da articulação discursiva de interesses neoliberais que colocam a instituição escolar *sob ameaça.* Ao longo de nossa argumentação, buscamos explorar, para além da linguagem da denúncia, possibilidades de reinvenção para uma possível escola *de depois*.

#### PALAVRAS-CHAVE

políticas educacionais; políticas de currículo; escola pública democrática; ensino remoto; contexto pandêmico.

### ENSEÑANZA REMOTA COMO ALTERNATIVA OBLIGADA: ESCUELA PÚBLICA BAJO AMENAZA?

#### RESUMEN

El artículo se enmarca en las disputas por la hegemonización de un sentido particular de escuela pública democrática en tiempos dela coronavirus, en el que la educación a distancia se convierte en una alternativa obligatoria para las políticas educativas. En diálogo con los aportes teóricos postestructuralistas, el texto tiene como objetivo analizar los procesos de significación de términos como acceso universal, democracia, conocimiento escolar, aprendizaje y relación con saber movilizados en el Plan de Acción Pedagógica elaborado en 2020, por la Secretaria de Estado de Educação do Rio de Janeiro. El análisis de este documento curricular ofrece subsidios para la comprensión de los efectos de la intensificación, en el actual contexto pandémico, de la articulación discursiva de los intereses neoliberales y negacionistas que ponen en peligro la institución escolar. A lo largo del argumento, tratamos de explorar, más allá del lenguaje de la denuncia, las posibilidades de reinvención para una escuela *del después*.

#### PALABRAS CLAVE

políticas educativas; políticas curriculares; escuela pública democrática; enseñanza remota, contexto pandémico.

#### INTRODUCTION

This text aims to enter the debate about the disputes regarding the signifier *democratic public school* in these unprecedented times — resulting from the coroavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic —, in which the remote teaching modality<sup>1</sup> tends to become a *mandatory alternative*<sup>2</sup> in the country's public school networks.

For this, we chose as object of analysis the Pedagogical Action Plan prepared in the first year of the pandemic by the State Secretariat of Education of Rio de Janeiro (SEEDUC-RJ), disclosed by an internal memo (CI) of SEEDUC and by the undersecretary of Education Network Management (SUGEN), through the Electronic Information System (SEI), on April 23, 2020. The choice of this curricular document is justified by its intention to be configured as a guiding text of educational policy for education in the state of Rio de Janeiro, assuming a normative regulatory function.

From the theoretical-methodological point of view, supported by the confluence of contributions from the field of educational public policies and curriculum policies, which operate from post-structuralist/post-foundational approaches (Laclau, 2011; Laclau and Mouffe, 2015; Marchart, 2009; Mouffe, 2003; 2014; 2016; 2017; 2020), the analysis seeks to interpret the discursive strategies mobilized in this specific document by the different political interests at stake. From this perspective, *discourse analysis* as a privileged methodological resource is also redimensioned as a theoretical reference insofar as it is closely related to the discourse theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (2015).

The hypothesis with which we work is that, in the current pandemic context, the debate on the introduction of the remote teaching modality in public networks, although announced as emergency and provisional, tends to refresh in the contemporary international political scenario classic tensions and disputes of the educational field for the hegemonization of private projects of society, university, and school. Depending on how the policy of implementing remote education is thought out and implemented in schools of public networks, we run the risk of seriously placing the public school institution *under threat*, radicalizing movements

<sup>1</sup> The debate around the potentials and limits of Distance Learning in the educational field is old and has been marked by tensions and controversy that it is not up to us here to deepen. Similarly, it does not seem productive for the reflection proposed here to dwell on the differentiations between the expressions *distance learning* and *remote teaching*. We understand that these differentiations exist and need to be punctuated in current educational debates on the subject, especially when they directly involve basic education. However, we considerate that the gateway chosen for us to participate in this debate, in this text, puts our lens on other aspects and tensions. In our understanding, the struggles for the sense of the very meaning of the school institution precede the reflection on teaching-learning modalities.

<sup>2</sup> This expression was coined by the authors to name the ways in which institutions — such as schools and universities — face the challenges imposed by the pandemic crisis due to the need for social isolation and, consequently, the interruption of their face-to-face activities.

that in recent decades, through criticism and denunciations anchored in the most varied theoretical perspectives, have insisted on considering it "under suspicion" (Gabriel, 2008).

Following this argumentative line, we are more precisely interested in exploring, among such tensions, the effects on the struggles for meaning, inserted in the new configuration of the order of capital named by Mouffe (2020) as "statized capitalism", of terms — *universal access, democracy, school knowledge, relation to knowledge and learning* — recurrently mobilized in the process of defining public school. According to this author, it is about the state and its federated entities assuming a neoliberal political orientation, through which the public power tends to finance private groups.

In the specific case of this text and considering the previously mentioned hypothesis, it would therefore be appropriate to analyze the Pedagogical Action Plan of SEEDUC (Rio de Janeiro, 2020), perceived as a producer of meanings for the movement to introduce remote teaching in a pandemic context in the state network of Rio de Janeiro, in order to give visibility to discursive traits that can be interpreted as indications of the affirmation and stabilization of private interests in the educational field.

The justification for the choice of this document as an empirical field is strengthened, beyond its normative intentionality, as already highlighted, also by the very nature of the theme it addresses. After all, it is no coincidence that authors such as Fiormonte and Sordi (2019) point out that the adoption of a policy such as remote education tends to favor, expand and strengthen a number of potential consumers in the virtual products market. It should also be noted that in the state of Rio de Janeiro (RJ) — inspired by the guidelines of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), translated by the campaign #AprendizagemNuncaPara — remote teaching has been offered by SEEDUC in partnership with the company Google<sup>3</sup> and the school content offered through the *Classroom* platform, with no cost to the network in the pandemic period, according to the UNESCO platform (2020). It is important to emphasize, however, that the scope of the proposed analysis is less to weave a negative criticism of the selected document (or defend a "more accurate" design of educational policy) than to interpret it as a textual surface woven in the midst of the struggles for the meaning of *democratic public school* at the current conjuncture.

We understand that what is in dispute at this moment is not a matter of deciding between different teaching modalities (face-to-face or remote) that are more or less appropriate — not least because the novelty of our present time, by reducing or preventing the possibility of face-to-face action, does not leave us much

<sup>3</sup> The private sector partners announced on the UNESCO page (2020) form the group called by the acrostic GAFAM: *Google, Amazon, Facebook, Microsoft*. Fiormonte e Sordi (2019, p. 108) state that these groups "have taken control of the technologies that guide our consumption, evidencing new times and ways in the production and access to digital knowledge", through an ecosystem of "devices and applications" (Fiormonte and Sordi, 2019, p. 109), also operating via educational content platforms.

room for choice. What is at stake is the defense of a public, secular and democratic school for *all*, in virtual times. This is about keeping the focus on the struggle for democratization of access and permanence in education in an unequal society like ours. If we cannot state that the pandemic is responsible for drawing the abyssal line (Santos, 2007), a hallmark of our society, without a doubt it shamelessly opens up social inequality and its effects on the relationship with knowledge, and can deepen the gap between those who can and those who cannot have access to schooling. This is what the results of five studies carried out between May and July 2020 in the country, systematized in the report "*Portraits of education in the context of the pandemic*" (Lima, 2020), show.

After all, how to continue betting on the defense of a public, secular and democratic school for *all* — in the face of the resizing of the demands that challenge the school institution due to the health crisis —, in a situation in which the state and its subnational entities, as is the case of Rio de Janeiro, tend to incorporate privatist projects mobilized by interests that displace the political dimension of the social from the daily political agenda to the detriment of the economic? When we know that the implementation of platforms as a support for the teaching-learning process, in addition to strengthening the deterritorialization of the school institution, in the sense that Haesbaert (2018) speaks of, as a space for the representation of democratic politics, also displaces the state's social commitment to students in the network, this question is not easy to answer. The challenge that is posed, therefore, requires that we continue to think politically about this institution in order to reaffirm its indispensability in the construction of a democratic social order on a shaky ground, in which the risks of intensification of its precariousness have increased exponentially.

We have organized our arguments into three sections in addition to this introduction. In the first, we discuss, in general terms, the potential of discourse analysis in the post-structuralist/post-foundational perspective, highlighting what this methodological approach allows us to produce as a political reading of the curricular document in focus. In the second section, we explore the struggles for the meaning of *universal access* and *democracy* in times of remote teaching as fixed in the selected document. The third part focuses on the traces, in the same curricular text, of the struggles for the meaning of terms such as *school knowledge*, *relationship to knowledge* and *learning*, which play an inescapable discursive function in the process of defining the school.

#### A POSSIBLE POLITICAL READING OF CURRICULAR TEXTS

The discourse analysis of the selected curricular document, in the theoretical-methodological perspective privileged here, presents strong heuristic potential that has been explored both in the field of public policies and in that of the curriculum. For a better understanding of this statement, it is important to make explicit the very meaning of hegemonized discourse within the framework of intelligibility elaborated by Ernesto Laclau, which runs through all his work. Seen as a structured totality resulting from articulatory practices (Laclau and Mouffe, 2015), discourse as a theoretical category — not descriptive or empirical — seeks to account for the rules of meaning production by which a certain phenomenon finds its place in the social world and in a certain discursive formation. In this sense, discourse theory analyzes

[...] the way in which political forces and social actors construct meanings within incomplete and undecidable social structures. This is achieved through the examination of particular structures within which social agents make decisions and articulate hegemonic projects and discursive formations. Moreover, discourse theorists seek to locate these investigated practices and logics in broader historical and social contexts, so that they may acquire a different significance and provide the basis for a possible critique and transformation of existing social practices and meanings. (Howarth, 2000, p. 3)

We bet that this understanding of discourse can both offer elements to advance the debates that involve the methodological issue of language in doing research in the educational field and produce instigating political readings of the social. After all, a conception of discourse that starts from the understanding that meaning is defined by particular systems of differences — "something is what it is only through its differential relations with something different" (Laclau, 2005, p. 92) — can open interesting clues to identify the specific rules and conventions that structure the production of (supposedly universal) meanings — in particular historical contexts (Howarth, 2000).

As particular documents produced, therefore, in specific historical conditions, curricular texts, such as, for example, the Pedagogical Action Plan, re-update mechanisms through which meaning is produced, fixed, contested and subverted (Howarth, 2000). In this perspective, the analysis intended here seeks to explore the processes of meaning mobilized in the document prepared by SEEDUC to regulate the implementation of remote education in schools of its network that involve the struggles for the fixation and hegemonization of particular meanings of *democratic public school*.

This text invests and contributes to the understanding of these struggles from the understandings of signifiers such as universal access, democracy, school knowledge, relationship to knowledge and learning. The choice of these terms was not random, as they tend to condense, when articulated in the same chain of equivalence, a possible sense of the social and political function of the school institution. The first two were the object of analysis of the first section, in order to explore the effects of the implementation of remote teaching, as expressed in the Pedagogical Action Plan (Rio de Janeiro, 2020), in the disputes over their respective definitions. In the third part of the text, we focus on the understanding of the relationship with school knowledge/wisdom hegemonized in the selected curricular document, in particular with regard to the issue of learning within this institution. What is at stake are the discursive strategies for updating this relationship in times of remote teaching. Our defense for a distancing from both content-centered and content-phobic perspectives (Veiga-Neto, 2012) requires seeking other possibilities of understanding for the meaning attributed to terms such as knowledge, wisdom and content (Gabriel, 2016; 2017; Gabriel and Moraes, 2014), as well as for the understanding in which we are

interested in investing the very idea of "relationship" (Gabriel, 2018) through which subjects positioned as teachers and students relate to knowledge objectified to be taught/learned. This clipping can be seen as the way chosen by us to, from the place of researchers in the educational field and teacher trainers, participate in this fight.

As Mouffe (2003; 2016) points out in his studies on possibilities of political reading of the social in our present, the current conjuncture has been affirming a proposal that threatens democratic institutions, but, at the same time, like any and all conjunctures, it is always open to democratic action. Thus, regarding the dispute for the hegemonization of a particular sense of public school, Mouffe (2014) offers us clues that allow the creation of conditions for another hegemony that can recover the sense of public school in which we bet, erasing the particular sense that has been propagated and reaffirmed in times of threats to this institution.

For this author, in the struggles for the meaning and hegemonization of a particular sense of *democracy*, the challenge is to architect a composition of "parliamentary and extra-parliamentary" struggles (Mouffe, 2014), based on the demands of groups in opposition to the hegemonic that favors "the emergence of all difference, embodied in social demands, in the field of political discursiveness, of different societies" (Rodrigues, 2017, p. 27). For Mouffe (2020), the coronavirus crisis, by exacerbating inequalities and depending on the way social forces appropriate the political moment, makes it possible to announce the exhaustion of the neoliberal model towards a radicalization of democracy.

This writing is inscribed, as suggested by Mouffe (2003), in a political and theoretical time. It is political because it represents our bet on the public school in relation to the threats it has been suffering as a public institution in the reconfigured neoliberal discourses in the educational field; and it is theoretical because we understand that the act of theorizing, in the post-foundational agenda, can create conditions to make the tensions and aporias inflamed by the pandemic work productively and thus expand the field of possibilities of understanding regarding the meaning of this social institution.

In these unprecedented times, the effects of these struggles in the educational field accentuate the widespread maxim that teaching work would be defined by the permanent need to decide in urgency and act in uncertainty (Perrenoud, 2001). Indeed, if the demands of each present are inscribed in undecidable contexts that constitute the different dimensions of the social, those of our contemporaneity — marked by a health crisis on a planetary scale — resize the urgencies and uncertainties, allowing a greater visibility of the contradictions and ambivalences that cross the processes of choice and validation of a policy that emerges from the fissures present in any and all contingently fixed meaning.

As Santos (2020) warns, COVID-19, which seems to be opposed to a situation of normality, acts as an oxymoron: at the same time that it presents itself as a health, economic and social crisis, it contributes to the production of the condition of possibilities for the affirmation of a system that moves and is instituted from the aggravations caused by the way this system is founded. The pandemic as a cause generates the demand for remote education, but as an effect, it responds to the demands formulated by a neoliberal project that supports the design of remote education, as adopted in the state. The growing association of neoliberalism with the logic of articulation with financial capital allows exploring the fissured sense of school, in order to strengthen a "political cycle" (Errejón and Mouffe, 2016) in which the state and its federated entities assume in a frontal way the prevalence of such logic in the construction of educational policies, with questionable attention to the social dimension. Thus, as the *Portraits of education in the context of the pandemic* warn, the educational process is configured not only as the "reflection of inequalities produced *outside* but also itself, as a factor that can exacerbate such inequalities" (Lima, 2020, p. 11, emphasis in the original).

In this context, the removal from the political agenda of the topic of the defense of a project for the construction and consolidation of a public, secular and democratic school is perceived as a possibility that — although always posed, requiring constant vigilance on the part of the defenders of a cognitive social justice (Santos, 2007) — today, due to the national and international political scenario, has greater chances of becoming hegemonic. What discursive strategies are mobilized in the selected document to confront these tensions?

We are particularly interested in analyzing the signs of displacement produced in the understanding of democratic public school with the introduction of the adjective *remote* to characterize the pedagogical practices that configure it as an institution. Indeed, in the current conjuncture of health crisis, not only the struggles for the meaning of the term *remote teaching* are reactivated, but also those that dispute the very meanings of *public school* and *democracy*, as argued earlier. In a reading of the political text produced for remote education, it is possible to perceive that the re-actualization and recontextualization of the demands for the universality of access to knowledge, via technological tools, is crossed by disputes for the fixation of a particular sense of public school between neoliberal interest groups, which present themselves as defenders of the right to school education, and those that emerge from social movements, whose historical demands for equality are also expressed in the struggles for the democratization of the school.

This is not about reinforcing dichotomous readings, nor technophobic positions in the educational field. After all, it is not now that a growing movement of destabilization of the public school has been configured as *locus* of production of curricular policies, of school knowledge and of subjectivities. We argue, however, that if the advancement of a conservative agenda after the 2018 election reinforces in the political arena the idea of a public school "under suspicion" (Gabriel, 2008; Gabriel and Moraes, 2014), or of teaching "under suspicion" (Macedo, 2012), through the denunciation of the "lack of quality" of this institution as referenced in evaluative parameters such as the Basic Education Development Index (IDEB), the physical distancing imposed and necessary in combating this pandemic opens the possibility, for some who participate in the current political game, to explore and radicalize this fissure of such a sense of school.

Until then, if movements such as the Non-Party School, Homeschooling, of the curricular reforms of basic education around the National Common Curricular Base (BNCC) (Brasil, 2017), of the Reform of Secondary Education advocated by educational reformers (Gabriel, 2017), invest in particular meanings of school, knowledge, democracy from which we radically move away, they leave, at least, margin for the school institution to be attributed some credit. In the present context, established by COVID-19, this condition begins to give way, in political texts, to a more pronounced delegitimization or denial of this institution. The sense of public school is restored in the political game, now crossed by the disputes of the processes that induce its own deinstitutionalization.

Paraphrasing Krenak (2019) when he states that "[...] our time is an expert in creating absences: of the sense of living in society and of the very meaning of life" (Krenak, 2019, p. 26) and betting that the school, even if under suspicion, can be — and is —, for many young people, an important space for learning to "live in society" and produce "the very meaning of life" in the sense of "opportunizing the construction of more autonomous and less compulsory trajectories", as Amaral and Castro (2019) argue, we wonder about the possibilities that have opened up for the definition of this institution due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In this perspective, is it not fitting to warn that — under the argument of the imponderable resulting from the pandemic that restores the understanding of school in the political game — educational policies, depending on how they face the challenges and demands of our present, paradoxically contribute to the creation of the absence — of the school institution — that Krenak (2019) tells us about?

The formulation of this warning is based on the understanding of the political game as defended by Mouffe (2017) and mentioned earlier. The author points to the political importance of the idea of "border" in the struggles for meaning, in order to indicate the presence of antagonisms between the propositions of different projects of society and, consequently, of school, teaching and sociability in this institution. After all, the aporia of inevitability and impossibility — which crosses the contingent struggles between different interest groups and has the undecidable as its horizon — manifests itself with greater force at the moment of the cut/border between *what is not being* meant as such. To occupy the place of the boundary is to occupy provisionally the place of the hegemonization of a particular sense attributed to a signifier and simultaneously produce its antagonistic sense.

Producing political readings in the field of education refers to the reflection on "plans of orientations for action" (Lima, 2003), which includes reflections that promote erasures in the "plan of action" (Lima, 2003); erasures that allow the displacement of a prescriptive, positive ordering to the field of possibility of practical action of the norm. Therefore, it is important to inquire about which planning, or which educational action, is possible or interesting to articulate in the practical context of remote teaching. Or can we understand remote teaching as a form of pedagogical link with the (re)institutionalized space of the school that may still be (re)territorialized in the school *of after*?

#### MEANINGS OF "DEMOCRATIC PUBLIC SCHOOL" IN DISPUTE

The reading of the Pedagogical Action Plan (Rio de Janeiro, 2020) allows us to verify, right from the beginning, that one of these strategies consists of operating with a chain of definition of remote teaching built on filling the fissures that destabilize the struggles for the hegemonization of a particular sense of distance learning. This discursive maneuver allows us to invest in other meanings that escape the structure of a constituted and regulated field of education. The reading of the excerpt below shows the expansion and diversification of the field of possibilities of definition for remote teaching:

[...] remote learning is not to be confused with distance learning, the latter is a teaching modality with its own nature and uniqueness. Remote teaching, in turn, extrapolates the possibilities provided by a digital platform, it concerns a set of pedagogical actions that make use of different tools and strategies and mobilize diverse actors, such as students and their families. (Rio de Janeiro, 2020, p. 4)

The justification enunciated in this document for the implementation of remote teaching and its effects on the understanding of the production of curricular policies also offers clues to the discursive strategies for such an enterprise. It is interesting to note that they end tensions that mobilize disputes between the different interest groups participating in the political game through the demands of access and equality. According to the extract below of the Pedagogical Action Plan of SEEDUC (Rio de Janeiro, 2020), its efforts are in the direction of achieving two objectives: 1) "[...] to guarantee to all students, interchangeably, the possibility of continuing studying while this exceptional situation lasts [...]"; and 2) "to minimize the damage to the studies of its students during the period of absence, as well as to ensure that the links between school-student/student-school are maintained" (Rio de Janeiro, 2020, p. 3).

It is important to underline the discursive strategies mobilized in this document to justify the articulation of the public sector with private groups, as a possibility of facing the current school crisis in order to achieve the objectives set. The following excerpt presents an example of articulation that seeks to account for the different interests at stake. On the part of the representatives of the state, there is a shift from the discourse in defense of universal access for students in the Rio de Janeiro network centered on the idea of the State's duty to that based on the right to learning.

In order to guarantee all students, indistinctly, the possibility of continuing studying while this exceptional situation lasts, the Secretariat made efforts to establish a partnership with the Google LLC, in order to elaborate the planning, support, monitoring and effective use of pedagogical resources to offer our students, teachers and technical-pedagogical team the opportunity to keep the teaching-learning process alive. (Rio de Janeiro, 2020, p. 5)

The goals that support this policy, made explicit in this document, draw some possibilities of fixing meanings about the understanding of democratic school or democratization of education that seem relevant to us. First, the commitment of the policy of the state of Rio de Janeiro in announcing as a premise the defense of equal access, as indicated by the mobilization of the signifier "all" and reinforced by the term "indistinctly". Such as these signifiers are mobilized, they allow a first interpretation that refers to the duty of the state with public education for *all*, constitutionally provided and the object of the Law of Guidelines and Bases (Brasil, 1996), whereby the state of Rio de Janeiro — as a federate entity — assumes the responsibility of addressing the problem.

The second possibility of interpretation consists in stating that, in this document, the justification for the worsening of the inequality situation would be more articulated to the material difficulties of the offer of remote education than to the implications of this offer for the teaching-learning process in a context marked by a profound cognitive social injustice. Thus, overcoming inequality in this area, an unavoidable condition for the affirmation of a democratic school, can be treated as something exceptional. The horizon of democracy, which tends to broaden the participation of *all* in the process, is reduced to the effectiveness of a planning that proposes to mitigate inequality understood as the imposition of a situation of exception and not as structuring a social system that systematically extends the social exclusion of a specific group of the population.

It is in this logic that the justification of SEEDUC in the option for Google is inscribed. It is announced in the text as a solution "by reason of the *ease of access* (either by *mobile devices, notebooks, pc*, among others), as a user-friendly interface and simple to operationalize [...]"<sup>4</sup> (Rio de Janeiro, 2020, p. 5, emphasis added). The lack of universal access, which exposes the precariousness of the process of hegemonization of remote education as a mandatory alternative, tries to be resolved by the state through the feasibility of "*practical use* of the platform", with the transfer of students to the chosen virtual environment, "with the mirroring of the state management system" (Rio de Janeiro, 2020, p. 5, emphasis added). According to the document, with the

[...] migration, it was possible to attribute an institutional account to each student, teacher and technical-pedagogical team, and, in possession of this account, the beneficiaries obtain several benefits, such as: personalization of resources, automatic direction of members of the Secretariat to their respective classrooms, unlimited e-mail storage, the possibility of holding video conferences with a large number of people, in addition to interacting with members of the same institution, among other possibilities. (Rio de Janeiro, 2020, p. 6)

The understanding that the universal access perspective would be associated with the significant "practical use" minimizes the socioeconomic issue of students who cannot afford the costs of a data package for a continuous use platform, for example, and, still, falls on the false premise that technological literacy assumes universal character. Thus, the reading of the document suggests that this other fissure tends to be equally filled, in an attempt to stabilize access to remote education with a view to democratization, by the promise of providing *symcards* with internet

<sup>4</sup> On the influence of networks as a new "*paideia*" (Fiormonte and Sordi, 2019) of the training projects, we are interested in considering how global communication systems expand their business: the offer of individual data constitutes the raw material of the political-technological structure of these multinationals (Fiormonte and Sordi, 2019).

access for students and teachers with the aim of offering "*equity* in the period of non-face-to-face teaching" (Rio de Janeiro, 2020, p. 10, emphasis added ) — soon considered as an impossible horizon of materialization. The lack of success of these actions, which were configured only as promises together with the proposition of a lightened training for teachers with a view to adapting this professional to a teaching modality for which he was not trained, makes it difficult to fill in the signifier *all* and, consequently, to consolidate the association sought between remote education and democratization.

An example of the weakening of this chain of meaning can be found in the denunciation of remote teaching by students in the network, who begin to antagonize the discourse of SEEDUC, as suggested by the *Dossier on distance learning in the state network in times of pandemic* from the Association of Secondary Students of the state of Rio de Janeiro (AERJ), published in May 2020:

The report tells us that 30.8% of students do not have good enough internet or the 28.4% without adequate device. In addition, they get very confused trying to understand how to work with distance learning, let alone how to understand the subject given by the teacher. So much so that only 19.9% find that teachers are prepared to teach the contents *online*, the result of an abrupt change in the reality of these masters who were forced to adapt in very short notice. (AERJ, 2020, p. 4)

In view of the recognition of the impossibility of filling the cracks related to technological access, other strategies are listed in the document itself, such as:

- 1. "classes on Open TV and TV Alerj, aligned with the basic curriculum, for all grades of elementary and high school" (Rio de Janeiro, 2020, p. 8);
- 2. "the printing of study material self-regulated activities to serve in an 'equitable manner, all students'[...] in order for them to continue studying in this period, minimizing, therefore, pedagogical losses resulting from the absence of face-to-face classes" (Rio de Janeiro, 2020, p. 9); and
- 3. an ombudsman service for students to "ask their questions, request guidance and help in planning their study routine" (Rio de Janeiro, 2020, p. 10).

In this same line of argument, the document explains the measures planned to meet the diversity of socio-cultural profiles of students in the network. Regarding the assistance to indigenous people and *quilombolas*, the document states that the first will be taught in person after the period of social isolation, since a mapping by SEEDUC found that the vast majority of students do not have a cell phone, tablet or computer (Rio de Janeiro, 2020). With regard to the *quilombolas*, the document informs that "SEEDUC does not have exclusively 'quilombola' schools" and, therefore, they receive "the same opportunities and pedagogical treatments as the other students in the state network with regard to the regular strategies already presented for the network" (Rio de Janeiro, 2020, p. 20). As for the students of Youth and Adult Education in Prison and Socio-Educational School units, the classes are provided through the "open channel television station, telecourse videos and ENEM magazine" in the "format

of self-regulated activities" (Rio de Janeiro, 2020, p. 25). Finally, the pedagogical strategies designed for students of Special Education indicate diverse orientations, elaboration of accessible texts for students with visual impairment, deafness and other disabilities (Rio de Janeiro, 2020), to be used on the platform while another group, that of students with "intellectual disability, physical, autistic, etc. that present a degree of severity that makes access to the platform unfeasible, should be notified to the Director of the School Unit so that the logistics of pedagogical support can be verified with the Regional Directorate" (Rio de Janeiro, 2020, p. 18).

The reading of this pedagogical proposal highlights a paradox in the enunciation formulated by SEEDUC: on the one hand, the justification for using technology as a learning resource for *all*, acting as a petition of principle of universal value for the students of the network and, on the other hand, the recognition of its fallacy regarding the possibility of guaranteeing universal access. By proposing other strategies that include, for example, the proposal to send printed material by mail, the document updates a sense of remote learning proposal dating from the 1960s, or even the 1980s, when the use of television as a technological resource began to assume a relevant role in the learning process. Although the discourse mobilized in the Pedagogical Action Plan seeks to justify the use of technologies for remote teaching as a "challenge to be overcome by the entire school community" (Rio de Janeiro, 2020, p. 11), which needs to understand the new relationships implied between teaching and learning transformed in the face of "a school environment beyond the physical and permanent walls of the school, as we traditionally know it" (Rio de Janeiro, 2020, p. 11), in this same document this discourse opens gaps and has difficulty asserting itself when it presents other alternatives of understanding of remote education, which do not necessarily involve the use of information and communication technologies in the present time. It is clear that the direct articulation between ease of access and technological tools, although it presents itself as a desirable horizon in the issue of guaranteeing the democratization of education in this network, cannot establish itself as a hegemonic operation.

Instead of denouncing the failure of these attempts at hegemonization or problematizing the possible harmful effects of such articulation, we are interested in underlining its effects on the democratization of school education that it mobilizes. The relevance of this interest is justified when we recognize that democratization of access to mobile data or technological tools does not automatically and necessarily mean democratization of access to knowledge and research, and the study of the Regional Study Center for the Development of the Information Society<sup>5</sup> (CETIC.

<sup>5</sup> In 2005, The Information and Coordination Center of Ponto BR (NIC.BR), responsible for implementing the decisions and projects of the Internet Steering Committee in Brazil, established a partnership with the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) in order to collect data on internet access and mobile phone ownership for personal use. Thus, the Regional Study Center for the Development of the Information Society (CETIC.BR), as a Department of the NIC.BR, aims to produce indicators on information and communication technologies (ICT) access and use in Brazil. Available at: https://www.cetic.br/pt/historicos/. Accessed in: June 14<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

BR, 2020) corroborates this line of argument. This study points to the fact that the growth of cell phone ownership and the democratization of this technology in the possibility of entering a technological culture cannot be considered as directly proportional quantities, since inquiries about the uses of this device can be listed in the relationship that implies the quality and frequency of this connection as elements that lead to questions about the effected of this adoption on the usage of *online* opportunities. Thus we ask: who is interested, then, in this discourse that tries to assert itself in this stabilization device that is the analyzed political text?

We consider that the discursive elements that have been added to unify the defense of remote teaching in state education show evidence of the presence of a hegemonic articulation between interest groups that align themselves with projects that tend to structure the defense of neoliberal orientations. We interpret that, at this conjuncture, the idea of "school under suspicion", defined around the signifier "quality", which begins to exert the discursive function of nodal point,<sup>6</sup> finds fertile ground to unfold in a particular way of signifying the public school, now, not only as a low-quality institution, but also and above all as an inadequate, if not disposable, *locus*, to ensure the effectiveness of the teaching-learning process. This deployment or displacement from a "school under suspicion" to a "school under threat" does not translate into a rhetorical preciousness. It points out our concern about the intensification of the circulation in the political debate of neoliberal discourses that do not recognize the important political role of this public institution in a democratic social order. In this new agenda, the public school, as a republican institution articulating a democratic project, tends to be located increasingly outside the field of meaning of a social order that projects in the context of the current State.

As we defend below, beyond the very understanding of the significant *school*, the defense of a democratic public school is not reduced to the problematization of the means of guaranteeing the teaching-learning process, but mainly involves debates and decisions about what and for what we teach. This concern assumes all its complexity and relevance in a context in which the sense of social justice and, in particular, of cognitive social justice seems to have assumed more restrictive configurations, and perhaps is no longer a priority goal of public educational policies.

# WHAT RELATION TO WHICH KNOWLEDGE IN TIMES OF REMOTE TEACHING?

How to maintain the relationship with school knowledge, via remote teaching, in order to affirm the validity and relevance of its democratization function, in a society marked by inequality and discrimination of different natures? The relevance of this type of questioning is justified in a framework of intelligibility in which the

<sup>6</sup> The nodal point can be considered as the unit of a formation that closes a discursive formation, in a contingent way. It does not have its own identity, but it is a signifier that presents itself as an articulator of a plurality of senses, fulfilling a function of fixing joints of a node (Southwell, 2017).

production and distribution of school knowledge are perceived as a key strategy in the construction of a common (Dardot and Laval, 2015) that contributes to reducing the privileges of class, race, gender or creed.

This understanding of the democratizing function of school knowledge does not mean the reactualization of hierarchical relationships between the different knowledges that circulate in university and school cultures, nor the fetishism of the importance of instrumental appropriation of content and/or skills in improving the quality of education, as current curricular policies make clear. In the epistemic posture here privileged, school knowledge is perceived as resulting from a process of permanent and contingent objectification of which different elements can be articulated — disciplinary and/or transversal contents, perceptions of the world, biographical and identity trajectories, institutional contexts, political interests, projects of societies — to participate in the construction of a common, that is, of a space-time named *between* which is inscribed in the way of the singular and collective, of the processes of objectification and subjectivation.

Such understanding of the definition of curricular and legitimized knowledge as an object of teaching-learning in the context of school cultures allows us to apprehend it as inscribed in permanent disputes in search of hegemonization and universalization of particular meanings, despite the privileged teaching modality. This means that we do not defend an unambiguous and more correct definition of this term, but the importance of recognizing its dual inscription in the domain of the political and of politics (Mouffe, 2014), which simultaneously places it both as a fissured signifier and, as such, always open to new definitions, and as a device mobilized to stabilize particular meanings of world projects.

The question that interests us most particularly here to explore focuses precisely on the effects on the struggles for the meaning of the term *school knowledge*, of this passage or adaptation of face-to-face teaching to remote teaching in times of pandemic. In what particular senses of this term does the alternative of remote education — as it has been implemented by current educational policies —contribute to consolidate and/or destabilize? Does this change in teaching modality contribute to displacing/consolidating the hegemonized borders in the process of defining content and/or school knowledge? What interest groups participating in the political game does this change tend to favor?

Reading the document makes it possible to emphasize that the issue of the definition of school knowledge/subject content is not a particular concern of this official text. Signifiers such as knowledge and content are mobilized, circulating flows of meaning without necessarily questioning the fixation and hegemonization of certain particular meanings to the detriment of other possible ones. In general, throughout the document, the term *knowledge* tends to be associated sometimes with the pedagogical adjective, reinforcing its insertion in the chain of definition of the particular knowledge of the teaching professional, sometimes with the hegemonically fixed sense of content as a learning object. The following two excerpts highlight these semantic variations.

In this virtual environment, Seeduc professionals will find the Online Educational Training Journey that aims to recognize the resources of the *G SUITE* of *Google*, as well as the appropriation of *pedagogical knowledge* for the development of learning in online environments. (Rio de Janeiro, 2020, p. 12, emphasis added)

The classes will be planned and recorded by the teachers of the network, guided by the Secretariat, offering *contents*, reflections and simple activities so that students have another opportunity and study tool. The classes will also be available virtually, so that students can consult and deepen the *knowledge* learned. (Rio de Janeiro, 2020, p. 9, emphasis added)

The association between knowledge and content can also be evidenced when it comes to printed training activities in the field of remote education.

[...] considering the structure of the submitted material that presents explanatory texts of the *content* following fixation activities, as well as a proposal of evaluative exercises that aims to verify the *seizure of content*, in addition to a research indication that allows the student to autonomously search for *knowledge* discussed, the return to classes will provide teachers with a process of collectively or individually commented correction, possibly identifying the *learning gaps*. (Rio de Janeiro, 2020, p. 25, emphasis added)

The term *content*, widely mobilized in the production of this document, tends to re-update, in turn, the particular meaning hegemonically fixed in recent curricular policies and that have been, however, the object of problematization in the curricular field for more than three decades. Inscribed in an articulatory logic of equivalence and difference that contributes to reinforce its fetishism as an inescapable element for the guarantee of the teaching-learning process, the particular meaning of this hegemonized signifier carries, in effect, the presence of strong traces of content-based discourses. In these discourses, the content is naturalized and objectified, something previously defined, outside the game of language and power that crosses the relationship with knowledge established by the subject-teacher/ student. This understanding is evidenced in several excerpts of the document, such as when it comes to expressing SEEDUC's concern at the time of thinking about the return "to the normality of face-to-face classes" (Rio de Janeiro, 2020, p. 23). The document stresses the need to guide

[...] strategies to ensure that all students have access to the same *contents*, such as the realization of a diagnosis, the result of which will base subsequent pedagogical decisions, thus allowing the creation of actions to recover and strengthen learning. (Rio de Janeiro, 2020, p. 23, emphasis added)

It is interesting to underline, however, in this same document, the presence of cracks in the attempt to stabilize this particular meaning for the term "content", suggesting other possible meaning flows for it, even if mobilized in a marginal or more timid way. When we read in the document, due to the ethnic and racial profile of a percentage of students in this network, that "SEEDUC [...] included transversely to the content of regular education, in the disciplines of History, Geography and Arts, the theme 'Afro-Brazilian and Indigenous History and Culture', given its importance and in line with Laws no. 10.639/03 and no. 11.645/08" (Rio de Janeiro, 2020, p. 20), it is possible to consider movements of displacement of this hegemonized sense from the expansion of the field of legitimized content as a teaching-learning object. After all, this type of inclusion calls into question the plastered character attributed to subject content. Similarly, the content-centered perception presents blemishes when the term *content* is associated with something necessary, but insufficient to guarantee the quality of the educational process. In this case, it tends to be mobilized as the constitutive exterior of other teachable objects such as skills and abilities. It is not by chance that this secretariat understands that

[...] the role of the school goes beyond *the mere transmission of content*, because it is necessary to develop multiple competencies and skills for life in the face of the challenges imposed by 21<sup>st</sup> century society, marked by liquidity and constant changes that make human beings need to reinvent themselves every moment, which increasingly requires schools to develop more flexible and comprehensive learning strategies, in order to value and include work with socio-emotional competencies in education for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, intentionally. (Rio de Janeiro, 2020, p. 4, emphasis added)

These timid displacements of the term *content* do not gain strength, however, in the analyzed document. A hypothesis that we consider fruitful to be explored consists in the way in which the *relationship to knowledge*, particularly when thought of from the signifier *learning*, is connected to the chain of equivalence produced around the terms *content* and/or *knowledge*. The post-foundational discursive approach with which we operate in this text allows us to affirm that the understanding of learning implies the mobilization of particular meanings of signifiers such as *content*, *school knowledge*, *subject-teacher* and *subject-student*. Depending on the particular sense hegemonized for each of these terms, it is possible that the chain of equivalence defining *learning* assumes distinct contours.

The careful reading of the *Pedagogical Action Plan* evidences both the emphasis given to the learning process and the hegemonization of a particular sense of this signifier that tends to reinforce content-based perspectives. With regard to the prominent place given to the issue of learning, it is possible to underline two lines of argument. The first reinforces discourses that advocate the positive effects of virtual teaching on the learning process. The relationship established in the document between the new technologies of remote education can be seen in different passages such as:

In this virtual environment, Seeduc professionals will find the *Online Educational Training Journey* that aims to recognize the resources of the G SUITE of Google, as well as the appropriation of pedagogical knowledge for the development of learning in online environments. (Rio de Janeiro, 2020, p. 12, emphasis added)

The second line of argument mobilized in this official text to support the centrality attributed to the issue of learning meets the contemporary movement named by Biesta (2012) as "the new language of learning" that manifests itself "in the redefinition of teaching as facilitation of learning and education as the provision of learning opportunities or learning experiences" (Biesta, 2012, p. 816).

It is not a matter of denying, in the critical analysis of this author, the importance of learning in the school context, but rather of problematizing the particular meaning of this term, hegemonized in the contemporary political-educational field. This reflection refers to the second evidence observed in the document analyzed and previously mentioned. In general lines, Biesta (2012) identifies two streams of meaning of *learning* that are in dispute in the educational field: one which associates it with the idea of acquiring objectified school knowledge, without taking into account, in this process, the active participation of the subject-learner; and another which operates with the learning-response-experience interface of a social-singular being (Delory-Mombeger, 2012), when confronted with a knowledge/content that affects them. This association between learning and singular response implies considering both the context in which students are inscribed and their individual trajectory that directly affects the teaching-learning process.

In this perspective, it would be appropriate to inquire about the possibilities of thinking about the issue of learning in a context such as our present, in which a health crisis exacerbates the effects of a social order marked by social inequality, reverberating, therefore, in a differentiated way with students and teachers of the public network. How to guarantee the democratization of education when access to school knowledge tends to dissociate the effects of the pandemic context experienced in the singular trajectories of life? In other words: how to ensure learning without necessarily questioning the asymmetrical power relations present and, simultaneously, the agency of the subject-learner in this game?

In the document, these different flows of meanings intersect and produce ambivalent discursive configurations. Although the recognition of the active role played by the subject positioned as a student is recognized in some passages of the document, the hegemonization of the sense of learning as the acquisition of a objectified content that can be controlled and measured causes this protagonism or agency of the subject-teacher and/or student to be significantly reduced, affecting the particular sense of learning prioritized by the document on screen. This ambivalence can be illustrated in this way:

The proposal includes training for SEEDUC education professionals for the most varied and possible "uses" (CERTEAU), seeking learning and knowledge production. (Rio de Janeiro, 2020, p. 12)

It was also recommended that the professor *enter his contents* at the time of his face-to-face class, so that the Secretary can continue accounting for the teaching workload, can improve the organization of the dynamics of the virtual classroom and ensure that the student establishes, in his study routine, a fixed time to have contact with the teacher for interaction, clarification of doubts and doing the proposed activities. (Rio de Janeiro, 2020, p. 6, emphasis added)

In the first excerpt, we emphasize the mention of the projected coordination between the acts of teaching and learning and the production of knowledge, thus allowing, albeit timidly, the possibility of an interpretation that recognizes the active participation of the subjects involved in the learning process. However, the recurrence to the signifier "uses", attributed to the theorist Certeau, without reference to the text from which it was taken, weakens, if it does not dissipate, this possibility of understanding. Indeed, as mobilized, this term leads us to the argument that validates the platform as the instrument of acquisition of content that, made into a thing, is articulated both in the formation of the subject-teacher and the subject-student, so that the school, as an effect of modern technology, increasingly fulfills its educational action through evidence of the content offered, revealed by the insertion of the content on the platform, as suggested in the second extract.

#### SCHOOL OF AFTER: BETWEEN INHERITANCES AND REINVENTIONS

If we agree with the permanence of traces of this pandemic in the present time and with the fact that it will leave deep marks in our way of inhabiting this world, justifying for some the emergence of another normal, it seems important to us to start thinking about ways and strategies, from our present, that can contribute to a *school of after*, without this putting under threat the power of the school institution in the construction of a common that is inscribed in the interstice of difference, instead of the hegemonization of a particular. Thus, the question of which school is possible in these times of pandemic is based on a reflection on the discursive strategies in which we can/should invest, in order to maintain the defense of the prominent place occupied by this school institution in the construction of a democratic society.

We consider that the search for these strategies is part of an interstice zone between the fields of Educational Public Policies and of the Curriculum. It is about — instead of operating with an educational policy that encloses a unique rationality of school, teachers and students, as suggested by the analyzed document on the guidelines for the implementation of remote education — assuming the objective conditions, those that structure Brazilian society, to analyze the school institution as a social-political organization resulting from this conjuncture, composed of subjects who, although contemporary, participate in different groups of interests formulators of demands that challenge the school in its daily life, whether it is configured by remote or face-to-face teaching. The sense of this unprecedented time points to serious social problems that plague contemporaneity in different fields of studies, reaffirming the aporia already announced by Laclau (Mendonça, 2010, p. 482, emphasis added): "in terms of political strategy, therefore, there is no real possibility of reaching the 'end of history'' and, in this time, we are induced to operate in tension, no longer by choice, but by the very condition of the possibility of existence. Thus, our condition requires that the social be thought through the relations of paradoxes, assuming that the contradiction experienced prevents the closure of a single proposition, in a certainty of a definitive political project. In this bias, the challenge is to operate in the articulations that move democratic politics, understanding that the fields that articulate politics hegemonize contingent meanings, but that produce effects in our present.

In this way, what is at stake, at this moment, is not the defense or criticism of remote education "in itself". The dispute is for the very understanding of secular and democratic public schools for *all*, which we understand to be "under threat". As a "mandatory alternative" due to the necessary social isolation, remote education is not necessarily the villain, and focusing our criticism on this modality can make us deviate from the struggle to defend the indispensability of the school institution for the construction of a democratic society in this political scenario.

With this, we reaffirm that our purpose was not to argue against remote teaching in times of pandemic, as we understand that this alternative has its contingency place in the current context. Here we are more interested in continuing to defend a public and democratic school than in sustaining criticism of one or another modality of education. It is thus important, from the theoretical perspective privileged here, to invest in certain flows of meanings at the expense of others, as a political strategy.

Therefore, as Mouffe (2016) suggests, we bet on the idea that every hegemonic articulation is constantly recreated and renegotiated, since "there is no point of balance in which the final harmony is achieved" (Mouffe, 2016, p. 12). We reason with the author that "in this precarious *between data*" (Mouffe, 2016, p. 12, emphasis by the author), contingently marked by the health crisis that plagues our present time, "it is possible to experience pluralism, that is, that this democracy will always be 'to come', to use Derrida's expression, which underlines not only the unrealized possibilities, but also the radical impossibility of final realization" (Mouffe, 2016, p. 11, emphasis by the author).

So, thinking of a school *of after* requires entering the dispute now and this does not presuppose the choice between fidelity to tradition or the boldness of the new. What is at stake is our possibility of continuing to act from the place of heirs (Derrida and Roudinesco, 2004) and, in this way, to receive and relaunch the inheritance in favor of the consolidation of a public, secular and democratic school.

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**Conflicts of interest:** The authors declare they don't have any commercial or associative interest that represents conflict of interests in relation to the manuscript.

**Funding:** This study was financed in part by the National Development Council Scientific and Technological Institute (CNPq), the 1D Productivity Scholarship from the Foundation for Research Support to the State of Rio de Janeiro (FAPERJ), and the Coordination for the Improvement of Level Personnel Superior in the International Institutionalization Program (CAPES-Print).

Author's contributions: The authors contributed equally to the production of the paper.

Received on May 15 2021 Approved on February 7th 2022

