

PUBLIC POLICIES AND SCHOOL REALITY

Políticas Públicas y La Realidad Escolar

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Resumen

Es notable cómo el acelerado avance tecnológico de las últimas décadas ha proporcionado cambios significativos en la economía, en el mercado de trabajo, en las relaciones interpersonales y en la educación. En el campo específico de la educación, esta “era de la información”, o informacional como dice Manuel Castells (1999) con basado en la revolución de las Tecnologías de la Información y la Comunicación (TIC), adquiere un papel fundamental pero también acentúa las dificultades en las acciones educativas, que se tornan complejas e imprevisibles (NÓVOA, 1999). En este escenario, donde surge la necesidad de una redefinición de los rumos que la educación debe tomar en una sociedad cada vez más conectada, en un panorama de avance tecnológico brutal, en el que está afuera de la red, imponderablemente estará perjudicado es imprescindible cuestionar cual es el grado de atención que el poder público da al problema. Teniendo en cuenta que las políticas públicas de democratización de las Tecnologías de la Información y la Comunicación se desarrollaran, en teoría, para la inclusión; es necesario entender porque algunas de esas políticas más parecen excluir. En este sentido, y si hoy no es difícil conectarse, ya que el acceso está más fácil, sea por el precio de los computadores personales, teléfonos celulares; y estar online parece ser una garantía de aumento de las posibilidades de inserción profesional, y también de emancipación individual; cabe cuestionar porque el poder no caminar junto a esta revolución. ¿Las escuelas del sistema público están atrasadas en este proceso? ¿Cómo es la introducción de los alumnos y profesores en esta “nueva” realidad? El objetivo de este trabajo es trazar paralelos entre el discurso oficial, representado principalmente por el programa de gobierno estadual “*Acessa Escola*”, y la realidad factual de las escuelas. Para tanto, fueran colectados datos sobre el programa en páginas de redes sociales y noticias sobre el programa, entre otros; confrontando-los con las observaciones y entrevistas hechas en tres escuelas públicas.

Palabras clave: Políticas Públicas, Realidad escolar, TIC, comunicación en redes sociales, discurso oficial.

Abstract

Rapid technological advance in recent years has triggered significant changes in the economy, job market, interpersonal relations and education, among other aspects of life. Specifically in the field of education, this era of information, or “information age” as put by Castells (2007), based on the revolution of information and communication technologies (ICTs), has acquired a fundamental role and also has accentuated the difficulties of educational actions, making them more complex and unpredictable (Nóvoa, 1999). In this scenario, where the need arises to redefine the role of education in an increasingly connected society, in a panorama of dizzying technological advance in which anyone without access to the web faces imponderable problems, it is essential to question the level of attention paid by the public authorities to the problem. Since public policies to promote democratization of ICTs should theoretically strive for inclusion, it is necessary to understand why some policies seem to do the opposite. In this respect, because these days it is becoming ever easier to have web access due to the falling prices of personal computers and mobile devices, and being online broadens the possibilities for professional insertion and individual emancipation, it is worth asking why the government is not keeping pace with this revolution. Why are public schools falling behind in this process? What is the best way to introduce students and teachers to this ‘new’ reality? The objective of this study is to trace parallels with the official discourse, represented mainly by a government program in the state of São Paulo, Brazil, and the factual reality of the schools served by it. For this purpose, I collected data on the program from social network pages and news stories, among other sources, and compared them with observations and comments collected by interviews conducted at three public schools in the greater São Paulo metropolitan region.

Keywords: translate into English

Introducción

The role of the government and the official discourse

Many spheres legislate on the educational quality as well as guaranteed access, provision of resources, etc. for education, among which I highlight some articles of the Brazilian Constitution, the Guidelines and Bases of Education Act, and especially the creation of the “Acessa Escola” (“School Access”) Program by the São Paulo state government.

As regards the Constitution, the pertinent provisions are Art. 23, paragraph V, which defines providing the means of access to culture, education and science as the duty of the federal, state and municipal governments; Art. 206, par. VII, according to which education must have assured quality; and Art. 214, par. III and V, which cover national education plans, with multi-year duration, aimed at the articulation and development of the various levels of education and the integration of government actions leading to improved quality of teaching and the human, scientific and technological development of the country, respectively.

In turn, the Guidelines and Bases of Education Act (Law 9,394/1996) establishes, in Art. 3, that education shall be provided based on the principles of freedom to learn, teach, research and promote culture, thought, art and knowledge (par. II) and of assured quality (par. IX), while Art. 4 states it is the duty of the State to provide education with guarantee of minimum standards of quality, defined as the minimum variety and quantity of inputs per student required to develop the teaching-learning process (par IX).

The importance of these articles, based on quality assurance, is latent, since I assume that access to new information technologies is essential for the training of public school students. But while quality standards are set as the primary goals of the law, it is possible that these objectives are only demanded when they are not met. The law becomes an instrument of social and political claims.

In the state of São Paulo, in June 2008, the State Education Secretariat, through a joint resolution with the Public Management Secretariat Office (SE/SGP Resolution 1 of 2008), created the “Acessa Escola” Program, an extension of another government plan, called “Acessa São Paulo”.

The program aims to provide access to information and communication technologies with the use of computer rooms put together in state schools¹. The idea is to enable “*knowledge building and social strengthening of the school team*” among students, staff, the Family School program users and public school teachers.

Coordinated by the Fundação para o Desenvolvimento da Educação – FDE (Foundation to Develop Education), which aims to “*promote the development of education and citizenship - in particular, working in the areas of education, infrastructure and information and communication technology,*” the program has among its action strategies enhancement of the use of existing infrastructure in schools to transform them into high school student training locations. As stated on the official communication page of the program², the aim is:

To promote the digital and social inclusion of public school students, teachers and school employees. Through the Internet, it allows users to access information and communication technologies to build knowledge and promotes social strengthening of the school team. Other aspects that we want to promote are:

- Youth engagement;
- Active youth participation in building new spaces within the school;
- Socialization of knowledge;
- Students, faculty and staff working interactively for knowledge exchange and building;
- Provision of services;
- Channel for access to resources with public utility available on the internet.

The program’s page available on a social network further states³:

- The program installs at high schools of the state system a room with the latest computers and broadband internet for free use of students, faculty and staff.
- The uninterrupted operation is guaranteed by continuous technical support and specially prepared interns, who ensure good quality service to users.

¹ It is common in Brazil for both the state and municipal governments to provide primary and secondary education, often with overlapping coverage.

² Information available on: <http://acessaescola.fde.sp.gov.br/Public/Conteudo.aspx?idmenu=11>. Access on April 7, 2015.

³ Information available at: https://www.facebook.com/pages/Programa-Acessa-Escola/271401046213701?sk=info&tab=page_info. Consulted on April 7, 2015.

- The “Acessa Escola” are open in the three school periods: morning, afternoon and evening. On weekends, they are used by all those who participate in the “Escola Família” program.
- Users can browse, search, format and print works, use online chat programs and participate in social networks.
- The room of the ‘Acessa Escola’ can also be used during classes when teachers lead students to research and learn using computers and the internet.

Also according to the information disclosed about the program, in the computer rooms that run during school hours, access is organized so that each user can use the computer for 30 minutes, after which he or she must go to the end of the line and wait for a new turn if desired. Each user signs a Declaration of Compliance (if under 18, parental permission is required) and obtains a unique password.

For the maintenance of rooms, the Fundação para o Desenvolvimento da Educação created the SEMPRE (permanent maintenance system of the school network), which besides upgrading existing structures to meet the demands for installation of computer rooms, is also responsible for implementing the “Acessa Escola” Program and for maintaining the facilities, according to priority: the urgent repairs begin in a maximum of five days, and other repairs are performed within 60 days.

In March 2013, some numbers on the project were released: 3,773 participating schools, 60,000 high school interns, and 55,000 computers installed with more than 62 million accesses. Speaking about the program, Governor Geraldo Alckmin said: “São Paulo does not leave anyone behind, by teaching people to use their computers and offering computers to those who do not have one.”⁴ The governor also reiterated that “I want everyone who follows us to keep in mind that, in terms of digital inclusion of students, São Paulo is setting an example.”⁵

A brief survey of news items about the program in the period from 2011 to 2014 showed the great importance of the role of the interns who work in the “Acessa Escola” computer rooms.

⁴ Alckmin fala sobre a ampliação do ‘Acessa Escola’. Available at: <http://tucano.org.br/radio-tucana/alckmin-fala-sobre-a-ampliacao-do-acessa-escola>. Consulted on October 2, 2014.

⁵ *Idem a.*

According to 2014 data⁶, an intern is a public high school student and receives a monthly stipend of R\$ 380.00. As also stated by the Secretary of Education of São Paulo, Herman Voorwald:

Interns are central figures. They work daily to assist the school community in the safe use of the internet and also receive important training for the job market. Therefore, we increased the number of positions: last year we offered 9,000 and in 2014 reached 11,000.⁷

For this analysis, the “Acessa Escola” was selected as a benchmark, both for being one of the highlights of the current state administration to curry favor with voters, and the need to limit the scope of this article. It is important to note that other programs use the same philosophy of digital inclusion, such as the “Rede do Saber” (“Knowledge Network”), for college training of elementary school teachers, to meet the provisions of the Guidelines and Bases Act; and the “Programa Nacional de Tecnologia Educacional” (Proinfo) of the Ministry of Education, which promotes use of ICTs as teaching tools in public elementary schools.

The school routine and the (real) access possibilities

With the information, data and proposals of the agencies responsible for implementing the “Acessa Escola” Program in mind, it was paid some initial visits to schools⁸. The negative finding depicted in the following paragraphs, we admit, it was already expected: we have already been vaccinated against political marketing. The important thing was to define how broad the chasm is between the official propaganda and the daily reality of public schools.

It was visited three schools located in Guarulhos, in the greater São Paulo metropolitan region. The first discrepancy appeared immediately in the program name. It was talked to twelve

⁶ *Idem a.*

⁷ Baixada Santista tem 483 inscritos para vagas de estágio no Acessa Escola. Available at: <http://www.tribuna.com.br/cidades/baixada-santista-tem-483-inscritos-para-vagas-de-est%C3%A1gio-no-acessa-escola-1.370848>. Consulted on October 2, 2014.

⁸ I chose these schools because they were early adopters of the program, allowing accompanying the progress since 2009 and due to proximity, since I studied at one of them and lived for many years in a nearby neighborhood.

students and eight teachers at the three schools, and most of them did not know the name “Acessa Escola”; all they knew was that there was a computer room whose purpose was to be a “cybercafé” or “LAN house”. This perception of the students regarding the programs is important, since it shows despite the political hype, at the grass-roots level competent authorities have made little effort to “give a face” to the project, i.e., the impression is that the “Acessa Escola” room, when existing, is no different from any other access tool. There is no commitment to the importance of computers as unique tools for education.

To make things worse, although they knew of the existence of the program (even if with another name), many students, staff and teachers of the schools visited said they never entered the rooms. The rooms were always closed, and in some cases had never been put into operation. Internally, it was found no encouragement or planning for the use of rooms or of the ICTs themselves by the coordinators or managers.

One of the schools was particularly poor in this respect. In January 2009, the boxes with equipment arrived. The assembly, originally scheduled for 60 days - as the FED site states about the SEMPRE maintenance program for non-urgent cases - took 240 days. The room remained closed at the time for lack of planning for the use, and in January 2010 (school holidays), the school was burgled, with the thieves making off with most of the hardware.

In July 2014 (four years later), the room was reassembled and the authorization form that parents of students under 18 must sign caused some surprise. The school secretary’s office reported that it received more than 20 calls a day asking about the rate for use of the computer, and saying that they would sign only if they were assured that no price would be charged.

It is worth noting that the interns hired for the program remained active in the schools, but their functions were restricted to helping the school staff to take care elementary school children or in school clerical services.

In contacts and interviews with eight teachers, I found that many were unaware of policies to encourage the democratization of ICTs created by the government, as well as their implementation and use. One of the exclusion factors is the lack of internal disclosure of these programs. The lack of information, both on what happens within the school itself and the legal rights that can be invoked, prevents any form of complaint or fight for rights. In this sense, the

teachers, much less the students, are not empowered to change the situation, as can be seen from the following comments:

“We have the computer, but so what, what can you do?”

“In the teachers’ room there is a computer to update the digital registry data. You cannot plan very well like that ... Only at home, if that.”

The number of computers made available to schools was also identified as a factor that hampers any attempt to use them. There are typically about 20 computers at schools with 1,000 students.

“Each student does whatever he wants on the computer, you cannot know ... Especially with two, three at each terminal.”

“Knowing how to use the PC is one thing, use it with an entire roomful of students is another.”

“Here at school, Felipe (one of the interns) knows how to post a link on the screen. One teacher used this feature, but when I arrived, the students were staring at the screen. I think that was not the idea of pedagogical intervention they expected.”

It is futile to promote a public policy without proper professional qualification. The teachers received no preparation and/or training to use the resources made available; many barely know how to use them, even less as a teaching resource. At this point, it is easy to see a generation gap among teachers. The oldest (five in all) believe that even if they received training they would not feel comfortable or prepared to use computers, while the youngest (three teachers) and recent graduates believe they are prepared and would have no problem to do so. However, the educational gap issue is broad. How does the application of these technologies work in the educational environment? No one interviewed knew the answer to this question, nor were the official websites of the programs in question useful in this respect.

The interviewed teachers also told us that the students use ICTs a lot outside the school environment, in LAN houses or at home (it is worth noting that the schools visited have students mainly drawn from low-income communities, which argues against unequal access to ICTs). They believe that the use is poorly carried out regarding the educational role of the computer, and can even lead to negative behaviors.

“They miss class to use Facebook or play extremely violent games on the net. One day I saw my son playing and was shocked by the pictures ... it was pure violence. Sometimes we see that they call each other by the 'nickname' and sometimes even fight when talking about this virtual environment.”

“Some of them know how to use the computer very well, but I do not know yet how much influence it has on learning.”

“Most students have no computer at home, so they use it here or in a LAN house.”

Further on the external (and inadequate) use, many teachers also complain about the students' lack of knowledge to perform research on the internet. They state they often receive several papers that are nearly or exactly the same when what they ask the students to deliver a research project, indicating either that lazy students are just copying the work of more diligent colleagues or are just cutting and pasting texts from the first Google hits on the assigned topic.

“Everything is ready on the internet. The student no longer has to at least do the work of copying a text by hand or trying to understand it. I get identical papers, sometimes even with the same number of pages. What should we do in this case, flunk all of them?”

The students' behavior is an important point to emphasize. In most of the interviews with staff and teachers the subject of damage was constant. The lack of appreciation for the common good ends up serving as an excuse for locking the computer rooms or for restricting access. When asked if there was a risk of damage, one of the monitors was direct: "every minute".

Official muzzle and the institutionalization of stagnation

During the school visits, the reluctance of some teachers, school staff and interns to talk about the program was noticeable, demonstrating some fear of expressing opinions about a public policy.

In the period of data collection for this study, because it was election season (October 2014), the program's website was down⁹. Thus, we asked the coordinator for information about the “Acessa Escola”. To our surprise, we were faced with bureaucratic hurdles on the release of information about public policies:

“Good afternoon,

To meet your request, it is necessary to ask the office of the secretary of education. With that authorization, there will be no problems.

Regards”¹⁰

With this orientation, we then asked for "permission" from the this office, which brought even more bureaucratic obstacles:

Dear Sir/Madam,

For your desired research to be authorized, an official letter must be sent to this Secretariat identifying the University, the Course and the professor guiding your work, as well as the subject of the work and a copy of your research project. After analysis of these documents it will be possible to issue or not, as appropriate, authorization for research, which should be clearly delineated.

⁹ The electoral laws in Brazil forbid any public service don't update information about government programs during electoral period.

¹⁰ E-mail received on October 2014.

A formal commitment to non-disclosure of data collected outside the academic environment, the prior authorization request for partial or full publication of any collected data and delivery of a copy of the Dissertation to the SEE Office are also conditions for authorization.

Sincerely”¹¹

In other words, official data were not transmitted and I was instructed to wait for the end of the elections and consequently the return of the site. Apart from the electoral propaganda, it is scary to come across this kind of restriction on access to public data. Interestingly, news about the program itself states that "in view of the capillarity of state schools, everything that refers to the program is of broad public knowledge."¹²

The chasm that separates the official discourse and school reality is huge. The delay in implementing the integration programs of the ICTs in state schools is embarrassing, and according to what was observed, there is light at the end of this long tunnel, especially when faced with this type of obstacle that restricts access to public information.

Thus, believing the political rhetoric can represent a step backwards in terms of the alternatives for the development of public school students and teachers. Meanwhile, the lack of information and knowledge of the laws that could at least ensure the fight for better conditions prevents any possibility of change.

¹¹ E-mail received on October 2014.

¹² ACESSA ESCOLA - Mario Covas award. Available at: http://www.premiomariocovas.sp.gov.br/2009/2009/Vencedores2009_Inov/inov_351.doc. Consulted on October 3, 2014.

Some considerations

As seen, there is a huge gap between the official propaganda and the reality of public school classrooms. It is not enough to just believe the political rhetoric; rather, it is necessary to dive headfirst into the daily life of schools. However, the lack of knowledge and information of the legal provisions that guarantee the quality of education and the resources to do so end up limiting any attempt at emancipation on the part of teachers, students and staff of the school system.

The logic of the distribution of resources should therefore always be accompanied by the respective professional development. It does not help to advertise the distribution of thousands of access points and computers in state schools if, in contrast, minimum conditions for their use in the teaching processes of these same schools are not created. In other words, put bluntly: What good is a computer if there is no intermediation project between technology and the education system?

The solution for this issue cannot rely forever on the individual initiative of the better prepared teacher. Even if such actions are commendable, the whole system logic should change. It is necessary to put into practice effectively and definitively every good intention contained in the official discourse; a discourse that it is still, in theory, an excellent idea for digital inclusion. It is necessary, within the limits and once again, to overcome the old barrier between theory and practice, to believe that it is possible, finally, to create a reality other than the unfortunate one at present.

We conclude with a long but significant quote from the text of Alvorí Ahlert, extracted from his text *Educational policies for the democratization of the access to science and technology*:

The role of the public school is to introduce its students to science and technology in order to provide educators and students with the creation of anti-hegemonic knowledge, to exercise in an active and reflexive way the new forms of interaction with the environment with the purpose of developing skills and competencies that allow emancipation. This should lead us to define, in the Education State Plan, public policies that advocate the access to technologies for state public schools in order to enable the qualification and social inclusion.” (Ahlert, 2007)

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