

## **Atuações de gestores escolares em tempos de crise: reflexões sobre o caso do município de Diadema**

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### **Resumo**

Este artigo apresenta resultados de pesquisa sobre as estratégias e ações de gestoras escolares durante a crise pandêmica de Covid-19. Metodologicamente, caracteriza-se como um estudo exploratório, que combinou fontes documentais e de campo, por meio de roda de conversa com diretoras de escolas da rede municipal de Diadema (SP). A análise fundamenta-se em contribuições do campo de implementação de políticas, notadamente, nos conceitos de atuação de políticas e discricionariedade dos agentes que atuam na linha de frente dos sistemas públicos de ensino. Os resultados indicam que, diante da descoordenação política entre as três esferas de governo, as equipes gestoras assumiram papel central para garantir o direito constitucional de todos de acesso à educação. Conclui-se que as lições extraídas desse período precisam iluminar o planejamento de políticas públicas para que, em eventuais novas crises, os prejuízos não recaiam sobre os mais vulneráveis de sempre.

**Palavras-chave:** Atuação política. Gestão Escolar. Crise Sanitária. Município de Diadema. School Management;

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## **Actions of school managers in critical times: reflections on the case of Diadema**

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### **Abstract**

This article presents research results on the strategies and actions adopted by school managers during the Covid-19 pandemic crisis. Methodologically, it is characterized as an exploratory study, which combined documentary and field sources, through a conversation with school directors in the municipal system of Diadema (SP). The analysis is based on contributions from the field of policy implementation, notably on the concepts of policy enactment and discretion of agents working on the front line of public education systems. The results indicate that, given the political lack of coordination between the three spheres of government, management teams assumed a central role in guaranteeing everyone's constitutional right to access education. It is concluded that the lessons learned from this period need to illuminate the planning of public policies so that, in new crises, the losses do not fall on the those who have always been the most vulnerable.

**Keywords:** Health Crisis. Municipality of Diadema. Policy enactments. School management

## **Acciones de directivos escolares em tiempos de crisis: reflexiones sobre el caso de Diadema**

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### **Resumen**

Este artículo presenta resultados de investigaciones sobre las estrategias y acciones de los directivos escolares durante la crisis pandémica de Covid-19. Metodológicamente, se caracteriza por ser un estudio exploratorio, que combinó fuentes documentales y de campo, a través de una conversación con directores de escuelas de la red municipal de Diadema (SP). El análisis se basa en contribuciones desde el campo de la implementación de políticas, en particular en los conceptos de acción política y discreción de los agentes que trabajan en la primera línea de los sistemas de educación pública. Los resultados indican que, ante la descoordinación política entre las tres esferas de gobierno, los equipos directivos asumieron un papel central para garantizar el derecho constitucional de todos a acceder a la educación. Se concluye que las lecciones aprendidas de este período deben iluminar la planificación de políticas públicas para que, en posibles nuevas crisis, las pérdidas no recaigan sobre los más vulnerables.

**Palabras clave:** Actividad política. Ayuntamiento de Diadema. Crisis sanitaria. Gestión escolar.

## Introduction

When the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak of the novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) in January 2020 as a public health emergency of international concern, various countries adopted government measures to combat the then-unknown enemy. At that time, the most effective measures were personal hygiene, mask-wearing, and social distancing.

In Brazil, the severity of the disease was downplayed by the federal government, with the then-president referring to it as a "little flu." Led by the central executive power, the health crisis turned into a real war of disinformation, fought through social media. Meanwhile, the public health system was collapsing, and the country's economy, already weakened since 2015, was impacted by rising unemployment, reduced family consumption, and a decrease in tax revenue.

Alongside health and the economy, public education was one of the most affected areas by the pandemic, worsening an already known scenario of educational inequalities segmented by region, class, gender, and race/ethnicity of students. A report by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2021, p.11) highlighted that "nearly 1.1 million children and adolescents of school age were out of school in 2019," most of them residing in the Northeast and Southeast regions of Brazil. The situation was more severe in rural areas, where 10% of children aged 4 and 5 were out of school, with 70% of them being Black, Brown, or Indigenous. During 2020, the percentage of students out of school increased among these groups, necessitating measures to address these inequalities.

However, the lack of coordinated actions among federal, state, and municipal governments left schools largely isolated in the early months of the pandemic. As a result, each educational institution had to find alternative ways to interact with students, relying as much as possible on the collaboration of families. Social inequalities became more visible to school professionals, not only because most did not have internet access at home but also due to the poor conditions of their housing. Many families were confined to overcrowded living conditions, forced to live in unhealthy environments while facing anxiety over job loss and/or violence both inside and outside the home.

The pandemic also highlighted the precariousness of public education systems and the lack of adequate working conditions for their professionals. The sudden shift to virtual modalities disrupted the work of teachers and administrators, who had to learn to use new technologies without prior training. In addition to intensifying their workload, many teachers used their own equipment

to conduct online classes, attend pedagogical meetings, and communicate with families and students.

Regarding the latter, the Continuous National Household Sample Survey (PnadC) of 2017 had already indicated that only 31% of students in Brazilian public schools had a computer or tablet at home with internet access, which explains the difficulties in implementing emergency remote learning (Fundação Carlos Chagas, 2020; Gestrado, 2020; Rosa & Martins, 2021).

Although the pandemic has been the subject of numerous studies, with the exception of a few (Martins et al., 2022; 2023; Mancilha et al., 2021), there has been little attention given to the role played by school administrators during this period. This article aims to contribute to this discussion by specifically addressing the case of the municipal network in Diadema, a municipality located in the Grande ABC Paulista, part of the São Paulo metropolitan area.

The paper is organized into three complementary sections: the first clarifies the theoretical framework of the research, as well as the methodological procedures for data collection and analysis; the second contextualizes the study's locus, presenting some characteristics of the municipality and the Diadema education network; and the final section gives voice to the principals who participated in the research, relating their testimonies to the concepts of discretion and policy implementation (Lytsky, 2020; Ball, 2008), which underpin the arguments of the text.

## **Theoretical and Methodological Framework of the Research**

This research falls within the field of policy implementation, as its central objective was to understand the strategies adopted by school administrators in executing the directives of public authorities during the school closures and the return to in-person activities. Due to the polysemy of the term "implementation," it is necessary to clarify the meaning attributed to this concept in the context of this investigation.

According to Perez (2010) and Passone (2013), there are essentially two models used in policy implementation studies: the top-down model, which prioritizes the analysis of goals and decisions made by central authorities, and the bottom-up model, which emphasizes the strategies and actions of the agents responsible for implementing policies at the operational level. The understanding of implementation adopted in this research aligns with the assumptions of the bottom-up model, focusing on the concepts of "discretion" (Lipsky, 2019; Lotta, 2021) and "policy enactment" (Ball, 2008).

The policy implementation studies conducted by Gabriela Lotta and colleagues (2021) fit within this model, as they operate on the principle that policies are modified by implementing agents using the discretion they possess. These actors, referred to by Lipsky (2010) as Street-Level Bureaucrats (SLBs), are those who operate in the daily workings of public institutions, addressing the demands and urgencies of the population. According to the author:

As street-level bureaucrats, as public service providers and custodians of public order, are at the center of political controversy. They are constantly caught between the demands of service recipients, who seek greater effectiveness and responsiveness, and the demands of citizens, who desire increased effectiveness and efficiency from public services (Lipsky, 2010, p. 38).

Therefore, these agents reinterpret and redirect political directives when implementing them in specific contexts. Lotta et al. (2021, p. 4) explain that: "This process is driven by the discretion of these professionals, that is, their freedom to interpret the rules and make decisions" [and highlight that] "the more ambiguous and conflicting the policies are, the greater the discretion of the bureaucracy."

The research by Ball, Maguire, and Braun (2016) also fits into the bottom-up model as it focuses on the context and cultural characteristics of institutions, the values and worldviews of the actors involved, as well as the language used in social discourses about policies. In contrast to the functionalist view of implementation studies, Ball (2008) proposes substituting the term "implementation" with "enactment" or "policy enactment".

In schools, there are interactions and accommodations between mandatory policies, institutional histories, and commitments - this is part of the work of interpretation and translation. However, few policies arrive fully formed, and the processes of policy enactment also involve specific tasks (ad hoc), borrowing, reordering, displacement, adaptation, and reinvention (Ball, Maguire, Braun, 2016, p. 20, original emphasis)).

Methodologically, the research was qualitative and exploratory, combining documentary and empirical data. In the first stage, by reviewing the regulations published by the Municipal Department of Education (SME) of Diadema from March 2020 to May 2022, it was possible to identify the strategies the municipality used to manage the crisis. In the second stage, a focus group (FG) with elementary school principals provided valuable insights into the factors influencing the implementation of official measures. This technique, inspired by Paulo Freire's (2003) Circles of Culture, is commonly used in qualitative research as it facilitates a "listening and speaking exercise,

where multiple participants contribute, with each participant's contributions built through interaction with others, either to complement, disagree with, or agree with the immediately preceding statements" (Moura, Lima, 2014, p. 100).

The research received prior authorization from the SME of Diadema and consent from the participants after reviewing the Informed Consent Form (ICF). Adhering to social distancing recommendations still in effect in 2022, the FG was conducted virtually and lasted 96 minutes. After a complete transcription of the audio, the material was analyzed using content analysis procedures (Bardin, 1977), and the results will be presented and discussed following a brief contextualization of the research *locus*.

## **Contextures of the Pandemic in the Municipality of Diadema**

Diadema is one of the seven municipalities that make up the Grande ABC region in São Paulo, and it is the 16th most populous city in the state of São Paulo. According to IBGE data (2022), the municipality has a population of 393,237 inhabitants, spread over an area of 30.732 km<sup>2</sup>, resulting in a population density of more than 12,000 people per square kilometer.

In 2021, the average monthly salary for the population was equivalent to three minimum wages, but only 23.78% of people were employed. Considering households with a monthly income of up to half a minimum wage, 34.6% of households were in this situation. This socioeconomic profile provides an overview of the municipality's poverty situation, with the primary economic activity currently being service provision.

According to the 2023 School Census, Diadema's municipal education network comprises 64 schools with the following enrollment figures: 12,299 students in Early Childhood Education (daycare and preschool); 11,688 in the early years of Elementary Education; 2,073 in the Youth and Adult Education (EJA) program; and 1,579 in Special Education. The 27,639 students are served by approximately 2,800 teachers, resulting in an average of 26 students per teacher.

Just before the schools closed, 65 new principals had been elected at the end of the previous year. The pandemic presented these leaders with unprecedented challenges, requiring them to manage situations that had never been encountered before. In addition to rethinking activities due to changes in the school calendar, they needed to develop new teaching strategies with limited technological resources and simultaneously address the demands of the Municipal Department of Education (SME) and the families, particularly those in greater social vulnerability.

From the suspension of in-person classes - between March 23 and 31 - until the end of the anticipated school recess - from April 8 to 23, 2020 - teachers and administrators worked tirelessly in telework mode to prepare home activities. The transition to home office work brought a series of disruptions to both professional and personal lives of the staff, as they had to accommodate the varying routines of families and address students at different times. This combination of factors led to an intensification of the workload and physical, mental, and emotional exhaustion among educators.

A survey conducted with professionals from the municipal networks of the ABC Paulista region between May and June 2020 (Rosa et al., 2020) revealed that 58.7% of respondents felt that decision-making processes were centralized by the Municipal Department of Education (SME). However, a significant portion (43.7%) believed that it was up to management teams to take the lead in initiatives. Combined with other data from the study, it was inferred that, especially in the initial months of the pandemic, there was a dispersion of actions within the network due to the lack of clear guidance from central system bodies.

According to the documentary data collected by Lamarca (2022), the SME announced, through Circular GAB SE 023 dated March 20, 2020, the partnership established by the City Hall with the Israeli multinational Mind Lab<sup>1</sup>, aimed at providing support for emergency remote teaching to students in the network.<sup>2</sup> The document stated that the content, which aimed to develop "cognitive, social, emotional, and ethical skills aligned with the BNCC," would be made available to students every Monday via email!

Partnerships with the private sector or third-sector entities have long been practiced by municipal public systems (Arelaro, 2007; Adrião, 2022). However, with the pandemic, this trend has intensified and opened several additional "windows of opportunity" for "educational businesses".

On one hand, the crisis exacerbated unemployment, hunger, poverty, and exclusion; on the other hand, it represented a real "opportunity" for certain sectors. The public calamity caused by the novel coronavirus highlighted basic education as a promising "niche" for companies, institutes, and foundations involved in the educational business or digital technologies (Filho, Santos, 2021, p. 5)

<sup>1</sup> An Israeli company, founded in 1994, presents itself as a "world leader in research and development of innovative educational technologies for the enhancement of cognitive, social, emotional, and ethical skills and competencies" (Mind Lab, n.d.). Mozart Neves Ramos, a chemical engineer and former Secretary of Education of Pernambuco, is a member of the company's board in Brazil.

<sup>2</sup> Avaliable at: <https://portal.diadema.sp.gov.br/prefeitura-de-diadema-inova-em-parceria-que-leva-atividades-on-line-para-alunos-com-aulas-suspensas/>



A pandemia, ao exigir a rápida adaptação das escolas e a reinvenção das dinâmicas de trabalho, gerou um cenário desafiador para todos os envolvidos. O fato de que menos da metade dos respondentes achou que as estratégias foram adequadas para os anos iniciais do ensino fundamental e ainda menos para a educação infantil destaca a dificuldade enfrentada por muitos educadores e gestores. A falta de adequação das estratégias e o suporte considerado precário para alunos com deficiência refletem a complexidade e os desafios enfrentados pelas escolas durante esse período.

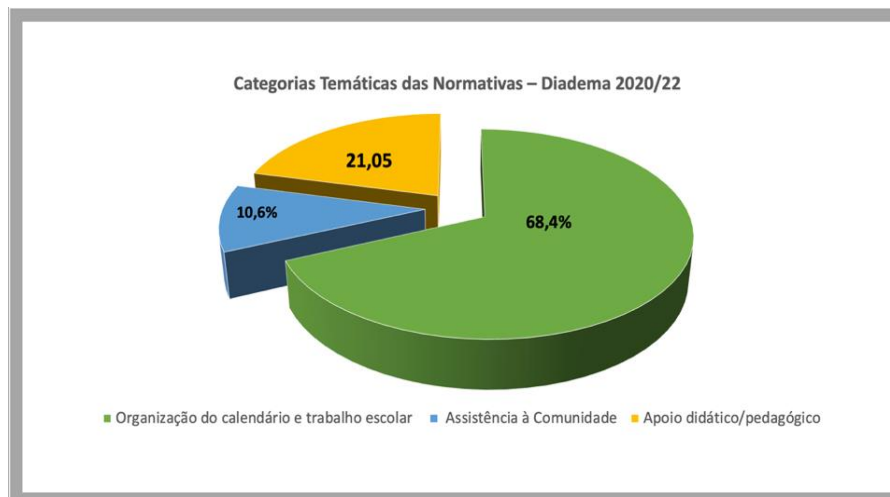
Como Lotta et al. (2021) indicam, os profissionais da educação foram forçados a desenvolver estratégias de enfrentamento para lidar com a pressão e o sofrimento associados à crise. Esses "coping strategies" variam desde a racionalização do serviço até a priorização do bem-estar dos alunos em detrimento do cumprimento estrito das metas.

A ausência de relatórios ou avaliações sobre a eficácia das atividades realizadas pela parceria com a MindLab, e a forma como os professores adaptaram suas próprias estratégias, revelam a necessidade de uma análise mais profunda e sistemática para entender o impacto real dessas medidas na educação dos alunos durante a pandemia ”.

In the municipal networks of the ABC Paulista region, the major concerns of teachers and administrators were: learning losses, 68%; risks of domestic violence, 62%; and school dropout and truancy, 61% (Rosa et al., 2020). In other words, the deprivation of the right to learn was one of the greatest sources of suffering for these professionals. This is not surprising, as the effects of the pandemic demonstrated that “the classroom is the most appropriate place for students' right to learn” (Cury, 2007, p. 488).

Indeed, for public administrators, adherence to the school calendar and the regulation of in-person and remote work were central concerns. Diadema was no different. Between March 2020 and March 2022, SME/Diadema issued 38 regulations, including decrees, ordinances, and circulars. Of these, 68.4% directly or indirectly referred to the school calendar (school recess, early vacation, control of remote activities, hybrid teaching, etc.); 21% concerned pedagogical guidelines (sending virtual and printed materials; distributing books and other structured materials, curriculum reorganization, remedial classes); and only 10.6% addressed social assistance actions (sanitary protocols; delivery of food baskets, meal cards) (Graph 1).

**Grafic 1** – Thematic Categories of the Regulations – Diadema 2020/22



Source: Prepared by the authors, based on Lamarca's research (2022)

The analysis of the regulations indicated that attention to organizational and administrative aspects surpassed concerns with pedagogical issues, which were left to the "autonomy" of the schools. However, the testimonies from the principals provided a much clearer picture of the challenges they faced amidst the health crisis. Due to the proximity of educational units to their communities, the actions of the management teams were crucial in providing guidance and emotional support to families and, above all, in advocating for the students' rights in such an adverse context.

According to Lotta *et al.* (2021, p.18):

Three main factors influenced the daily functions of street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) in a crisis context: (i) processes of decision-making centralization; (ii) higher levels of ambiguity, that is, uncertainties surrounding the formulation and implementation of public policies; and (iii) increased political conflict over possible courses of action in response to the pandemic. [...] These factors undermine the ability of frontline workers to deliver public services with quality.

Similar intervening factors occurred in the daily work routine of school principals in Diadema, as will be discussed below.

## **Actions of Principals for the Right to Life and Education**

Representing the municipality of Diadema<sup>3</sup> two principals participated in the conversation circle. They worked in schools located in very contrasting regions, each with very specific

<sup>3</sup> Due to its connection with a larger research project in the Greater ABC Paulista region, the conversation circle included principals from schools in other municipal networks in the area.

characteristics. After a thorough reading and coding of the material, we identified three categories of analysis: the schools and their communities; school autonomy: strategies and actions of the management teams; and the right to life and education upon the return to classes.

#### As escolas e suas comunidades

When introducing herself, Thamires was emphatic in stating that she was a director because she has been a teacher since 2005. In 2012, she joined the Diadema network as a tenured teacher at the same school where she now serves as principal. In 2020, the school had 268 students in fundamental education, including those in the Education of Young People and Adults (EJA) program, which runs in the evening. During her presentation, Thamires was keen to refer to the school as a "special school"

It is a school that was specifically created for the deaf in 1988. It operates in three shifts: morning, afternoon, and evening. The school has a very inspiring history of struggle because it was literally built by the deaf community and the students' parents. It was a "healthy fight" to secure rights and to actively contribute to the construction. We had an employee, who was a parent of a deaf student, who used to say, "I laid bricks here, I helped build the entire school." In this school, "inclusive" students are the hearing students. We often say it was an "inverse inclusion!" (Thamires)

The affectionate tone with which this principal refers to the school highlights the strong ties between the institution and the community. The term "special school" used by her signifies the acknowledgment of the community's struggle for the school, rather than indicating that it serves deaf children and adults. It is interesting to note that for her, the "included" students are the hearing ones, a concept that disconnects this idea from the notion of "disability." Although small, the challenges of a school with such characteristics undoubtedly required extra efforts during the pandemic, as will be discussed later.

Aurora, the second participant to introduce herself, has a 20-year teaching career. She joined the municipal network of Diadema 15 years ago, where she has worked as a teacher, pedagogical coordinator, and assistant principal. Appointed as principal in 2019, she took over a school with about 900 students, covering early childhood education, the initial years of elementary education, and EJA (Education for Youth and Adults). In describing the school, she anticipated the challenges of managing an institution within a community of extreme social vulnerability, especially in the context of a severe health crisis.

The community is extremely impoverished; the meal provided by the school is the main attraction for the students, often being the only meal for the majority of them. We are located in an area with significant drug trafficking. So, students are either involved in drug dealing, drug trafficking itself, or drug use. This is a very serious

issue in this community. As a result, the school suffers greatly from a lack of teachers and high turnover rates. A few years ago, the school was without teachers for three or four classes until May. However, now there is a group of teachers who are permanent staff at the school and do not wish to leave (Aurora).

In May 2020, a large fire destroyed 100 shanties in a slum located around the school, leaving over 500 people homeless. Aurora recalls that:

Most of the teachers went to the school to assist with sorting through the aftermath. Everyone was very frightened. The tragedy was so overwhelming that no one cared about the pandemic. Water was provided only by tank trucks. This urbanized, paved area is right on the border between Diadema and São Bernardo, with the burned area being precisely on the border. We realized that the educational aspect was secondary; there was so much more to address. We spent 15 days sorting through items: clothes, supplies, and assembling food baskets. During this process, we discovered that three families of our students did not have bathrooms, and they were also without electricity using illegal connections. We then organized a fundraiser to build the bathrooms (Aurora).

This account clearly highlights the significance of the school as a public facility and the role of its staff, especially in areas where governments often fall short. Aurora's testimony, delivered with emotional depth and unmistakable pride, underscores how the concerns and initiatives of the Municipal Education Department (SME) at that moment were entirely secondary. Particularly for a population that was primarily focused on survival.

There was also the issue in the area where they didn't have internet. They don't have a network; some parts don't even have running water at home, right? So, there was no internet, no computers, none of that (Aurora).

With the deaf students, it was the same situation; they also lacked access. From July to August, it was done with my cellphone. We didn't have funding yet, so I set up a WhatsApp Business account on my phone (Thamires).

In the first year of the pandemic, the organization and operation of schools depended fundamentally on the initiatives of the school management teams. They were responsible for providing both material and psychological support to the community and for facilitating remote teaching with the limited resources available to them.

## **School Autonomy: Strategies and Actions of Management Teams**

Nesta categoria, reunimos excertos relacionados às estratégias e ações das escolas para tentar garantir o acesso dos alunos às tarefas durante o isolamento social. O tema da “autonomia escolar” emergiu em meio aos depoimentos sobre o tensionamento entre as expectativas da rede pública municipal e as limitações de cada escola. As demandas da SME foram tomadas como parte do compromisso das diretoras de garantir que alunos e famílias mantivessem o vínculo com a escola.

We had a spreadsheet from the Education Secretariat that we updated with this data monthly. We had to report how many students came to pick up the activities, how many returned them, how many contacted us via WhatsApp, whether they participated in synchronous classes, or if they only reached out to inquire about the food baskets. Initially, the engagement was quite low, but after three or four months, we reached at least sixty or seventy percent of the students. (Aurora)

In a tone that was both ironic and realistic, Thamires recounted the actions taken to meet the SME's demands and ensure that children continued their education.

We were 'free' to work, as long as we managed to reach the students. So I said, 'Folks, we're not going back. Therefore, I won't force anyone to do anything. Some teachers of the younger children had already set up WhatsApp groups, but most of the school hadn't. So I talked to the teachers, along with my team partner, and we encouraged them until by the end of the year everyone was included in these groups.' (Thamires, emphasis added).

A lot was said about the importance of new technologies, social networks, and WhatsApp groups for enabling remote learning. However, according to Aurora, 'what really worked was printing the activities for everyone at the school.' The actions undertaken by the management depended on the mobilization of all segments of the school, and the support from the SME for the school's initiatives came in response to the director's demands:

We spoke with the Secretariat to get their support, and we also talked to the School Council to use the funds we had in the PDDE account. We bought everything from printers to ink. The Secretariat provided the paper, and we delivered activities every week to at least seven hundred students. We became copy machines! I, the vice-director, the coordinator, everyone had printers at home working 24 hours a day (Aurora).

At Thamires' school, once everyone was relatively familiar with the technologies, a strategy proposed by a deaf teacher was for the teachers to record their lessons and post the videos on Google Meet. This allowed the lessons to be divided into synchronous and asynchronous moments, which facilitated access to the content for students, at least for those who had some internet access. However, this action encountered the limitations of the network itself, as explained by the director:

Since we don't have a sign language interpreter in the municipality, there was a culture in the city of calling our school when a deaf person needed help at the health center or even at the police station. A teacher would then go down to assist. But that's not allowed, because interpreting is a regulated profession, and there was even a time when a complaint was made. Although it didn't lead to a lawsuit, there was a report of the illegal use of the profession. Regarding the videos (they thought a lot about this), they discussed with families and students, and agreed that everything posted in the group would remain in the group. We also partnered with a school for the deaf in São Paulo to exchange information, as much as we could...(Thamires)

This last account illustrates well the concept of discretion as formulated by Lipsky (2010),

which refers to the administrative limits of a particular institution and the interpretive possibilities of the law by 'street-level' public agents. In this sense, within their autonomy, the decisions made by these agents are primarily guided by the values that direct their actions. In Thamires' case, the principle of the students' right to access learning took precedence over a strict interpretation of the letter of the law. 'Street-level bureaucrats may view the managers' directives as legitimate, but they may regard the policy objectives proposed by the managers as illegitimate (Lipsky 2010, p. 65)

Similarly, the agreement established with parents and students to keep the 'arrangement' confidential is a good example of how political actors interpret and translate policy texts and how they act in response to the specific contexts and circumstances of practice. These examples confirm the understanding of Ball, Maguire, and Braun (2016) that policies are not simply 'implemented,' as decisions are influenced by institutional culture, worldviews, values, and the subjectivities of school actors.

Interpretation is a commitment to the language of policy, while translation is closer to the language of practice. Translation represents a kind of third space between policy and practice. It is an iterative process of enacting institutional texts and putting these texts into action—literally, 'acting' on policy through tactics that include conversations, meetings, plans, events, and 'learning walks. (Ball, Maguire, Braun, 2016, p. 67)

Similar agreements were made at Thamires' school, where they used the moments of food basket distribution to request families to return the completed home assignments.

We managed to reach about 70% of the students. But what did we do? As we had the delivery of the basic basket, we said 'O, go get the basket and bring the activity.' And then I organized the boxes, [with lessons] separated by folders. Our biggest challenge was with the EJA, because they had a lot of difficulty. But we did it like this, kind of like a bargaining chip, nice and easy, right? (Aurora)

The accounts grouped in this category provide crucial insights into how school management teams interpreted and translated, in Ball's (2008) terms, the guidelines from the SME during the pandemic. It can be said that, amidst the chaos, these public agents' "discretionary" actions were essential not only for ensuring their students' right to education but also for safeguarding people's lives. (Lipsky, 2019, Lotta *et al.*, 2021).

## **The Right to Life and Education in the Return to In-Person Classes**

The return to in-person classes in 2022 required numerous adaptations, starting with the reorganization of school spaces and schedules to comply with health protocols. These included mask-wearing, hand hygiene, and maintaining physical distance. At that time, not all teachers and



staff were able to return, making this reorganization another significant challenge for school management. Reflecting on this period, Thamires and Aurora discussed the planning and the overall climate of apprehension experienced by everyone as they returned to school:

We were extremely anxious when we learned that we would be returning. And the school was in that state. We only had one cleaning staff member. At times, we helped with cleaning. My vice-principal and I took care of the basic cleaning in the courtyard. But how would we welcome parents, teachers, and students with the school in such a condition? We were a bit anxious about how this return would be, especially since the parents were eager to come back. The first group to return was the EJA students. We didn't focus on pedagogy initially; it was more about emotional support because most of our students were at high risk. We were very concerned; some live alone, and the school is their life! (Thamires, our emphasis)

We discussed this a lot from the beginning of the year to avoid being caught off guard. We spent two weeks conducting surveys and calling families. We organized a staggered return: older students came in groups of four or five at a time. The teachers organized the groupings. They even created blue, yellow, and green wristbands, each color representing a different day (Aurora).

A guide of recommendations was developed by the National Campaign for the Right to Education (CNDE, 2021) for the return to in-person classes. The document warned about the serious infrastructure problems in public schools that could endanger the health and safety of the entire school community.

The infrastructure shortcomings will not be resolved overnight, and therefore, at a minimum, a national reopening plan is necessary. This plan should establish safety protocols and provide resources for the required modifications. Additionally, it is also essential to create subjective conditions of safety, so that the school community feels secure about returning. [...] Given the level of disorganization with which measures to reduce disease transmission have been managed, it is possible to imagine that basic supplies such as hand sanitizer, masks, and soap will not reach schools in time and in sufficient quantities for safety protocols to be followed, as there are already reports of this across the country. (CNPDE, 2021a, p. 16-20, original emphasis)

According to data from the 2021 School Census, only 34% of municipal early childhood education schools had adequate restrooms; only 54% of schools had access to the public water supply; only 41.2% had suitable restrooms for early childhood students, and 4.6% of municipal schools and 5.2% of state schools did not have any restrooms at all. (CNPDE, 2021b)

In such a scenario, where everyone's life was at risk, the right to education was no less neglected. We agree with Schneider (2014, p.7), who states that the discourse of equal rights to education often ignores "the differences that exist before access to school." In a 2007 article, Cury already pointed out that the right to education presupposes public investments to provide adequate facilities, educational materials, transportation, school meals, and health assistance to students. The

COVID crisis "awakened" the need which had been previously neglected by public managers - to better equip schools and train teachers, managers, and students in the use of digital technologies for teaching and learning purposes. It remains to be seen whether this newfound "awareness" is directed towards the public interest or to the interests of already known private entities.

## **Final considerations**

The account of Diadema, a municipality located in one of the economically wealthiest regions of the country, highlights the devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on education. More than that, it confirms the sense of helplessness experienced by the most vulnerable segments of the Brazilian population due to the historical neglect of fundamental rights by public authorities.

The ineffectiveness of the executive branch resulted in political discoordination among federal entities, leading to a surge in COVID-19 hospitalizations and deaths. As Rosa and Martins (2021, p.91) observed, "The lack of coordination between government actions, since the beginning of the health crisis, created numerous and serious problems, as subnational government levels took on pandemic response tasks in a disjointed and regionally varied manner." Regarding public schools, the pandemic experience was further exacerbated by the hostility of Brazilian authorities, supported by the more reactionary segments of our society, towards education professionals.

The disastrous management of the pandemic cost the lives of hundreds of thousands of people and left countless families impoverished and grieving. In education, it further deepened the inequalities between public and private school students. This situation would have been even worse if not for the commitment of teachers and managers to public education and respect for everyone's right to a dignified life. It thus became evident the crucial role played by managers in preventing a complete collapse of public education systems. Highlighting this fact does not mean reinforcing a social imaginary that attributes a missionary or heroic character to education professionals, but rather confronting, based on concrete facts, the usual attacks on public schools and the seriousness of teaching professionals.

The testimonies of the principals who participated in this study may not reflect the reality experienced across all public education systems in Brazil, but a significant portion of the educators working within them will see their efforts mirrored in these stories. It is also worth concluding that the "autonomy" granted to each school during the health crisis was used by school managers as a discretionary space for political action in areas where public authorities often fail to fulfill their duties. It is crucial that the lessons from the pandemic are not forgotten so that they can guide the



formulation of public policies that, in future crises, do not continue to exclude the same individuals as before.

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