



# Discourse theory and the production of knowledge in democratic school management

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**ABSTRACT.** Our objective is to analyze how Discourse Theory helps to constitute an effective theoretical-methodological reference for researchers in democratic school management that approach the school as an empirical field. For this, we expose the historical context of research in educational administration/management and the construction of research that focuses on the school, identifying the elements that indicate a predominant mode in this subarea of Education; we explain the epistemological basis of Discourse Theory that enables operating new analytical tools; we identified and analyzed publications in this subarea that worked with Discourse Theory and ended by exposing their contributions to the establishment of new relationships between the researcher and the school, enabling the advancement of knowledge.

**Keywords:** poststructuralism; discourse theory; school management; democracy.

## Teoria do discurso e a produção do conhecimento em gestão escolar democrática

**RESUMO.** Nosso objetivo é analisar como a Teoria do Discurso pode se constituir potente referencial teórico-metodológico para os pesquisadores em gestão escolar democrática que têm a escola como campo empírico. Para isso, expomos o contexto histórico das pesquisas em administração/gestão educacional e a construção das pesquisas que focalizam a escola, identificando os elementos que indicam um modo predominante nessa subárea da Educação; explicitamos o embasamento epistemológico da Teoria do Discurso, o qual pode fazer operar novas ferramentas analíticas; identificamos e analisamos publicações dessa subárea que trabalham com a Teoria do Discurso e finalizamos abordando suas contribuições para o estabelecimento de novas relações entre o pesquisador e a escola, de sorte a possibilitar avanço do conhecimento.

**Palavras-chave:** pós-estruturalismo; teoria do discurso; gestão escolar; democracia.

## La teoría del discurso y la producción de conocimiento en la gestión escolar democrática

**RESUMEN.** Nuestro objetivo es analizar cómo la Teoría del Discurso puede constituir un poderoso referente teórico-metodológico para los investigadores en gestión escolar democrática que tienen a la escuela como campo empírico. Para ello, exponemos el contexto histórico de la investigación en gestión educativa y la construcción de investigaciones que se centran en la escuela, identificando los elementos que señalan una modalidad predominante en esta subárea de la Educación; explicamos las bases epistemológicas de la Teoría del Discurso que pueden hacer operar nuevas herramientas analíticas; identificamos y analizamos publicaciones de esta subárea que trabajaron con la Teoría del Discurso y finalizamos exponiendo sus aportes para el establecimiento de nuevas relaciones entre el investigador y la escuela, posibilitando el avance del conocimiento.

**Palabras-clave:** posestructuralismo; teoría del discurso; gestión escolar; democracia.

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## Introduction

We witnessed, at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, a shift in the research agenda in Education, both internationally and nationally. This shift primarily arose from the questioning of positivism and the consolidation of a critical framework, along with its various theoretical and methodological contributions.

Internationally, the book organized by Barroso (1996), containing the main selected and translated texts from French to Portuguese, illustrates the presence of different countries at the Colloquium held in November 1994 at the Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences of the University of Lisbon, titled 'The school: an object of study'. In an evaluative summary of the congress, Canário (1996) asserts that this indeed represents a change in the research agenda in Education. There is a construction of the school as an object of study for researchers, driven by both social and scientific reasons. The former relates to questioning the effectiveness of the school in society, and the latter is associated with the questioning of positivism and the contributions of systemic and phenomenological theories. The author advocates for the possibility of multiple methodological approaches to research, the need for objectivity (but not neutrality), and a shift in scientific logic in which the production of knowledge doesn't dictate what professionals and schools should do but interprets and helps understand the school reality. In the same vein, Nóvoa (1992) organizes the book titled *School Organizations Under Analysis* and delineates the 'meso' level of approach – the school – as a specific and powerful context for the relationships between political demands, pedagogical practices, and scientific endeavors.

In *The School as an Educational Organization*, Lima (1998) proposes a method of analysis, the Sociology of School Organizations, in which different models predominate to help researchers understand the school as an organization. This framework has become a theoretical and methodological reference for numerous research projects in Brazil (Torres, 2005; Oliveira, 2020). In the United Kingdom, Ball (1987) had already conducted research from the perspective outlined in Lima's (1998) book, analyzing micropolitical and power relations within different school contexts. In Latin America, Rockwell and Ezpeleta (2007) highlight the importance of viewing the school as a 'social construct', an 'unfinished process in construction', and they attribute the term 'quotidian' as the best descriptor to incorporate the heterogeneity of daily school events into the Marxist categories familiar to education researchers.

At the national level, especially guided by the writings of André (1984) and Lüdke and André (2013), case studies have proliferated in opposition to quantitative research in education. Advocating for the production of concrete and contextualized knowledge, research developed on this epistemological basis focuses on the particular, treating it as a whole. Researchers in these studies often use a more colloquial language and make extensive use of dialogue, observations, opinions, and everyday facts to provide readers with 'naturalistic generalizations' (André, 1984). A significant example in educational administration/management is Paro's (1995) research, which analyzes the school from within and is described as "a truly monumental empirical (but not empiricist) survey [...]" (Cury, 2016), portraying the school in a "[...] poignantly dramatic" manner (Krasilchik, 2016). In the various subfields of education in Brazil, the school has come to be privileged as a focal point of study, guided by various terminologies that directly or indirectly express the theoretical and methodological framework supporting the research: institution, culture, organization, daily life.

In the History of Education, Nosella and Buffa (2013) provide a perspective on educational research focused on the 'school institution' through the investigative dialectical method. They present a 'practical guide' for historians in education who intend to conduct research in schools. The authors identify three main phases in research: the first, from the 1950s to the 1960s, before the creation of graduate programs, was characterized by a predominance of studies on the relationships between education and society. The second phase, from the 1970s to the 1980s, during the military government, witnessed the 'institutionalization of graduate studies, which emphasized the schooling of research production and a reaction to the military regime, fostering the development of strong critical thinking in education'. They emphasize that, during that period, school institutions were virtually absent from research or were used to illustrate the historical movement of society, with a strong influence of Marxist critical reference. Finally, as we mentioned earlier, in the 1990s, they describe a 'paradigm crisis', where many researchers moved towards advocating for epistemological and thematic pluralism, focusing on the study of unique objects. The authors view the shift towards studying the unique - the school - as positive but limit the investigative method to dialectical Marxism while remaining critical of other epistemological influences.

In turn, curriculum theorists, in their various epistemological approaches, also recognize this construction. As an example, we cite a significant text by Alves and Garcia (2000), which outlines methodological changes for researchers intending to analyze different school daily routines. The main changes include: a shift in the perception of the world and the overturning of the hierarchical relationship between rigid and totalizing concepts, as well as a focus on the concreteness of school events.

In the intersection of subfields - Work and Education and Higher Education - Silva Júnior and Ferretti (2004), responding to the demands of their collective research and at the invitation of Licínio Lima, introduce

the category 'school practice' based on the category 'social practice', articulating the concepts of 'institution, organization, and school culture'. The authors emphasize the historical importance of the institutional function of the school (maintaining the bourgeois social pact) and highlight that reforms often do not take place as planned since there is a production within school practice.

This mapping reveals, in the various subfields of Education, the growth and consolidation of research that takes the school as the primary site for the integration of different aspects and elements to understand education and its pedagogical processes. In this article, we are interested in how this change of agenda in educational administration/management was constructed<sup>1</sup>, specifically, concerning the theme of democratic school management, our goal is to elucidate why and how Discourse Theory (Laclau & Mouffe, 2015) can become a potent theoretical and methodological framework for researchers in democratic school management who focus on the school as their empirical field and point of entry for their analyses. To address this objective, the guiding question is: What is the epistemological foundation of Discourse Theory, and how and why can it serve as a potent theoretical and methodological reference for research in democratic school management?

As methodological procedures, we highlight survey, systematization and analysis on the theme of democratic school management, carried out throughout our academic trajectories; survey, systematization and analysis of publications in Education, especially in the educational administration/management sub-area, which have Discourse Theory as a theoretical-methodological reference and, also, a thorough analysis of the proposal of the authors in evidence (Laclau & Mouffe, 2015). We organize these procedures into the following sections, to achieve our objective: in the first part, we expose the historical context of research in educational administration/management and the construction of research that focuses on schools, identifying the elements that constitute a predominant way of knowledge, in this sub-area of Education. In the second part, we explain the epistemological basis of Discourse Theory (Laclau & Mouffe, 2015), which is able to operate new analytical tools for the researcher. Next, we identify and analyze publications in Education that work with Discourse Theory, especially those that are limited to the sub-area in question, and we finish by focusing on their contributions to the establishment of new relationships between the researcher and the school, enabling what constitutes, as we will defend, the advancement of knowledge in Education research.

## **The production of knowledge in democratic school management in Brazil: aspects in evidence**

It is a common feature in productions within educational administration/management to acknowledge the production of knowledge based on two distinct theoretical foundations: one being managerial, grounded in the General Theory of Administration (predominant until the late 1970s), and the other critical, supported by Marxist concepts, starting at the end of the military dictatorships. Both groups of researchers have developed (or adapted) complex concepts from theories whose original authors did not specifically address schools. For example, the main proponents of School Administration theory in Brazil conceived administrative processes to enhance school effectiveness, drawing from Taylor and Fayol (Ribeiro, 1952), and/or they also considered School Administration in light of the transformation of capitalist society, influenced by Marx and Gramsci (Paro, 1986).

This observed fact has been discussed by various researchers who have pointed out the coexistence of these two paradigms (Russo, 2004; Souza, 2006). In this context, Silva Júnior (2002) alerted us to the need for researchers to return to the school environment and find elements for the theory of educational administration/management. From a similar perspective, Russo (2004), addressing the two paradigms mentioned, is in agreement with the second paradigm, emphasizing the importance of conducting studies within the school environment, emphasizing that

[...] the utopia of democratic school management remains on the horizon. This requires progressive educators to systematically reflect and build theoretical models that clearly indicate the path to follow for transformative education (Russo, 2004, p. 40).

However, other researchers have pointed out that, despite being shaped by different theoretical foundations, scholars from both paradigms maintain a similar research approach - that is, methodologically,

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<sup>1</sup> Terminology is still dear to us, so in this text, we chose to put it in two ways: the first indicates a sub-area of research in national (CAPES; CNPq) and state (FAPs) funding agencies, and the second allows us to communicate more similarly to our interlocutors, by alluding to their respective adjectives: democratic management and/or participatory management.

they act similarly - namely, establishing a prescriptive relationship between theory and practice, with theory dictating what practice should do (Abdian, Nascimento, & Silva, 2016). In the previously quoted passage, Russo (2004) illustrates our observation of theory prescribing practice by indicating democratic school management as the horizon, and above all, the need for theoretical models to be followed in school practice. In their doctoral thesis, Souza (2006), while conducting a survey, systematization, and analysis of research on school management, supports our evidence by arguing that theory, in most research, appears as an unfulfilled future.

Now, the theoretical shift and the methodological shift carried out by authors in School Administration, specifically the transition from business administration to democratic management and the researchers going into the field, compel us to understand how research in democratic school management was constructed, an area where we have collectively devoted our efforts since the beginning of the second decade of the 2000s in our research group (Abdian, 2018).

The research efforts of our group have been realized through two analytical perspectives: one epistemological, focused on the analysis of knowledge production and its limits and potentials, and the other focused on the analysis of the school, especially in its daily life, particularly regarding curriculum and management. These aspects are understood beyond the school's contents and the school principal, in the context of organizing work within the school. What unites our research and brings us together as researchers is a group of authors, primarily from Philosophy and Social Sciences (Sousa Santos, 1999; Gallo & Figueiredo, 2015), who question the foundations of modern critical theory and seek alternative frameworks for analyzing Education. In this text, we aim to analyze the contributions of Discourse Theory (Laclau & Mouffe, 2015), but for the reasons mentioned, we feel comfortable referring to authors aligned with our approach and research findings<sup>2</sup> in this section of the article.

One of our studies analyzed theses and dissertations published between the years 2005-2014, with the theme of democratic school management, and found that research in this field of knowledge bases its theoretical production on legislative discourse, which imposes itself as a model to be followed by schools. Most of the investigations examined begin the text by highlighting the importance of the Federal Constitution (Brazil, 1988) and the Law of Guidelines and Bases of Education (Brazil, 1996), as documents that establish democratic management as the ideal to be achieved by Brazilian public schools. In a way, in these researches, there is the presence of a hierarchy between legislation/democratic achievement (theory) and the reality of public schools (practice), as well as a blunt and accurate criticism of the school structure. It was possible to notice the repetition of research problems that circulate around the question of why the school does not experience democratic management, circulating the elements that prevent it, placing them in conservative theory or in capitalist society and government and in the practice of schools themselves, which reproduces both (Paro, 1986; Russo, 2004).

In a survey of articles published in periodicals in the strata between A1 and B2 (2005 to 2014), we also systematized and analyzed 23 articles and found that in all of them it is present, in a repetitive manner, in a hegemonized discourse, the "[...] association from democratic management to the execution of the Law (Brazil, 1996), to the implementation of school councils and the election of directors and to specific democratic politics" (Paredes, 2017, p. 51).

Another of our research projects conducted a survey, systematization, and analysis of books on democratic school management from the 1990s onwards, confirming the hypothesis that there would be a "[...] regime of truth in this field of knowledge that shapes the ways of producing, appropriating, and circulating true discourses[...]" (Carvalho, 2021, p. 17). Consequently, democratic management as something to be achieved by the school is constructed with rules of discursive formation that, in turn, shape the subjectivity of the researcher to act theoretically in one way and not another. Therefore, if democratic management has the status of an ideal, a horizon to be pursued by the school, the effects of its discursive practices are perceived as obstacles to the advancement of knowledge production. The hypotheses confirmed by these studies require us to "[...] stop seeing the government as something distant and external to us, and start seeing it up close in this activity we call research on democratic school management in Brazil" (Carvalho, 2021, p. 30).

Given that knowledge production in democratic school management is characterized by this model or state of power, which defines its research problems and imposes limits, how can we escape this situation? With the support of the authors who inform our work, we can argue that an escape is possible, given that a state of

<sup>2</sup> As the research cited later provides a detailed list of the texts analyzed, we will not worry about indicating tables with this information in this article, because we have limited space and the reader can find them online, in the theses and dissertations database from CAPES.

power does not exhaust the possibilities of difference. However, this escape is achieved through the coexistence of “[...] majority practices in education and minority expressions of education” (Gallo & Figueiredo, 2015, p. 26-28). We observe a mode of knowledge production in the survey, systematization, and analysis of research on democratic school management that becomes hegemonic. Still, we can also see that the prescriptive relationship between theory and practice requires other modes of action that deviate from the model of causality between legislation and the school. In this article, we aim to elucidate this possibility with the Discourse Theory (Laclau & Mouffe, 2015).

Anticipating the perspective of Discourse Theory<sup>3</sup> that we will discuss in the next section, we can state that since the late 1970s, a group of researchers began to question the knowledge that had been produced up to that point, wondering if it was truly the meaning of School Administration they desired. They shared the belief that the school is not a business and, therefore, its administration should not be based on a capitalist bias. In response to this, they demanded a management approach that took into account the specificity of the school and promoted democratic and participatory processes in appointing management positions. In doing so, they established ‘chains of equivalences’ that led to a different form of knowledge production in this subfield. They also ‘hegemonized another sense’ of School Administration, - known as school management - and demarcated the means to achieve it, democratically (Paro, 1995; Russo, 2004; Vieira, 2007).

However, knowing that what becomes hegemonic does not become fixed, we understand that an alternative to studying knowledge production in educational administration/management is to focus on the demands’ that escape from what is hegemonized. This approach allows us to glimpse other ‘articulations’ that occur in new chains of equivalences, and how this challenges a different meaning of educational administration/management. This is what we propose to do in this text: we seek to align ourselves with post-structuralist theorists who aim to establish other theoretical-methodological horizons that enable us to move away from the centrality of theory, the fixation of an identity for democracy (such as that of the Law of Guidelines and Bases of Education), and normativity as the potency of theory. We believe that such insubordination within the Human Sciences, in our case Education, can allow us to be critical of critical theory and of ourselves (Sousa Santos, 1999).

Next, we present the Discourse Theory and how we have appropriated its foundations to answer the initial question posed in the Introduction.

## Discourse theory: epistemological basis and integral concepts

By taking a critical stance in relation to Marxist theory, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (2015)<sup>4</sup> are supported by a post-structuralist epistemological matrix, which is constituted with the recognition of structuralism and the deconstruction of some of its postulates.

From a structuralist perspective, the structure is understood as something totalizing, and, individually, the elements do not produce meaning. Its understanding presupposes the consideration of the interdependence that it causes between the elements that constitute it, which only make sense if analyzed based on the relationship between them. The structuralist model seeks to understand not the most apparent relationships of a given structure, but what is hidden behind it and which underlies it (Mendonça & Rodrigues, 2014a).

In the mid-1960s, led by its pioneer and main representative, Jacques Derrida, and with the aim of eliminating the certainties and formalism present in structuralism, a project of deconstruction and defoundation emerged in the social sciences – post-foundationalism – which posits that ‘what is can potentially not be’ (Mendonça & Rodrigues, 2014a). While structuralism centers on seeking the essential relationships of the structure, post-structuralism is concerned with critiquing the essence of the structure. It is pertinent to note, however, that post-structuralism is not characterized by reflecting beyond the structure, but rather by questioning the essentialist approach to it. According to Derrida (2002), the most relevant issue with structuralism is the illusion that the structure has a center; thus, the fundamental critique pertains to the conception of the function attributed to the center, presenting it as a transcendent structural foundation.

Within the realm of post-structuralist epistemology, rejecting essentialism of class for the analysis of the social, we find two scholars from the field of Political Science: the Argentine Ernesto Laclau and the Belgian Chantal Mouffe. They, through their observation and experience in social movements, struggles against

<sup>3</sup> We decided to finalize this section of the text, taking turns between theory and practice, in order to be coherent with our theoretical-methodological approach since we are no longer able to interpret the history of knowledge with the same eyes that we had before delving deeper into the study of the authors mentioned.

<sup>4</sup> Originally, the work was published for the first time in English, and, in 2015, the Brazilian edition was launched after 30 years, which featured translations by Joanildo Burity, Josias de Paula Júnior and Aécio Amaral, in addition to a presentation by Alice Casimiro Lopes, Daniel de Mendonça and Joanildo Burity (Laclau & Mouffe, 2015).

totalitarian regimes, and demands for progressive political projects, began to doubt the centrality of “[...] a privileged subject with a pre-established direction for social change” (Lopes & Mendonça, 2015b, p. 9). In other words, Laclau and Mouffe (2015) argue that the role of social transformation assigned to a class, understood as one formed by self-conscious and self-aware subjects, ultimately generates a unique rationality capable of nullifying any and all differences or divergent thinking. Consequently, the authors construct the Discourse Theory with an innovative conceptual framework, questioning materialism, objectivism, and determinism, and challenging the possibility of fully unveiling reality to the point of truly knowing it.

Highlighting the limitations of Marxist theory, the authors propose a decentered view of the world, or rather, they acknowledge the contingency of centralities in the analysis of the social realm, recognizing that infinite variables can serve as centers for the evaluation of events. With this in mind, Laclau and Mouffe (2015) understand the subject as a social actor/agent, as subjectivity constructed in relation to the meanings of actions they establish with other actors, other subjectivities, thus denying a fixed identity for the subject and also teleology.

With flexible theoretical boundaries that encompass various scientific fields such as linguistics, psychoanalysis, sociology, and philosophy, Discourse Theory suggests that the analysis stemming from the capture and examination of the social should not result in an end in itself, something absolute and truly indisputable. It also rejects the intention for this analysis to project a future for things, relationships, and identities, as proposed by Marxist teleology<sup>5</sup>. The stance suggested by Laclau and Mouffe (2015) is the analysis of the social and its demands, which are multiple, allowing the researcher to value the plurality of social movements and subjectivities that are constituted through discourse.<sup>6</sup>

Just as we will discuss later, when we state this, we do not imply that Discourse Theory does not produce fixations. It certainly does! Especially because, as a way of analyzing the social, it also theorizes it, and at this moment, anchoring is essential, a temporary closure of the moments that are captured and having their elements articulated. However, it is the transitory nature of fixations that allows us to glimpse that there will always be an excess of meanings, a constant deferral of significations, an endless number of possibilities of articulations involved (Mendonça & Rodrigues, 2014a). For this reason, it produces fixations, but its potential lies in the void of normativity (Lopes, 2015).

This arises from the understanding of the social as discourse, as the practice of meaning-making actions – and not as writing or speech. The interest is not in the word and its meaning, which is typically pre-established and known. The focus is on action and, consequently, the sense forged there. Social actors, living and interacting with each other, act based on their own demands, interests, which, despite being particular, can be similar. When common demands are articulated in chains of equivalences that manage to establish a nodal point, meanings occur, and hegemonized senses emerge. What was initially particular takes on the shape of the universal. Therefore, articulation is the logic of difference being transformed into the logic of equivalence.

However, not all demands can articulate themselves within that chain of equivalences that was strong enough to hegemonize a sense; in this way – and because they do not cease to exist – they try to connect with other particular/individual demands, with the purpose of constituting new chains of equivalences and thus confront what is hegemonic. This is why the social does not possess a finalistic meaning. What is hegemonic is not fixed, it is part of a discursive structure, and it is merely a condition occupied by precarious articulations, which constantly and infinitely contest meaning and, consequently, power. From this, it is also possible to infer that the existence of subjectivity necessarily depends on the other. The full and unique construction of subjectivity is impossible because externality, that which is different, continually constitutes it. In this theoretical-methodological sense of Discourse Theory, we conceive subjectivity as the ongoing construction of the subject, which presents not just one identity but multiple identities, fixed as demands in certain social contexts and open to analysis by the researcher. Subjectivity is the subject under construction in the discursive social sphere (Laclau & Mouffe, 2015).

Therefore, we can say that discourse is the totality structured by an articulatory practice that rejects the difference between discursive and non-discursive practices because it considers that every object is

<sup>5</sup> In Marx (1985), teleology is exemplified in a passage in which he compares the weaver man to the spider, indicating that the intentionality he puts into his work is characteristic/natural of the former: “A spider performs operations similar to those of the weaver, and the bee surpasses more than one architect when building his hive. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best bee is that he figures his construction in his mind before ideally in the worker’s imagination. He doesn’t just transform the material he operates on; He imprints on the material the project he consciously had in mind, which constitutes the determining law of his way of operating and to which he has to subordinate his will.” (Marx, 1985, p. 149-150).

<sup>6</sup> Some research in Education uses this theoretical-methodological framework for empirical analysis in schools. In the field of curriculum, as an example, we cite Cunha (2019), and, in the area of management, we highlight Marques (2011).

established as an object of discourse and does not exist outside a discursive condition. In this sense, they abandon the opposition between thought/reality and admit the limitation of all discursive practices, since they are constantly destabilized by contingencies.

Due to this way of viewing the social as a precarious and contingent discursive practice, Laclau and Mouffe (2015) point to their understanding of democracy: radical and plural democracy. The radicality lies in the impossibility of fixing a final meaning arising from the plurality of articulations vying for hegemonic status.

The principle of plurality, in the radical conception of democracy by Laclau and Mouffe (2015), does not mean that everything is possible and admissible in the social realm. Plurality does not prevent fixations from occurring, as the issue is not with fixations themselves, but rather the inflexibility of what is fixable. In this perspective, the authors do not believe that in a radical and plural democracy, it is acceptable for those who seek to exclude the existence of others, in other words, to transform the adversary, the antagonist, into an enemy who must be annihilated and overthrown.

“It is not within our reach to eliminate conflicts and free ourselves from our human condition, but it is within our reach to create the practices, discourses, and institutions that would allow these conflicts to take on an agonistic form” (Mouffe, 2015, p. 130). Therefore, understanding that we live in a radical and plural democracy is to recognize that the social is plural “[...] and its possibility emanates directly from the decentered nature of social agents, the discursive plurality that constitutes them as subjects, and the shifts that occur within this plurality” (Laclau & Mouffe, 2015, p. 269). This realization by the authors can be seen in the plurality of movements and subjectivities that make up the social and do not reduce it to the economic struggle over class identity (bourgeoisie and proletariat). Among these, some have been analyzed by different Brazilian researchers: feminist, Black, and LGBTQIA+ movements (Facchini, Carmo, & Lima, 2020); anti-asylum movements (Lüchmann & Rodrigues, 2007); movements of workers from recovered factories, agroecology, and housing (Novaes, 2010); etc.

This understanding of democracy also emerges consistently from post-structuralist discussions. According to Derrida (2002), the concept can have various meanings. According to this author, the meaning of democracy is marked by a constitutive fault. In other words, due to the impossibility of reaching the meaning of democracy, the consequence is the endless attempt to fill the gap through the contingent filling of partial meanings, which makes it impossible to grasp democracy in its entirety. This also explains the fact that democracy has been founded and refounded by different theoretical and practical perspectives at different historical moments.

In the educational context and with this group of authors, we understand democracy as something non-totalitarian. Making a conceptual shift, we can bring to studies in Education the idea that the school cannot have a center that totalizes it, as being, specifically and essentially, democratic (and not authoritarian), even if we analyze it from the perspective of specificity of the school/democratic management, because the cases of a founding myth, in a society (here, we understand the ‘myth’ of the school being, essentially, democratic),

[...] are examples of attempts to attribute immobile centers and which, not infrequently, are taken as ultimate truths, completely disregarding other configurations that could be possible, but which, as a matter of decision (always taken on an undecidable terrain, i.e., in which other decisions could have taken place), were set aside. In this sense, a certain myth governs a given society, because another does not govern it (Mendonça & Rodrigues, 2014a, p. 41).

If we were to understand democracy in terms of a single meaning - that of legislation - we would take the risk of conceiving it as an order rather than a right. And like any order, it assumes a univocal character, without accepting plurality (Mouffe, 2003). In contrast, the Discourse Theory is introduced, in which society does not have a finalistic meaning. Thus, the possibilities of meaning in society are infinite, permeated by precarious and contingent relations, bringing the notion of non-fulfillment: “[...] society as an object of full knowledge is impossible, since social meanings are always poorly closed and incomplete” (Mendonça & Rodrigues, 2014b, p. 50). Another possible shift in thinking about education is that the school is one of the possible - but not the only - institutions for plural and endless practices of democracy and the constitution of subjects, which, through constant and dynamic conflictual movements and relationships, can build hegemony around achievements for social justice (Mouffe, 2015).

Next, we will analyze how the Discourse Theory has been appropriated and used in research in Education in Brazil, especially those with the theme of democratic school management.

## Discourse theory and research in school management in Brazil

We found in the Discourse Theory an unconventional path to construct our research, as it resonates with questions we have been asking for several years, not only about the production of knowledge in democratic school management but also about how we perceive the constitution of subjectivities and their relationships. Thus, since 2015, other works by Laclau (1978, 2011, 2018) and Mouffe (2005, 2015, 2019) have been on the schedule of study of our research group and have provided the foundation for our analyses. In parallel, works by other researchers have helped us in our theoretical deepening, particularly in expanding the debate on the Discourse Theory and the Argentine writer in Brazilian territory. In particular, Joanildo Burity, Daniel de Mendonça, Léo Peixoto Rodrigues, and Alice Casimiro Lopes, from different universities and research groups but with joint publications (Lopes & Mendonça, 2015a), have significantly contributed to the dissemination of this theoretical-methodological approach in research in Political Science and Education, especially in the Curriculum subfield and curriculum policies. This observation was made based on our impressions, our captures of the social, in the face of what we see, read, and participate in – and we are sure that our methodological insubordination is not an impediment, as Discourse Theory allows us to be that way.

Therefore, the efforts of the aforementioned authors to publish Brazilian versions of Ernesto Laclau's books, as well as the close contact with him (even when he was alive) and his visits to Brazil to teach courses and participate in events, have led to Discourse Theory being discussed in Political Science, Sociology, Anthropology, History, International Relations, Philosophy, Education, Arts, and many other areas, creating a very different scenario from the one described by Lopes, Mendonça, and Burity in the presentation of the Brazilian version of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* after the publication of the first English version: “[...] Brazil was not one of those spaces of reception and debate [...]. Not ignorance. Silence. A deliberate choice to disengage from debating with the perspective” (Laclau & Mouffe, 2015, p. 8). In contrast, currently, we see that the Discourse Theory has flourished and, due to its sophistication in conceptual constructions, is gaining more and more adherents.

Beyond this impression based on our research practice and experience with our peers, we also conducted a systematic search of articles, dissertations, and theses published and available on official search websites (SciELO and CAPES Theses and Dissertations Database) using the keywords ‘Teoria do Discurso’ [Discourse Theory], ‘Ernesto Laclau e Chantal Mouffe’, focusing on research in the field of Education. We did not limit the search timeframe to identify, systematize, and analyze the integration of this theoretical-methodological framework in Brazil.

We found 33 articles, 13 dissertations, and 16 theses, totaling 62 productions. Of these, three articles, two dissertations, and one thesis are related to educational administration and management.

Two of the articles and the thesis were produced in the research group “Qualidade da educação: sentidos e práticas na gestão escolar” (Quality of Education: Meanings and Practices in School Management) at the Federal University of Pernambuco (UFPE). The articles were authored by Luciana Rosa Marques, Iágrici Maria de Lima Maranhão, and Juliana Camila Barbosa Mendes (Marques, Maranhão, & Mendes, 2019), published in the *Revista Brasileira de Política e Administração da Educação* (Brazilian Journal of Education Policy and Administration), and by Marques (2020), published in *Educar em Revista* (Educate in Review). The thesis, by one of the authors of the first article (Mendes, 2019), was defended in the Graduate Program in Education at UFPE, under the supervision of Luciana Rosa Marques. Another article resulted from the research conducted by Letícia Brittes (2013) at the Federal University of Pelotas (UFPEL), supervised by Álvaro Moreira Hypolito, and was published in the *Exitus Journal* of the Federal University of Western Pará (UFOPA). The two dissertations were developed at the Center for Studies and Research in Educational Administration, as part of the Graduate Program in Education at São Paulo State University in Marília-SP (UNESP/Marília), under the guidance of Graziela Abdian.

In the first article, Brittes (2013) aimed to understand the emergence of democratic management in the public education system in Brazil and its implications for teaching practices, through possible semantic shifts. She sought to understand how Discourse Theory (Laclau & Mouffe, 2015) would contribute to the analysis of democratic management proposals. The author provisionally concluded that while democratic management constitutes an attempt at normativity within public schools, teachers must build counter-hegemonic spaces as they develop investigative practices regarding discursive rules and curriculum structures, embracing a radical democratic practice.



Marques et al. (2019) focus on the reform of the public sector with a business-oriented approach in education, emphasizing the quality of education. They conducted their research through an analysis of documents and interviews with state-level education managers in Pernambuco. Their aim was to understand the prevailing sense of quality and how it regulates the parameters of performance, efficiency, and effectiveness in public services within the school bureaucracy. In the end, the authors show that business-related elements such as goal and results-oriented management, competitiveness, and curriculum standardization are materializing in education policies. These policies have extended the idea that educational quality is achieved through setting goals based on business-related elements and the results achieved in relation to these goals. The problem is that these goals and results do not align with the discourse promoting student retention, popular participation, social inclusion, and citizenship. By using Laclau and Mouffe's concept of the floating signifier, the authors emphasize that New Public Management can maintain the movement of different processes of signification concealed by a practice different from what it preaches. It succeeds in being adopted not by solving educational problems, but by creating a perception that it could.

Marques (2020) also addresses New Public Management and its articulation of goals, results, and large-scale assessments in the field of education, specifically in the state of Goiás. Using interviews with school administrators (from schools with high and low Educational Development Index), unions, and the analysis of government documents, the author concludes, drawing on Discourse Theory, that New Public Management constitutes a nodal point. It coexists with discourses of democratic management, which are obviously contradictory to it, among the social actors involved in the analysis. Therefore, although it is hegemonic, it is not the only perspective.

Mendes' thesis (2019) aims to establish a relationship between responsibility, accountability, and social quality, with a focus on evaluation as an indispensable factor for educational quality in the State of Pernambuco's Education Secretariat. Using the Discourse Theory, a post-colonial perspective from Bhabha, and Ball's policy networks, the author analyzed how the mentioned relationships developed discursively and what demands were articulated for them between 2006 and 2018. This approach allowed the author to conclude that the signifiers of modernization and accountability were associated as natural values to be pursued, through the articulation of accountability and social quality.

Rosa's dissertation (2020) uses the Discourse Theory as a theoretical and methodological framework to analyze Saviani's work, investigating the proposed management of Historical-Critical Pedagogy. According to the author, the theoretical-methodological framework helped her understand how the idea of overcoming the class struggle and social transformation, contained at the heart of Historical-Critical Pedagogy, if achieved, would not suppress social contradictions, precisely because it needs to substantiate the a priori identity to be followed by each social agent, as the school faithfully reproduces its contents and assumptions. She also showed that only the premises of Historical-Critical Pedagogy are the most important thing in this relationship.

Carvalho (2020) sought to carry out, under the support of Discourse Theory and semi-structured interviews with leaders, directors, students, teachers and employees of two state public schools in São Paulo engaged in opposition to school reorganization, between 2015 and 2016, an analysis of discursive practices about politics and democratic management. In the speeches of school members, several counter-hegemonic indications appeared in relation to the proposed school reorganization, as they redefined the meanings of politics and democratic management, in their moments of equivalence and articulation.

From the survey and systematization of production, we can highlight some important elements. The first is that there are few works in educational administration/management developed from the perspective defended here, as being powerful for the production of knowledge, and such works were concentrated in Pernambuco (federal university) and São Paulo (state university). Regarding the analysis carried out with the reference, we can identify that all works adopt Discourse Theory to question the way in which school policy and management, in a certain way, are in line with a production of normativity, in order to regulate a way of hegemonic management, to the detriment of other modalities and meanings of democratic management, in public schools. The authors use the concepts as a methodology that could work on these issues differently and question the hegemonic way of thinking about schools: the theory of democratic management guides public policies and, together with them, establishes the principles and assumptions that schools and school actors must follow, to achieve a certain type of quality, even though there are other ways of thinking and feeling about school challenges, in the school quotidian. In this sense, we can ensure that the prescription relationship between theory and practice present in previous studies predominates and the reinforcement of

normativity on the school. Well, after all this journey, how can we think about the contributions of Discourse Theory to research on democratic school management?

## Final considerations

We have shown that, both internationally and nationally, there has been a change in the research agenda in Education, mainly occurring in the mid-1990s. The school became a potent meso-level for understanding educational problems and better future perspectives, under different theoretical and methodological frameworks in research.

In educational administration/management, researchers acknowledge the importance of studying the school and being within the school to understand its practices and institutional aspects (Silva Júnior & Ferretti, 2004), its everyday life within the school (Paro, 1995), and, above all, to develop a theory of democratic management capable of transforming the school in response to societal changes (Russo, 2004). As demonstrated by other authors mentioned throughout our discussion, research in this field represents a way of producing knowledge that tends to hierarchize and separate theory from practice: politics from management, the everyday from the non-everyday. Although there has been a shift from a business-oriented perspective to a democratic one, methodologically embracing the study of the school, we, as authors, have not ceased to exert a normativity over the school and its pedagogical practices. This is precisely where we introduce the potential for displacement that the Discourse Theory can offer us: with its epistemological foundations and its understanding of discourse as a precarious totality in constant movement, it can contribute to a new way for researchers to engage with the field or the school.

By considering linguistic practice inseparable from extralinguistic practice and understanding discourse as an articulatory practice, we advance in the sense that we do not analytically limit ourselves to the comprehension of written content for the analysis of democratic school management. It is possible to consider that when we talk about democratic management, elements are left out, aspects are not articulated, and there is always a new way of being and thinking that is not being considered in discourse. In this way, we avoid essentialist discourses that preach universal and generalizing truths, which become independent of contexts and contingencies, and promise to reach a place where there are no differences. With the support of Discourse Theory, this is not possible, since democracy presupposes multiplicity and heterogeneity.

We want to emphasize that if the ephemeral nature of centralities fits within Discourse Theory, it allows us to look at the school and what happens within it differently, without indicating what does not comply with the normativities produced by legislation or research in Education. It invites us to explore and understand other negotiations that occur to compete for the meaning of something that may seemingly already have an established sense.

It is necessary to state that, with Laclau and Mouffe (2015), we are steadfast defenders of plural and radical democracy, and we have in Discourse Theory another possibility of understanding the school that is not hegemonic. We say this because they enable us to identify a hegemonic way of thinking, regardless of the theoretical reference (positivist or critical), that hierarchizes knowledge, politics, and the researcher. Allowing us to dialogue with Lopes (2015) at the end of the article, we can draw from one of her observations about Discourse Theory when applied to curriculum theories for democratic school management. She states that critical knowledge, by pointing out a path to follow – in our case, the notion of democracy that the school does not implement, that of the law – minimizes the democratic possibilities of management by “[...] attempting to establish [...] a realistic and objectivist epistemological foundation for policies [...]” and, therefore, does not open up “[...] possibilities to operate in the production of multiple and more democratic subjectivities [...]” (Lopes, 2015, p. 130).

The authors allow us to conclude that in schools, universities, and various governments, there is a simultaneous operation of conservative and democratic practices, which are constantly destabilized in search of meanings other than those currently in existence. Therefore, when we advocate that Discourse Theory is a potent theoretical and methodological framework for advancing research in educational administration/management, we do not insist on the idea that it must be the best theoretical basis and thus become perpetually hegemonic. This would go against the very framework we claim resonates with our inquiries. Thus, our understanding of advancement falls into the realm of coexistence, meaning that Discourse Theory exists alongside other theoretical and methodological frameworks that are already quite common in research in this subfield, conceived as another perspective capable of producing authentic knowledge.

We believe that the challenge is to foster dialogues and the proliferation of differences, reactivating as yet nonexistent possibilities, as our role is not to dictate how schools or research should be in the future but to expand the opportunities for constructing meanings and new hegemonies.

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