

DEMOCRATIC AND PARTICIPATORY MANAGEMENT IN BRAZILIAN PUBLIC SCHOOLS: THE SUCCESSFUL CASE OF SOBRAL

GESTÃO DEMOCRÁTICA E PARTICIPATIVA NAS ESCOLAS PÚBLICAS BRASILEIRAS: O EXITOSO CASO DE SOBRAL

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Abstract: This article aims to discuss the importance of democratic and participatory management in public schools, demonstrating how possible this experience can be, as it is in Sobral, a city in Ceará County. In a country that has recently gone through a gradual and, finally, acute process of complete obscurantism due to retrograde governments in every sense, and, with special emphasis, in Education, being in a progressive government as we currently are, opens up space for us to give new meaning to rigid teaching concepts that had tied us to a past without much progress in this area. With a school model that emphasizes the dialogue between teaching and society, achieving excellence becomes easier. To support the assumptions we bring here, we are based on some Education theorists, such as Freire (2000), Lück *et al.* (2007), Paro (2010; 2005) and Valerien (1993). We conclude that in light of what is happening in Sobral City, it is fully possible to have schools whose democratic and participatory management points to greater advances in pedagogical and social terms.

Keywords: Education; Democratic and Participatory School Management; Excellence in Education in Sobral.

Resumo: O presente artigo tem por objetivo debater a importância da gestão democrática e participativa na escola pública, demonstrando como essa experiência é possível, tal como o é no município cearense de Sobral. Em um país que passou recentemente por um processo gradual e, por fim, agudo de completo obscurantismo devido a governos retrógrados em todos os sentidos, e, com especial ênfase, na Educação, estar em um governo progressista como atualmente nos encontramos, nos abre espaço para ressignificar conceitos engessados de ensino e que nos prendiam a um passado sem muitos avanços nessa seara. Com um modelo de escola que prima pelo diálogo entre o ensino e a sociedade, alcançar a excelência torna-se mais fácil. Para fundamentar os pressupostos que aqui trazemos, baseamo-nos em alguns teóricos da Educação, como Freire (2000), Lück *et al.* (2007), Paro (2010; 2005) e Valerien (1993). Concluímos que à luz do que acontece em Sobral, é plenamente possível termos escolas cuja gestão democrática e participativa aponte para maiores avanços em termos pedagógicos e sociais.

Palavras-chave: Educação; Gestão Escolar Democrática e Participativa; Excelência da Educação em Sobral.



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INITIAL CONSIDERATIONS

This essay summarizes the considerations of three educators who have worked in the field of Education for decades. Thus, we have observed, across a broad spectrum, how democracy, combined with the opening of school management to the participation of all members of the community, raises the quality of education and reflects this success in the increase in student participation rates and in the motivation of both students and teachers. A successful case that exemplifies this dynamic very well is the award-winning Education in Sobral, a city in Ceará, where two of the three authors gathered here come from.

Therefore, in the following sections, we will analyze democratic school management and then explain how feasible it is, showing, then, how excellent Education is achieved in the city of Sobral.

1 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1.1 Democratic Management at Public Schools: A Concept of Quality in Education

Given the need to understand Brazilian society at the present time and the emerging relevance of building participatory management in schools that involves the entire school community and the community surrounding it outside the school walls, it is necessary to reflect on what really contributes to democratic management in Brazilian schools, as well as the main challenges of implementing this type of management.

The objective of this essay is to analyze the alternatives and challenges for managers in implementing democratic management in schools. Thus, the research we develop here is bibliographic in nature (based on materials published in books, articles, dissertations and theses on the subject); its approach is, therefore, qualitative, and its objective is its basic and exploratory nature.

When we talk about “school”, the qualification of “democratic” seems obvious, since we are in a country with a democratic regime enshrined by law. However, Paro (2010, p. 106) states: “It is impossible to ensure the democratization of schools without providing favorable political and institutional conditions for school units⁴”. In this context, we can infer that institutional conditions are relevant points to be considered.

As it is a constant process of dialogue and participation among all those involved in the school community (teachers, students, parents, employees and representatives of civil society),

⁴ “É impossível assegurar a democratização das escolas sem proporcionar condições políticas e institucionais favoráveis às unidades escolares” (Paro, 2010, p. 106, tradução nossa).

for democratic management to be effective, school managers must be open to dialogue and willing to listen to the demands and suggestions of the school community within and outside the school walls.

For Lück *et al.* (2007, p. 17), “[...] it is worth noting that understanding the concept of management already presupposes, in itself, the idea of participation, that is, the joint work of people analyzing situations, deciding on their course of action and acting on them together⁵”. We also find in Valerien (1993, p. 74) that “[...] there are numerous incentives given to the principal so that he himself and his school are the privileged actors in the process of change, in educational innovation and in community development⁶”.

According to the *Novo Aurélio Século XXI: o dicionário da língua portuguesa* (1999, p. 985), the word “management” comes from the Latin word *gestione* and refers to the act of managing, administering and administering. And the word “democracy” has its origin in the Greek word *democratia* and means “[...] government of the people, popular sovereignty, political regime based on the principles of popular sovereignty⁷”. We can observe that together, these two concepts evidence a third for school management, which was determined by *Lei nº 9394/96 (Lei de Diretrizes e Bases da Educação Nacional – LDB)* in accordance with the constitutional principles of 1988. In this sense, LDB/96, p. 4 establishes, in Portuguese:

Art. 14. Os sistemas de ensino definirão as normas da gestão democrática de ensino público na educação básica, de acordo com as suas peculiaridades e conforme os seguintes princípios:

I – participação dos profissionais da educação na elaboração do projeto pedagógico da escola;

II – participação das comunidades escolar e local em conselhos escolares ou equivalentes.

Art. 15. Os sistemas de ensino assegurarão às unidades públicas de educação básica que os integram progressivos graus de autonomia pedagógica e administrativa e de gestão financeira, observadas as normas gerais de direito financeiro público⁸.

⁵ “[...] destaca-se que o entendimento do conceito de gestão já pressupõe, em si, a ideia de participação, isto é, do trabalho associado de pessoas analisando situações, decidindo sobre seu encaminhamento e agindo sobre elas, em conjunto” (Lück *et al.*, 2007, p. 17, tradução nossa).

⁶ “[...] são numerosos os incentivos dados ao diretor para que ele mesmo e sua escola sejam os atores privilegiados no processo de mudança, na inovação educativa e no desenvolvimento comunitário” (Valerien, 1993, p. 74, tradução nossa).

⁷ “[...] governo do povo, soberania popular, regime político baseado nos princípios da soberania popular” *Dicionário da Língua Portuguesa Novo Aurélio – Século XXI* (1999, p. 985, tradução nossa).

⁸ Art. 14. The education systems shall define the standards for the democratic management of public education in basic education, in accordance with their specific characteristics and in accordance with the following principles:

I – participation of education professionals in the preparation of the school’s pedagogical project;

II – participation of school and local communities in school councils or equivalent.

Art. 15. The education systems shall ensure that the public basic education units that comprise them have progressive degrees of pedagogical and administrative autonomy and financial management, in compliance with the general standards of public financial law” (LDB/96, p. 4).

Since the implementation of this law, some advances have been made, as it prioritizes autonomy for the implementation of democratic management in schools. However, even though it is provided for by law, the decentralization of power through democratic management still needs to evolve significantly to be truly implemented. Contributing to this understanding, Freire (2000, p. 48) states that he does not believe “[...] in a purely formal democracy that ‘washes its hands’ of the relationship between those who can and those who cannot because it has already been said that ‘everyone is equal before the law’”. More than saying or writing this, it is necessary to do this⁹.

In the context of schools in Brazil, democracy should be the starting point for an administration focused on quality education, with the autonomy of those responsible for management as a model, and for them to do so consciously and effectively. Always seeking to manage, not only establishing the guarantee of rights, but overcoming this vision and going further, always seeking to reduce the inequalities experienced in the country and also in schools, this will be possible or mitigated with the participation of all those involved in the educational process, as stated by Lück *et al.* (2007, p. 36):

In general terms, the logic of management is guided by democratic principles and is characterized by the recognition of the importance of the conscious and informed participation of people in decisions about the orientation, organization and planning of their work and the articulation of the various dimensions and developments of its implementation process¹⁰.

As Lück *et al.* (*ibidem*) also show, the need for changes forced by globalization and a new vision of the labor market establishes new forms of administration. There is no longer room for the centralization of power. Seeking collective work is necessary; a new concept emerges. Democratic management has two aspects as its principles: autonomy and participation – which still seem to be lacking in the appropriation of these concepts in the school context. Regarding this, Paro (2005, p. 16) states that:

Accepting that democratic management must necessarily involve community participation, there still seems to be a lack of greater precision in the concept of participation. In this regard, when I use this term, I am concerned, ultimately, with participation in decision-making. This does not, of course, eliminate participation in execution; but it also does not consider it as an end

⁹ “[...] na democracia puramente formal que ‘lava as mãos’ em face das relações entre quem pode e quem não pode porque já foi dito que ‘todos são iguais perante a lei’. Mais do que dizer ou escrever isto, é preciso fazer isto” (Freire, 2000, p. 48, tradução nossa).

¹⁰ Em linhas gerais, a lógica da gestão é orientada pelos princípios democráticos e é caracterizada pelo reconhecimento da importância da participação consciente e esclarecida das pessoas nas decisões sobre a orientação, organização e planejamento de seu trabalho e articulação das várias dimensões e dos vários desdobramentos de seu processo de implementação” (Lück *et al.*, 2007, p. 36, tradução nossa).

but rather as a means, when necessary, to participation itself, which is the sharing of power, participation in decision-making. It is important to always bear this aspect in mind so that participation in execution is not taken as an end in itself, either as a substitute for participation in decision-making or as a way of concealing the absence of the latter in the process¹¹.

Based on these studies, we can see that the great challenge of democratic management in schools today in Brazil is to ensure that the school community, through its representatives, is involved in this process of helping to manage it in a truly participatory and responsible manner, seeking to improve the quality of education and the improvement of students. Believing that it is possible, and more than that, working in a collective and organized manner, seeking to raise awareness among those involved in the democratization process, will certainly make this change happen. This is what is happening in Sobral, a city in Ceará.

2 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

2.1 Democratic and Participatory Management in the Public-School Environment of Sobral

By way of illustration, we will briefly present here an example of participatory management, based on democratic foundations, which is the emblematic case of **EXCELLENCE** of the education in Sobral. This prosperous city is the leader in formal employment contracts in the interior of the state and, among all the municipalities. It is also the only one that competes with the capital city, Fortaleza, for leadership in terms of exports. All the others are below it in this regard, with Sobral being the fifth largest economy in Ceará – and it is both the largest university center and the largest health center in the hinterland.

Sobral is 230 km away from Fortaleza and it breathes culture and has a present and a past that are important to the history of the state. It became known for having been the place where Einstein's Theory of General Relativity was proven – on May 29, 1919 –, and was named three times by the foreign investment guide published by the British newspaper group Financial Times as one of the 10 cities of the future in America – the only one in Brazil with this potential.

In short,

¹¹ “Aceitando-se que a gestão democrática deve implicar necessariamente a participação da comunidade, parece faltar ainda uma maior precisão no conceito de participação. A esse respeito, quando uso esse termo, estou preocupado, no limite, com a participação nas decisões. Isto não elimina, obviamente, a participação na execução; mas também não a tem como fim e sim como meio, quando necessário, para a participação propriamente dita, que é a partilha do poder, a participação na tomada de decisões. É importante ter sempre presente este aspecto para que não se tome a participação na execução como fim em si mesmo, quer como sucedâneo da participação nas decisões, quer como maneira de escamotear a ausência desta última no processo” (Paro, 2005, p. 16, tradução nossa).

Sobral is the number 1 city in the country in a ranking that measures the educational opportunities offered to all children and young people in Brazilian municipalities, in terms of access to basic education. This is the fourth time in a row that the municipality of Ceará has occupied this position. The repetition of results draws attention, as do other cities that follow it – this year, the municipality of Cruz is tied for 1st place. Among the top positions in the Brazilian Education Opportunities Index (IOEB), the first nine¹² are occupied by cities in the state. Counting the first 20 places, Ceará occupies 18 positions – the ranking was prepared by evaluating 5,126 municipalities in Brazil. [...] The municipality achieved the following scores in the IDEB in recent years (the results are released every two years): 6.1 in 2015; 6.2 in 2017; 6.6 in 2019 and; 6.7 in 2021¹³.

In the newspaper *Diário do Nordeste*, the then Secretary of Education of Sobral, Dr. Herbert Lima, said¹⁴:

This result is a source of great honor for all of us. At the same time, it is a source of great responsibility. It is the continuation of work that has been going on for two and a half decades. Since 1997, Sobral has been making profound reforms to its educational policy, which have helped the city overcome challenges. [...] We have created mechanisms so that, when teachers arrive in the classroom, they have the means to offer a high-quality class.

¹² In a territorial division dating from 1988, the municipality is made up of 10 districts: Sobral, Aracatiçu, Bonfim, Caioca, Caracará, Jaibaras, Jordão, Ôlho D'Água, Patriarca and Taperuaba. By Municipal Law Number. 111, of 11/24/1989, the district of São José do Torto was created and annexed to the municipality of Sobral. // *Em divisão territorial datada de 1988, o município é constituído por 10 distritos: Sobral, Aracatiçu, Bonfim, Caioca, Caracará, Jaibaras, Jordão, Ôlho D'Água, Patriarca e Taperuaba. Pela Lei Municipal n.º 111, de 24-11-1989, é criado o distrito de São José do Torto e anexado ao município de Sobral.*

(Disponível em: <https://biblioteca.ibge.gov.br/biblioteca-catalogo?id=3537&view=detalhes#:~:text=Em%20divis%C3%A3o%20territorial%20datada%20de%201988%20o%20munic%C3%ADpio%20%C3%A9%20constitu%C3%ADdo,anexado%20ao%20munic%C3%ADpio%20de%20Sobral>. Acesso em: 12 nov. 2024, tradução nossa).

¹³ Sobral é a cidade número 1 do País em um ranking que mede as oportunidades educacionais oferecidas para todas as crianças e jovens dos municípios brasileiros, em termos de acesso à educação básica. Esta é a quarta vez seguida em que o município cearense ocupa a colocação. A repetição de resultados chama atenção, assim como outras cidades que o acompanham – neste ano, o município de Cruz empata no 1º lugar. Dentre as primeiras colocações do Índice de Oportunidades da Educação Brasileira (IOEB), as nove primeiras são ocupadas por cidades do Estado. Contando-se os 20 primeiros lugares, o Ceará ocupa 18 posições – o ranking foi elaborado com a avaliação de 5.126 municípios do Brasil. [...] O município alcançou as seguintes notas no IDEB nos últimos anos (os resultados são divulgados a cada dois anos): 6,1 em 2015; 6,2 em 2017; 6,6 em 2019 e; 6,7 em 2021. (Tradução nossa). *Vide REDAÇÃO*. Por que Sobral é, pela quarta vez seguida, a cidade número 1 do Brasil em ranking de educação? **Diário do Nordeste**, 23 de outubro de 2021, 7h. Disponível em: <https://diariodonordeste.verdesmares.com.br/regiao/por-que-sobral-e-pela-quarta-vez-seguida-a-cidade-numero-1-do-brasil-em-ranking-de-educacao-1.3150823>. Acesso em: 8 jun. 2024.

¹⁴ É um motivo de muita honra para todos nós esse resultado. Ao mesmo tempo, é de muita responsabilidade. É a continuidade de um trabalho que tem duas décadas e meia. Desde 1997, Sobral tem feito reformas profundas na sua política educacional, que fizeram o município superar desafios. [...] Criamos mecanismos para que, ao chegar em sala, o professor tenha meios para oferecer uma aula de muita qualidade. (Tradução nossa). *Vide REDAÇÃO*. Por que Sobral é, pela quarta vez seguida, a cidade número 1 do Brasil em ranking de educação? **Diário do Nordeste**, 23 de outubro de 2021, 7h. Disponível em: <https://diariodonordeste.verdesmares.com.br/regiao/por-que-sobral-e-pela-quarta-vez-seguida-a-cidade-numero-1-do-brasil-em-ranking-de-educacao-1.3150823>. Acesso em: 8 jun. 2024.

Based on the words above, we affirm that the transformation of the educational system in Ceará began in Sobral, which has stood out as a successful example of the high quality of public education, serving as an inspiration and reference not only for Ceará, but also for Brazil.

Since the mid-2000s, Sobral has implemented a series of innovative and effective educational policies that have contributed significantly to raising the local quality indexes of Basic Education. Among the initiatives that helped drive this transformation, we can mention that Sobral prioritized the quality of education, investing in the ongoing training of teachers, in the valorization of the teaching career and in the application of efficient pedagogical practices.

It is worth mentioning that in addition to the city having implemented literacy programs such as the *Programa de Aprendizagem na Idade Certa* (MAISPAIC) – Learning at the Right Age Program –, there have been investments in improving the infrastructure of schools, providing suitable environments for the teaching and learning process. Thus, it is clear that the results achieved by students from Sobral in national assessments, such as the IDEB¹⁵, demonstrate the effectiveness of the educational policies applied and served as an incentive for the replication of these practices throughout the state of Ceará.

We highlight that in 2015, Sobral had an IDEB of 8.8 – a mark that consecrated it as the municipality with the best index of Ceará, of the Northeast Region, and of all Brazilian municipalities. Therefore, the number exceeded the average proposed by the MEC 2021, which was 6.1. By reaching 7.3 points in 2011, the city reduced the school dropout rate from the 1st to 5th grade of Elementary School to zero. The performance of municipal schools remained above the state average (4.9), and also the national average (5.0). Among the 47 schools in the municipal network of Sobral, 35 were evaluated by IDEB, with 34 appearing among the 100 best schools in the Northeast region and 9 of them among the 100 best ones in the country.

According to the *Centro de Liderança Pública* (Center for Public Leadership), some points stand out that make Sobral's Education a state and national reference due to: 1) use of literacy strategies, adopting the MAISPAIC program, which focuses on teaching children to read and write up to the age of 7, promoting quality education from the Early Years; 2) ongoing teacher training with training and pedagogical monitoring programs to ensure the improvement

¹⁵ The Basic Education Development Index (IDEB) was created in 2007 and combines, in a single indicator, the results of two concepts that are equally important for the quality of education: school flow and average performance in assessments. The IDEB is calculated based on data on school approval, obtained from the School Census, and average performance in the Basic Education Assessment System (Saeb). // *O Índice de Desenvolvimento da Educação Básica (IDEB) foi criado em 2007 e reúne, em um único indicador, os resultados de dois conceitos igualmente importantes para a qualidade da educação: fluxo escolar e desempenho médio nas avaliações. O IDEB é calculado com base em dados de aprovação escolar, obtidos no Censo Escolar, e desempenho médio no Sistema de Avaliação da Educação Básica (Saeb)* (Tradução nossa).

of teaching; 3) effective school management, with the implementation of efficient school management, focusing efforts on results and monitoring student performance, promoting school autonomy; 4) investment in improving school infrastructure, providing environments suitable for the teaching and learning process; and, consequently, 5) positive results, which were achieved by Sobral's students in national assessments such as IDEB.

Picture 1 – Sobral Has 9 of the 100 Best Public Schools in Brazil



Source: <https://www.sobral.ce.gov.br/informes/principais/sobral-possui-nove-escolas-entre-as-100-melhores-do-brasil-e-supera-medias-nacional-e-estadual-do-ideb-2021> (Nov. 10, 2024).

Picture 2 – The Public Schools in Districts of Sobral Among the Best 100 Public Schools in Brazil



Source: <https://www.sobral.ce.gov.br/informes/principais/sobral-possui-nove-escolas-entre-as-100-melhores-do-brasil-e-supera-medias-nacional-e-estadual-do-ideb-2021> (Nov. 10, 2024).

For these and other reasons, Sobral's educational experience has served as a model for other cities and states in Brazil that seek to improve the quality of Basic Education, especially public education. Just as it has been happening in Sobral, it can happen anywhere else, as long as we have progressive thinking to change our reality for the better, combined with feasible public policies and, strengthening the base of this tripod, we have motivated and prepared teachers and school managers to carry out their work well.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The school's mission is not an easy task; experiencing democratic management is a complex action that involves all social actors in the school community, requiring the constant presence of a space for speaking with quality listening and welcoming, where management is

open to welcoming and adapting its actions to the financial, human and bureaucratic needs of the institution, counting on critical subjects capable of exercising their citizenship, with perspectives of fulfilling their role in the society in which they live.

Democratic management is a participatory action in the school community, where everyone shares their roles and responsibilities, with the main objective being the success of the student as a literate and active citizen in their community, being a critical subject capable of understanding their role within their context and acting to achieve equity among their peers. It is worth noting that to be successful in democratic management it is not enough to simply be a manager elected by the community; it is necessary to act within a collective in a democratic way, creating spaces for community participation and providing conditions for structuring democratic actions.

This is a common practice in the education system of the city of Sobral and its, Ceará, which has become a national reference for excellence, putting the county in the spotlight for having some of the best schools in Brazil for several years. This achievement has been achieved through the commitment of the schools to maintain the quality of education, combined with dialogue between students and teachers, between teachers and management, and between management and the community.

“If education alone does not transform society, without it neither will society change¹⁶”.
(Paulo Freire¹⁷)

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¹⁶ “Se a educação sozinha não transforma a sociedade, sem ela tampouco a sociedade muda” (Paulo Freire – Tradução nossa).

¹⁷ FREIRE, P. **Pedagogia da Indignação: cartas pedagógicas e outros escritos**. 6. ed. São Paulo: Unesp, 2000.

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