

Democratic governance and school community participation: tensions between the normative framework and participatory implementation in Brazilian public schools¹

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Abstract

This article examines the tensions between the constitutional principle of democratic governance in public education and the actual conditions for school community participation in Brazilian basic education. It is based on the observation that, although democratic governance has been established as a constitutional principle since 1988 and has subsequently been regulated by the National Education Guidelines and Framework Law, the National Education Plan, and, more recently, by Law No. 14,644/2023, its translation into substantive participatory practices remains uneven and incomplete. The main objective is to examine, through a bibliographic and documentary review, the historical and conceptual foundations of democratic governance, the legal framework governing it, and the principal mechanisms for school community participation, engaging critically with the literature that discusses the tensions between the democratic-participatory paradigm and the managerial paradigm in public educational administration. This qualitative study, based on bibliographic and documentary research, draws upon classical authors in the field of educational governance as well as contemporary scholarly literature indexed in peer-reviewed journals. The findings indicate that the institutional establishment of school councils, student councils, and school principal selection processes is not, by itself, sufficient to ensure effective participation, which depends on power relations, institutional culture, and the political education of the school community. The study concludes that democratic governance remains a contested horizon, challenged by the managerial rationality increasingly embedded in contemporary educational policies.

Keywords: School councils; democratic governance; new public management; school participation; educational policy.

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Gestão democrática e participação da comunidade escolar: tensões entre o horizonte normativo e a efetivação participativa na escola pública brasileira

Resumo

O presente artigo analisa as tensões entre o princípio constitucional da gestão democrática do ensino público e as condições efetivas de participação da comunidade escolar na educação básica brasileira. Parte-se da constatação de que, embora a gestão democrática esteja consagrada desde 1988 como princípio normativo e tenha sido sucessivamente regulamentada pela Lei de Diretrizes e Bases da Educação Nacional, pelo Plano Nacional de Educação e, mais recentemente, pela Lei nº 14.644/2023, sua tradução em práticas participativas substantivas permanece desigual e incompleta. O objetivo geral consiste em examinar, a partir de revisão bibliográfica e documental, as bases histórico-conceituais da gestão democrática, o arcabouço legal que a disciplina e as principais instâncias de participação da comunidade escolar, em diálogo crítico com a literatura que problematiza a tensão entre o paradigma democrático-participativo e o paradigma gerencial na administração da educação pública. A pesquisa, de natureza qualitativa, bibliográfica e documental, sustenta-se em autores clássicos do campo da gestão educacional e em produção acadêmica contemporânea indexada em periódicos qualificados. Os resultados indicam que a formalização institucional de conselhos escolares, grêmios estudantis e processos de escolha de diretores não constitui condição suficiente para a participação efetiva, a qual depende de correlações de força, de cultura institucional e de formação política da comunidade escolar. Conclui-se que a gestão democrática permanece um horizonte em disputa, tensionado pela racionalidade gerencial que se infiltra nas políticas educacionais contemporâneas.

Palavras-chave: Conselhos escolares; gestão democrática; nova gestão pública; participação escolar; política educacional.



Gestión democrática y participación de la comunidad escolar: tensiones entre el horizonte normativo y la efectividad de la participación en la escuela pública brasileña

Resumen

El presente artículo analiza las tensiones entre el principio constitucional de la gestión democrática de la educación pública y las condiciones efectivas de participación de la comunidad escolar en la educación básica brasileña. Se parte de la constatación de que, aunque la gestión democrática está consagrada desde 1988 como principio normativo y ha sido regulada sucesivamente por la Ley de Directrices y Bases de la Educación Nacional, el Plan Nacional de Educación y, más recientemente, por la Ley n.º 14.644/2023, su traducción en prácticas participativas sustantivas sigue siendo desigual e incompleta. El objetivo general consiste en examinar, mediante una revisión bibliográfica y documental, los fundamentos histórico-conceptuales de la gestión democrática, el marco jurídico que la regula y las principales instancias de participación de la comunidad escolar, en diálogo crítico con la literatura que problematiza la tensión entre el paradigma democrático-participativo y el paradigma gerencial en la administración de la educación pública. La investigación, de naturaleza cualitativa, bibliográfica y documental, se sustenta en autores clásicos del campo de la gestión educativa y en la producción académica contemporánea indexada en revistas científicas especializadas. Los resultados indican que la institucionalización de los consejos escolares, los centros estudiantiles y los procesos de selección de directores no constituye, por sí sola, una condición suficiente para garantizar una participación efectiva, la cual depende de las correlaciones de poder, de la cultura institucional y de la formación política de la comunidad escolar. Se concluye que la gestión democrática sigue siendo un horizonte en disputa, tensionado por la racionalidad gerencial que se infiltra en las políticas educativas contemporáneas.

Palabras clave: Consejos escolares; gestión democrática; nueva gestión pública; participación escolar; política educativa.



Introduction

Democratic management of education in Brazil represents a principle with a long historical trajectory and, simultaneously, a permanent field of political and epistemological dispute. Inscribed in the 1988 constitutional text as one of the conditions for guaranteeing the right to education, the democratic management of public education expresses the conquest, albeit partial, of social and educational movements that, during the country's redemocratization process, demanded the overcoming of centralizing, hierarchical, and technocratic administrative models inherited from the authoritarian period. Decades after its normative consecration, however, the implementation of democratic management in the daily routine of Brazilian public schools remains an open issue, marked by uneven institutional progress, deeply rooted cultural resistance, and the emergence of managerial rationalities that redefine, often in a regressive manner, the meanings of participation.

The problem guiding this article arises precisely from this gap between the normative horizon of democratic management and the real conditions of participation by the school community in decisions affecting school life. While, on the one hand, the Federal Constitution of 1988 (art. 206, item VI), the Law of Guidelines and Bases of National Education (Law No. 9,394/1996), and the National Education Plan (Law No. 13,005/2014) establish democratic management as a principle and a goal, on the other hand, the concrete regulation of these norms was deliberately postponed and delegated to state and municipal education systems, producing a heterogeneous and, in many cases, incipient normative framework. Added to this scenario is the introduction, starting in the 1990s, of principles of New Public Management in educational administration, which strain the democratic-participatory conception of school management with a rationality focused on efficiency, accountability for results, and institutional performativity.



The academic, social, and political relevance of this topic is justified by at least three reasons. First, because democratic management constitutes a structural condition for the democratization of the right to education itself, insofar as, without effective participation of the school community in curricular, pedagogical, and administrative decisions, public schools tend to reproduce authoritarian and exclusionary power relations. Second, because specialized literature has indicated a persistent gap between the formal institutionalization of participatory mechanisms—school councils, student unions, principal elections—and their substantive implementation, with councils often reduced to consultative or bureaucratized bodies. Third, because understanding this tension is a condition for qualifying the public debate on the models of school management that have been contested over the last three decades in Brazil, especially in light of the advance of managerialist and meritocratic discourses in educational policies.

Based on this framework, this article is guided by the following research question: to what extent has the normative framework of Brazilian democratic school management translated into effective participation by the school community, and what theoretical-political tensions permeate this process? The general objective consists of critically analyzing, in light of classical and contemporary theoretical production in the field of educational management, the tensions between the legal-normative framework of democratic management in Brazil and the conditions for realizing the participation of the school community. Specifically, the aim is to: i) reconstruct the historical-conceptual foundations supporting the transition from technocratic school administration to democratic management; ii) examine the legal-normative framework regulating democratic management in Brazilian basic education; iii) analyze the main institutional instances of school community participation and their limitations; and iv) discuss the tension between the democratic-participatory paradigm and the managerial paradigm in contemporary public education administration.



This is a qualitative research study of a bibliographic and documentary nature, whose procedures are detailed in the subsequent section. The article is organized, in addition to this introduction, into five sections: the first presents the methodological procedures; the second reconstructs the historical-conceptual foundations of democratic management; the third examines the Brazilian legal-normative framework; the fourth discusses the instances and limits of school community participation; the fifth problematizes the tension between democratic management and New Public Management; finally, the final considerations summarize the main arguments and point out possibilities for future research.

Methodological Procedures

This article results from a qualitative research study of a theoretical nature, conducted through a literature and documentary review. The literature review was guided by the selection of classic and foundational works in the field of Brazilian educational management, particularly the contributions of Freire (1996), Paro (2012, 2016), Lück (2006, 2011), Gadotti (1992), and Demo (1996), taken as structuring theoretical references for understanding the ethical-political and paradigmatic foundations of democratic management. Associated with this theoretical core was a documentary survey of the relevant Brazilian normative framework, comprising the Federal Constitution of 1988, the Law of Guidelines and Bases of National Education (Law No. 9,394/1996), the National Education Plan (Law No. 13,005/2014), the Statute of the Child and Adolescent (Law No. 8,069/1990), the Free Student Union Law (Law No. 7,398/1985), and Law No. 14,644/2023, which established School Councils and Forums of School Councils.

Complementarily, a survey of contemporary academic literature indexed in qualified journals in the field of Education was conducted, especially in the SciELO and Redalyc databases, with selection criteria guided by the theoretical relevance of the texts for the discussion of democratic management and its



tensions with New Public Management, including authors such as Souza (2009, 2012, 2019), Cury (2002), Oliveira (2015), Ball (2005), Cossio (2018), and Verger and Normand (2015). The analysis of the selected material followed a critical-hermeneutic procedure, organized into analytical axes that articulate conceptual foundations, normative framework, and political-epistemological tensions, in line with methodological recommendations for theoretical articles, according to which the discussion should be structured by analytical categories rather than by a descriptive sequence of empirical results.

The inclusion criteria for the sources were based on the centrality of the texts to the field of Brazilian democratic school management, the currency of existing legislation, and the indexation of academic production in journals evaluated by the Qualis/CAPES system or in internationally recognized indexing databases. Non-verifiable sources, secondary sources without clear authorship, or those lacking explicit theoretical and methodological foundations were excluded. The analytical treatment of the corpus was not restricted to a sequential presentation of the authors, but sought to build a critical dialogue among the theoretical perspectives mobilized, identifying convergences, tensions, and interpretive limits, so as to substantiate the discussion proposed in subsequent sections.

Democratic Management: Historical-Conceptual Foundations

Understanding democratic school management requires, preliminarily, the reconstruction of the paradigmatic shift that separates the notion of school administration, heir to the technical-bureaucratic rationality applied to schools, from the notion of democratic management, founded on political and participatory assumptions. Paro (2012) demonstrates, in a work that has become an inevitable reference in the field, that the uncritical transposition of categories from business administration to the school environment produced a concept of school leadership centered on control, hierarchy, and process standardization—one incompatible with the specifically educational, political, and relational



nature of pedagogical work. For the author, a school cannot be managed like a business because its purpose is not the production of commodities governed by the logic of profit, but human formation, which requires an administrative rationality guided by substantively democratic ends.

In this same critical direction, Paro (2016) maintains that democratic management is not reduced to a set of formal procedures, but is configured as a necessary mediation for the school to fulfill its educational purpose in a manner coherent with the values it intends to cultivate in learners. The author argues that it is impossible to educate for citizenship and democracy within an institution that is internally organized in an authoritarian manner; thus, democratic management constitutes, simultaneously, both a means and an end of the educational process. This formulation shifts the debate on school management from a merely technical-administrative discussion to an eminently political one, in which the distribution of decision-making power within the school comes to be understood as a constitutive, rather than peripheral, dimension of educational quality.

In a complementary dialogue, Lück (2006) describes this displacement as a paradigm shift, in which the fragmented and hierarchical conception of traditional school administration, focused on the control of isolated processes, gives way to a conception of management guided by the mobilization of competencies and the construction of collective meanings—capable of mobilizing the intelligence and collaborative will of school actors around shared goals. The author emphasizes that this paradigmatic change is not merely semantic, as it implies overcoming practices centered on the isolated figure of the principal in favor of processes of shared responsibility, in which teachers, staff, families, and students assume an active role in defining the institution's direction (Lück, 2011).

Libâneo, Oliveira, and Toschi (2012) systematize this paradigmatic dispute by identifying two opposing models of school organization: the technical-scientific model, founded on the rational division of labor, the hierarchy of



functions, and normative standardization; and the self-governing or democratic-participatory model, founded on the collective construction of rules and the expansion of shared decision-making spaces. The authors caution, however, that the opposition between these models should not be read dichotomously, since real democratic management combines, in concrete school practice, elements of technical coordination indispensable to institutional functioning with processes of collective deliberation. Thus, the theoretical and practical challenge lies not in the elimination of every technical dimension, but in its subordination to the democratic and educational purposes that guide the school institution.

If the previously described paradigmatic shift provides the conceptual bases of democratic management, it is to the work of Demo (1996) that we owe the most incisive formulation regarding the procedural and unfinished nature of participation. For the author, participation is not a given fact—a state that can simply be granted or conceded—but an ongoing conquest whose process of construction is as relevant as its results. This formulation has direct implications for the analysis of democratic school management, as it shifts the focus of the discussion from the mere formal existence of participatory channels (councils, assemblies, elections) to the quality and effectiveness of the participatory processes that unfold within them, warning against the illusion that the institutionalization of participatory spaces is, in itself, a guarantee of democratization.

Freire (1996) offers the ethical-philosophical substrate that articulates this procedural conception of participation with the formative purpose of education. By defining educational practice as an ethical, political, and epistemological act, the author rejects any conception of teaching reduced to the transmission of content, affirming that educating is, above all, forming subjects capable of critically reading the world and intervening in it transformatively. From this perspective, democratic school management is not an organizational appendage external to the pedagogical process, but its coherent extension, for only an internally democratized school can form—through daily experience



and not merely through curricular discourse—subjects capable of exercising citizenship in a critical and autonomous manner. In an earlier work, Freire (1967) had already advanced this thesis by characterizing education as a practice of freedom, as opposed to banking and domesticating pedagogies that reproduce relationships of dependency and political passivity.

The articulation between Freire (1996) and Paro (2016) thus allows for sustaining a conception of democratic management founded simultaneously on pedagogical praxis, social mediation, and the collective production of knowledge about the school institution itself. This theoretical convergence does not, however, eliminate a relevant tension: while Freire anchors the democratization of the school in a pedagogy of conscientization centered on the educator-educand relationship, Paro emphasizes the organizational and administrative dimension of management as a structural condition for democratic implementation. Far from configuring an incompatibility, this tension reveals the need to articulate, in any analysis of democratic school management, both the pedagogical-formative dimension and the political-administrative dimension of participation, without reducing one to the other.

Gadotti (1992), in turn, situates this discussion within the broader horizon of the Citizen School project (*projeto de Escola Cidadã*), in which school autonomy and community participation are understood as constitutive dimensions of an emancipatory educational project aimed at forming subjects who are protagonists of their own history. In a work co-organized with Romão, the author argues that school autonomy should not be conceived as administrative self-sufficiency detached from the State, but as the school community's capacity to collectively define its pedagogical project in dialogue with public educational policies (Gadotti; Romão, 2004). This formulation is particularly relevant to the argument of this article, as it anticipates, as early as the 1990s, the tension that would become central in the following decades between autonomy as democratic self-determination and autonomy as the transfer of responsibilities without a corresponding transfer of decision-making power—a tension that



will be revisited in the fifth section of this article when discussing New Public Management.

This diversity of theoretical perspectives is systematically synthesized, from an overview perspective, by the collection edited by Ferreira (2008), which brings together contributions on the trends and challenges of democratic educational management in Brazil, highlighting that the field, since redemocratization, has been marked both by the theoretical consolidation of the concept and by disputes surrounding its practical meanings within school networks.

From the 1988 Constitution to the LDB

The legal recognition of democratic management as a constitutional principle results directly from the Brazilian redemocratization process, in which social, trade union, and educational movements demanded the overcoming of the centralizing and authoritarian models of school administration inherited from the military regime. The Federal Constitution of 1988 establishes, in Article 206, item VI, the democratic management of public education as one of the principles upon which education must be based, while nevertheless conditioning its implementation to the form of the law. This projected onto infraconstitutional legislation, and more specifically onto state and municipal education systems, the task of defining concrete mechanisms for participation.

This constitutional referral to subsequent regulation was reproduced almost a decade later by the Law of Guidelines and Bases of National Education (LDB). Article 14 of Law No. 9,394/1996 establishes that education systems shall define the rules of democratic management of public education in basic education, observing two minimum principles: the participation of education professionals in the elaboration of the school's pedagogical project, and the participation of the school and local communities in school councils or equivalent bodies. Cury (2002) observes that this formulation, while enshrining democratic management as a national guideline, delegates a wide margin of



discretion to federative entities to define the scope and concrete instruments of its implementation, producing a heterogeneous normative framework across school networks—wherein states and municipalities that were better organized in terms of participatory traditions advanced in regulation, whereas others maintained generic provisions of low practical effectiveness.

Article 15 of the LDB, in turn, ensures progressive degrees of pedagogical, administrative, and financial management autonomy to school units. According to Cury (2002), this provision must be read in conjunction with Article 14, as autonomy without participation tends to reinforce the discretionary power of school leadership, whereas participation without autonomy evaporates into deliberations on matters of little decision-making relevance. This articulated reading is fundamental to understanding that democratic management, in the Brazilian legal framework, is not reduced to the existence of collegial bodies, but presupposes the effective transfer of decision-making power over pedagogical, administrative, and financial aspects of the school—a transfer that remains incomplete in a large portion of school networks.

The persistence of the regulatory gap identified in the literature led to the formulation, in the National Education Plan (Law No. 13,005/2014), of a specific provision aimed at democratic management. Goal 19 of the PNE establishes the commitment to ensure conditions, within two years, for the realization of democratic educational management, associated with technical criteria of merit and performance and public consultation with the school community for the appointment of school principals, in addition to providing for the definition of parameters to strengthen school participation and autonomy. Article 9 of the aforementioned law reinforces this commitment by determining that federative entities adapt their legislation on democratic management in accordance with national guidelines.

Carvalho (2016), in analyzing the effects of Goal 19 on school networks, finds that, despite the normative advance represented by the PNE, its implementation remains uneven, particularly regarding the definition of



objective and transparent criteria for selecting school leaders and the effective strengthening of collegial bodies. Souza (2019), in a study on the conditions for democratizing the management of Brazilian public schools, corroborates this diagnosis by identifying that the formal existence of school councils and principal selection processes is not accompanied, in most of the surveyed networks, by effective mechanisms for the political education of the school community toward exercising participation, which compromises the substantive quality of deliberative processes. These findings suggest that Goal 19, although it consolidated democratic management as a priority on the national educational agenda, was not sufficient in itself to overcome the historical institutional fragility of participation in Brazilian basic education.

The most recent normative strengthening of Brazilian democratic school management occurred with the enactment of Law No. 14,644 on August 2, 2023, which amended the LDB to expressly provide for the establishment of School Councils and Forums of School Councils in all public basic education units. The new wording of Article 14, item II, of the LDB replaces the generic reference to school councils or equivalent bodies with a more precise determination regarding the composition and deliberative character of these collegial bodies, responding to a historical demand from educational movements for more robust participation channels that are less subject to the discretion of local education systems.

Aguiar (2008) had already warned, prior to the aforementioned legal amendment, that the strengthening of school councils depends not only on their formal institution, but on political and pedagogical conditions that ensure an effectively deliberative character for these bodies, lest they be converted into merely consultative or rubber-stamping instances for decisions already taken by school leadership or secretariats of education. This warning remains relevant even after Law No. 14,644/2023, insofar as the effectiveness of councils ultimately depends on the balance of power within the school and the political



education of its members—dimensions that the law, by itself, does not have the power to generate.

Parallel to school councils, student participation finds specific normative support in Law No. 7,398/1985, known as the Free Student Union Law, which guarantees basic education students the right to autonomous organization in representative entities with leaders elected by direct and secret ballot, as well as in Law No. 8,069/1990, the Statute of the Child and Adolescent, whose Article 53, item IV, recognizes the right of children and adolescents to organize and participate in student entities. Navarro et al. (2004), in material produced under the National Program for Strengthening School Councils, highlight that the articulation between school councils and student unions enhances the democratization of school management, insofar as it expands the range of actors effectively involved in decision-making processes, breaking with the historical tendency to restrict participation to teachers and managers to the detriment of students, families, and education staff.

The PPP as a Space for Collective Construction

Among the channels for school community participation, the political-pedagogical project (PPP) occupies a central position, as it constitutes the document in which the school explicitly articulates its purposes, values, and modes of organizing pedagogical work. Veiga (1995) maintains that the political-pedagogical project cannot be understood as a mere bureaucratic instrument for complying with normative requirements, but rather as a process of collective construction in which the school community deliberates on the ends and means of educational action, linking the pedagogical project properly speaking to the political project of the school as an institution situated within a specific social and historical context. For the author, the participatory drafting of the political-pedagogical project is itself an exercise in democratic management, insofar as it mobilizes the school community toward the collective definition of directions



that would otherwise remain under the exclusive control of leadership or bureaucratic bodies external to the school.

This procedural conception converges with Paro's (2016) formulation regarding participation as a necessary mediation for the educational purpose of the school, since the collective construction of the pedagogical project not only elevates the quality of the resulting document, but constitutes, in itself, a formative experience in democratic practice for all actors involved, including students. Despite this democratizing potential, the literature has indicated that, in concrete school practice, the drafting of the political-pedagogical project is frequently reduced to a formal procedure conducted by small groups of administrators and pedagogical coordinators, with low effective participation from families, support staff, and students—thereby draining its potential as an instrument for democratizing school management and converting it into a documentary piece of regulatory compliance.

The analysis of school councils as a privileged locus of participation requires acknowledging the structural ambivalence of these collegial bodies, situated between the deliberative potential assigned to them by legislation and the tendency, recurrently identified in the literature, toward their bureaucratization or political erosion. Dourado et al. (2004) characterize the school council as a strategic space for democratizing the school and building citizenship, insofar as it gathers representatives from all segments of the school community—teachers, support staff, students, families, and, in some cases, local community members—around deliberations regarding the pedagogical, administrative, and financial issues of the school unit.

Souza (2009), however, warns that the democratic effectiveness of a school council cannot be inferred solely from its formal existence, but depends on a set of procedural conditions. Among these, the author highlights the dialogic construction of decisions, the recognition of alterity among the different represented segments, and a readiness for collective deliberation over rules and priorities, as opposed to practices where the council operates as a mere



rubber-stamping body for decisions previously made by the school principal or the secretariat of education. In a subsequent study, Souza (2012) deepens this analysis by situating school management as a locus of power struggles in which different groups and interests, internal and external to the school, compete to define the institutional trajectory; thus, the democratization of management cannot be understood as a linear or consensual process, but rather as a field of permanent tension among divergent interests.

This interpretation is corroborated by Aguiar's (2008) analysis of the National Program for Strengthening School Councils, which identifies as the program's primary limitation the restriction of political education to education professionals to the detriment of empowering families and students for full participation. This reproduces asymmetries in technical knowledge and cultural capital, compromising genuine parity among the segments represented in school collegial bodies.

The selection of the school principal constitutes one of the most recurrent themes in the debate on democratic management and, paradoxically, one of the most subject to reductionist interpretations that tend to equate the democratization of management exclusively with the electoral form of filling the position. Silva (2018), in research on the methods of appointing school principals in Brazilian municipal networks, demonstrates that direct election, while representing a relevant mechanism for the democratic legitimization of school leadership, does not show, in isolation, a consistent correlation with indicators of educational quality. This suggests that the method of appointing the principal is necessary, but not sufficient, for achieving effective democratic management.

Souza (2019) reinforces this argument by indicating that the democratization of school management depends, more than on the method of selecting the principal, on the quality of everyday participatory processes taking place within the school, including collegiality in pedagogical decision-making, transparency in resource management, and the leadership's openness



to ongoing dialogue with various segments of the school community. Goal 19 of the PNE itself recognizes this complexity by associating consultation with the school community with technical criteria of merit and performance in defining administrators—a formulation that seeks to balance democratic legitimacy and technical qualification, even though this balance remains an object of political dispute across different education systems, as previously noted by Carvalho (2016) in the analysis of the implementation of that goal.

Performativity, Accountability, and the Erosion of Participation

Beginning in the 1990s, Brazilian public administration, including the field of education, was traversed by the diffusion of principles from New Public Management—a state reform model that imports management categories and instruments originating from the private sector into the public domain, such as efficiency, productivity, accountability for results, and performance evaluation. Oliveira (2015) demonstrates that this managerial rationality, upon being incorporated by democratic-popular governments, produced significant contradictions between the pursuit of administrative efficiency and the expansion of the right to education, insofar as accountability policies tied to performance indicators tend to shift the focus of school management from collective deliberation over educational purposes to compliance with quantitative targets defined externally to the school.

Ball (2005) offers a fundamental theoretical framework for understanding this phenomenon by characterizing performativity as a technology of regulation that operates through judgments, comparisons, and displays of performance, which are converted into measures of productivity and mechanisms of control. For the author, performativity reconfigures professional subjectivities, displacing the meaning of teaching and managerial work from ethical and pedagogical commitments toward a concern with indicators and rankings—a process that tends to erode the collective and deliberative sense of school



management in favor of a management model centered on accountability to external regulatory bodies.

Verger and Normand (2015) systematize this debate by identifying New Public Management as an educational reform model of global scope, founded on the combination of administrative decentralization and the centralization of control through standardized evaluations, which the authors characterize as the constitutive paradox of this model: the autonomy granted to schools—generally restricted to resource management and the execution of externally defined policies—does not correspond to an effective decentralization of decision-making power over educational purposes and curriculum, as centralization is maintained within evaluation and accountability bodies. Cósio (2018) corroborates this diagnosis by identifying, within the Brazilian context, the impacts of New Public Management on teacher education and educational policies, highlighting the tendency toward the individualization of responsibility for educational outcomes, as opposed to the conception of shared and socially situated responsibility that underpins the tradition of democratic management.

The theoretical tension between democratic management and New Public Management finds relevant evidence regarding its concrete effects on school life within contemporary empirical literature. Peroni and Flores (2014) analyze the articulations and tensions among the National Education System, the National Education Plan, and democratic management, identifying that the absence of consolidated regulation for the National Education System compromises the federative coordination necessary to ensure equitable conditions for the implementation of democratic management across different school networks. This produces a framework of institutional inequality that tends to reproduce, on another plane, the socio-educational inequalities already existing in the Brazilian educational system.

This diagnosis is corroborated by the analysis of Souza (2019), which demonstrates significant disparities in the conditions for democratizing school management among different networks and regions of the country, associated



with both the inequality of institutional capacity among education systems and the inequality of political and cultural capital among school communities for exercising participation. The convergence of these analyses supports the assertion that the implementation of democratic management depends not exclusively on the existence of a favorable legal framework, but on material, institutional, and formative conditions that ensure this participation assumes a substantive, rather than merely formal, character.

The synthesis of this debate allows for the identification of a central analytical conclusion for this article: Brazilian democratic school management is configured as a permanent field of dispute between two political projects for public education—a democratic-participatory project, anchored in the Freirean tradition and in Paro's critique of technocratic school administration, which conceives participation as a procedural conquest and as a constitutive dimension of the school's formative purpose; and a managerial project, founded on the rationality of New Public Management, which redefines the terms of participation and autonomy under the logic of efficiency, accountability, and performativity. An analysis of Brazilian legislation reveals that both projects coexist, often contradictorily, within the same normative framework, which partially explains the heterogeneity and incompleteness of the implementation of democratic management across Brazilian school networks.

Final Considerations

This article aimed to critically analyze the tensions between the legal-normative framework of democratic school management in Brazil and the conditions for realizing school community participation, in light of the theoretical debate between democratic-participatory and managerial perspectives. The historical-conceptual reconstruction carried out allows for the assertion that democratic management, far from constituting a closed set of formal procedures, is configured as an ethical-political horizon under permanent dispute—the realization of which depends as much on the consolidation of institutional



participation mechanisms (school councils, student unions, participatory political-pedagogical projects, and democratic principal selection processes) as on political, cultural, and formative conditions that ensure this participation assumes a substantive character.

In response to the research question guiding this study, it can be stated that the normative framework of Brazilian democratic school management—although having advanced significantly since the 1988 Constitution, with successive regulations via the LDB, the PNE, and, most recently, Law No. 14,644/2023—has not translated uniformly and substantively into effective participation by the school community. This gap stems from a combination of factors: the historical postponement of concrete regulation of democratic management to local education systems; institutional inequality among school networks; the insufficiency of formative processes aimed at the political qualification of families and students for exercising participation; and, more structurally, the tension between the democratic-participatory rationality that historically underpins the concept of democratic management and the managerial rationality that, since the 1990s, has contested the meanings of autonomy, participation, and accountability in public education administration.

The main contribution of this article lies in the articulated systematization among the classic theoretical-conceptual foundations of the field of democratic management—especially the contributions of Freire and Paro—the Brazilian legal-normative framework throughout its historical trajectory, and contemporary literature highlighting the empirical limits of participatory implementation. It thereby offers an integrated reading capable of informing both academic research and the formulation of educational policies aimed at strengthening democratic management.

As limitations of this study, its eminently theoretical and bibliographic nature is acknowledged, which does not allow for capturing the diversity of concrete configurations that democratic management assumes across different school and regional contexts within the country, nor the singularities of its



implementation in specific state and municipal networks. For future research, it is suggested to conduct empirical studies of a qualitative or mixed nature aimed at investigating the concrete operating conditions of school councils following the enactment of Law No. 14,644/2023, as well as comparative studies between school networks that have adopted different models for appointing school principals, so as to deepen the understanding of the conditions that effectively favor, or compromise, the democratization of management in Brazilian public schools.

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Note

- 1 Statement on the Use of Artificial Intelligence – Gemini, an artificial intelligence tool developed by Google, was used to assist in translating this article into English. The translated version was fully reviewed and adjusted by the editorial team to ensure fidelity to the original text, terminological accuracy, and compliance with the journal’s editorial standards. The tool was not used to generate the article’s arguments, analyses, or academic content.



How to cite

SANTOS, Douglas Manoel Antonio de Abreu Pestana dos. Gestão democrática e participação da comunidade escolar: tensões entre o horizonte normativo e a efetivação participativa na escola pública brasileira. **Educação em Análise**, Londrina, v. 11, p. 1-25, 2026. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5433/1984-7939.2026.v11.55653>.

Submitted on: June 30, 2026

Accepted on: July 31, 2026

Published on: September 8, 2026



CRediT

Acknowledgments:	Not applicable
Funding:	SANTOS, D. M. A. A. P. declares receiving funding from the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES) through a doctoral scholarship.
Conflict of Interest:	The author certifies that he has no commercial or associative interest that represents a conflict of interest in relation to the manuscript.
Ethical Approval:	Not applicable
Author Contributions:	SANTOS, D. M. A. A. P. declares having performed conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, writing – original draft, supervision, validation, visualization, and writing – review and editing.

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