PROPOSING A DEFINITION OF PERSECUTION OF EDUCATORS BASED ON DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT: This article presents a proposal for defining what is persecution against educators in Brazilian basic education. To do so, it starts from the perspective of democratic education based on critical pedagogy, outlining what a desirable democratic participation is in the construction of educational communities. By contrast to this desirable participation, an action as persecution against teachers is defined when the analysis of it based on four criteria shows methods and objectives that are antidemocratic and contrary to educators' autonomy and authority. The four proposed criteria are: the targeted object, the employed method, the relationship of the actors with institutional spaces for participation, and the objectives and horizons of these actions.

Keywords: Democratic education. Persecution against educators. Discourse of indoctrination. Hate against teachers. School without party.

PROPONIENDO UNA DEFINICIÓN DE PERSECUCIÓN CONTRA EDUCADORES DESDE LA EDUCACIÓN DEMOCRÁTICA

RESUMEN: Este artículo propone una definición de lo que es persecución contra educadores en la educación básica brasileña. Para esto, parte de la apuesta por la educación democrática desde la pedagogía crítica, esbozando cuál sería la deseable participación democrática en la construcción de comunidades educativas. En contraste a esta participación deseable, definimos una acción como persecución de los docentes cuando su análisis, a partir de cuatro ejes, muestra métodos y objetivos antidemocráticos y contrarios a la autonomía y autoridad docente. Los ejes propuestos son: el objeto que es objetivo, el método empleado, la relación de los autores del acto con los espacios institucionales para la participación y los objetivos y horizontes de estos actos.

Palabras clave: Educación democrática. Persecución de educadores. Discurso de Discurso de doctrinamiento. Odio a los docentes. Escuela sin partido.

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PROPONDO UMA DEFINIÇÃO DE PERSEGUIÇÃO A EDUCADORAS(ES) BASEADA NA EDUCAÇÃO DEMOCRÁTICA

RESUMO: Este artigo propõe uma definição do que é a perseguição contra educadoras(es) na educação básica brasileira. Para isso, aposta na educação democrática baseada na pedagogia crítica, delineando, assim, o que é a participação democrática desejável na construção de comunidades educativas. Por contraste a essa participação desejável, sugere-se a definição de uma ação como perseguição a educadoras(es) quando a análise desta, feita conforme quatro eixos, evidencia métodos e objetivos antidemocráticos e contrários à autonomia e à autoridade docente. Os eixos apontados são: o objeto que é alvo; o método empregado; a relação dos autores do ato com os espaços institucionais para a participação; e os objetivos e horizontes desses atos.

Palavras-chave: Educação democrática. Perseguição a educadoras. Discurso da doutrinação. Ódio aos professores. Escola sem Partido.

Introduction

A serious threat to the right to education in Brazil has been emerging, undermining students' access to essential knowledge crucial for their full development: the systematic persecution of educators simply for performing their job duties.

When educators do not feel safe to perform their work in the classroom, fear leads to the exclusion of topics, approaches, and content from the school routine. This includes even legally mandated subjects, such as Afro-Brazilian and Indigenous history and culture, and classic curriculum topics like the theory of evolution and vaccination, which cease to be addressed in class due to an environment of insecurity where some educators are effectively censored and others self-censor – what the legal world calls a chilling effect (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Educators are severely affected directly, whether due to the emotional suffering caused by fear or the financial costs of a legal process, while students are prevented from engaging with important topics and content crucial for shaping their knowledge of the world and their life horizons. The freedom to teach and the freedom to learn are interdependent and constitutive of the right to education, and therefore cannot be attacked without endangering this right.

Everyone who has contact with the daily life of school and/or university institutions knows cases where educators were persecuted simply for doing their job according to their professional knowledge (Tardif, 2014), Brazilian educational legislation and with scientific knowledge. Based on the guide "Educators are human rights defenders" (IFRJ, 2021), between January 2018 and August 2021, there were 77 reports in newspapers, websites, blogs, and social media pages about persecuted educators, teacher illness, and censorship of educational materials. The guide also presents a survey – conducted through an online form available for responses for 15 days in October 2021, containing 837 responses from educators – in which 82.1% of respondents reported feeling threatened in some way by the current situation (IFRJ, 2021, p. 22).

Descriptions, analyses, and typologies of persecution also appear in the 'Manual de defesa contra a censura nas escolas' (Manual for defense against censorship in schools - 2022) and in the report "I Was Scared, That Was Their Goal": Efforts to Ban Gender and Sexuality Education in Brazil, by Human Rights Watch (2022). The aforementioned report analyzes the broad context and various cases, including interviews

with 32 educators from eight states in Brazil, where all of them report living in fear and 20 of them narrated having experienced some form of harassment.

This text seeks to systematize these practices that diminish the democratic density of educational communities by defining the persecution of educators. The Manual for Defense Against Censorship in Schools (2022), in our research, is one of the texts that best addresses the topic – its "Cases" section (p. 64-186) consists of a comprehensive systematization of the forms of this phenomenon known so far. Nevertheless, despite significant civil society initiatives such as the guide, report, and manual mentioned earlier, the absence of this explicit definition makes it more difficult to produce comprehensive data on this phenomenon, impedes the recognition of self-censorship and persecution as violations, and complicates efforts to prioritize these practices in public policies aimed at restoring the autonomy and authority of educators and providing redress for persecuted educators. Unfortunately, it also hinders the perception of the seriousness of these violations even among educators themselves.

We understand that persecution has become a broad and systematic phenomenon. We refer to it as a singular phenomenon because, despite the multiple practices of intimidation against educators, there is a nexus among these various individual cases that appears to have become part of the school routine. In the effort to understand this new element of the teachers'daily life in Brazilian basic education, the first step should be to propose a definition for the concept. A promising heuristic possibility is to start by distinguishing persecution from its opposite: desirable community participation in school life, essential for democratic education.

The first part of the text aims to propose a definition for democratic education and consider its relationship with democratic management. This discussion is crucial for the second part of the text, which aims to develop a definition for systematic persecution of educators, in contrast to democratic participation in the daily life of an educational community. The second part starts with a brief literature review on the topic and concludes with a proposal to define the concept of systematic persecution. In this text, we use "educators" to encompass both male and female professionals because, although teachers are the primary targets of persecution, other education professionals (such as coordinators, principals, etc.) are also victims of this form of violence.

A Definition of Democratic Education

Democratic Education: Contested Meanings

> The term "democratic education" holds enormous hegemonic potential because who would be against democratic education? We need to establish some meanings of this term that are not open to negotiation: education that is not limited to job training, combats various forms of oppression that exclude many young people from school life, and values education professionals. However, to reinforce the hegemonic potential of the "democratic education" banner, it is important to retain, to some extent, the term's nature as an empty signifier. Defining it meticulously would reduce its power to encompass a totality that exceeds it and to articulate different struggles for public schooling. "Democratic education" cannot be defined in advance by anyone, as such a definition would be irremediably tied to its context of production. Each society needs to constantly discuss what the goals of school education should be in light of the challenges posed by each historical context. (Penna, 2018, p. 128).

One of the goals of this study is to propose a definition for democratic education, enabling the definition of educators' persecution in contrast to the democratic practices that permeate educational communities.

Firstly, when we speak of democratic education, are we referring to an academic concept or a political banner? If we adhere to the political discourse theory developed by Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau (2015), we can argue that democratic education is a signifier whose meaning is contested by different discourses that seek to set it. Academic discourse is characterized by its methodological rigor and commitment to a scientifically grounded provisional truth, whereas political discourse deals with the urgent rights disputes that can impact the preservation of life or the management of death. Penna (2018), using political discourse theory, views democratic education as a signifier with significant hegemonic potential (who would be against it?), yet it needs to maintain its empty character and remain open to incorporating new agendas. Another way to conceptualize democratic education is as a floating signifier, where its meanings are continuously debated within educational discourses.

The selection of the term "democratic education" holds significance, yet equally critical is the interpretation that one seeks to set to it in the debate. The previously quoted citation highlights three elements. The first underscores the importance of understanding the complexity of the educational phenomenon, contrasting it with schooling projects that seek to undermine its educational essence by narrowing teaching to mere knowledge transmission. The third element focuses on valuing education professionals, contrasting with the hate campaign against educators propagated by reactionary movements and the precariousness of teaching work. The second one forms the core of our conception of democratic education: "Combatting various forms of oppression that result in the exclusion of many young people from daily school life." (Penna, 2018, p. 128). Recognizing the structural nature of social inequality relationships in shaping any pedagogical practice aimed at social transformation is an indispensable aspect of our interpretation of the concept. This is the defining feature of what constitutes democratic education for us.

In the realm of academic discourse, several studies do not explicitly use the term "democratic education," yet they are effectively addressing the democratization of both schools and society in that regard. Consider the literature on anti-racist education, popular education, adult and youth education, inclusion, accessibility, and more. These represent the many facets of what we encompass within the concept of democratic education.

The Center for Studies in Democratic Education at the Federal Fluminense University has been striving to develop its appropriation (always provisional) of the concept through an exploration of relevant literature and an assessment of different research fields that contribute to the area, even though they do not use the term "democratic education." At this stage of our work, the research conducted by Edda Sant (2019) holds significant importance. She undertook a literature review on the diverse applications of the concept of democratic education, employing the following approach:

> Discourses are structured around pivotal points or signs (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001), which serve as converging points for various discourses (Mannion et al., 2011, p. 444). Some of these pivotal points function as "floating signifiers" (Laclau, 2007) or critical yet disputed "horizons": aspirational symbols "that different discourses compete to imbue with meaning in their peculiar ways" (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 28). For instance, within the political realm, "democracy" operates as a floating signifier across various political discourses. While liberal democracy prevails as the dominant form in Western democratic politics, the definition of democracy remains unsettled, with competing discourses vying for predominance (i.e., hegemony) by presenting their own version of democracy as the "real" one (Laclau & Mouffe,

2001). This review starts with the premise that democratic education operates as a floating signifier within the academic literature of the educational field, subject to structural pressures from competing agendas. Conceptualizing democratic education in this context provides us with the theoretical and methodological tools to analyze it as a widely embraced yet contested moral aspiration. (Sant, 2019, p. 658).

The literature review conducted by Sant (2019) focuses on articles that used the term "democratic education" in the title, keywords, or abstract, and were published in peer-reviewed English-language journals between 2006 and 2017. The theoretical framework utilized was Laclau and Mouffe's (2015) political theory of discourse, which conceptualizes "democratic education" as a floating signifier. The articles were analyzed according to four categories (political project, philosophical assumptions, public policy, and practice), revealing eight distinct versions, each associated with a distinct political discourse. Among these eight versions, six advocate for democratic education (liberal, deliberative, participatory, multicultural, critical, and agonistic), while two oppose it (elitist and neoliberal).

In a subsequent publication, Sant (2021) chose to: exclude the elitist discourse, due to its minimal presence in Western liberal democracies; replace multiculturalism with decolonial discourse, given the relevance of this perspective to her argumentation; and rename the 'agonistic' discourse as 'radical,' believing that this second term better encompasses the proponents of this perspective. At the heart of this conception of democratic education lies the framework advocated by critical pedagogy. Here is the initial description developed by Edda Sant (2019) of "critical democratic education":

> Critical educators seek equality and social transformation. Critical democrats are concerned with the deficits of aggregative and liberal systems as they reproduce existing inequality and power relations. They argue that most existing democracies operate as thin versions of democracy, where society is atomized into individuals whose voices are confined to the market system, thereby limiting possibilities for real social change. (Carr, 2008; Lim, 2011; Menashy, 2007; Veugelers, 2007). Against this thin democracy defined in terms of choices, individualism, and the status quo, critical democrats advocate for a thick normative democracy in which all humans have equal and real opportunities to be agents of social transformation (Carr, 2008; Hatzoloulos, 2015; Lim, 2011). Social transformation is not seen as neutral but rather as committed to the value of equality, which underpins the ethical demands of the critical democratic educator. (Sant, 2019, p. 674-675).

When we integrate democratic education with critical pedagogy, we engage in the discourse on democracy's meanings. It's crucial to recognize initially that this conception of democracy opposes the neoliberal appropriation of the term, which is rooted in an aggregative model. In societies dominated by neoliberalism, democracy tends to be shallow, characterized by atomization (individualism), the normalization of social inequality (status quo), and constraints on genuine social change. Defining high-density democracy entails critically examining structural inequalities and embracing an ethical commitment to social transformation.

Our proposal is that the research focus in democratic education should center on either reducing or expanding democratic density. One of the most frequently cited authors in discussions of democratic density within the field of critical pedagogy is Professor Michael Apple, particularly in his collaboration with Gandin (Gandin & Apple, 2002). Apple (2011) himself, in an article titled "Democratic Education in Neoliberal and Neoconservative Times," however, criticizes some of the academic leaders of the critical pedagogy movement for "not sufficiently connecting to the actual realities of schools and classrooms (Apple, 2011, p. 24), and

argues that "there is a powerful need to connect critical educational theories and approaches to the actual ways in which they can be and are present in real classrooms and other educative sites" (Apple, 2011, p. 24).

When discussing "other educational spaces", Apple (2011) broadens the debate beyond the institutional aspect, a path that we also follow here: we adopt the concept of community developed in the field of critical pedagogy, as it highlights the relationship among individuals within educational settings. The work of intellectual bell hooks (2022) is pivotal in this discussion for her exploration of the term "learning communities". However, the term 'learning' has recently been co-opted by a discourse that seeks to diminish the role of 'teaching', thereby denying the properly educational dimension of the relationship between students and educators (Biesta, 2012). Hence, we advocate for educational communities..

We find this focus potent for the field of democratic education studies – engaging with practices that either enhance or diminish democratic density – because it avoids the normative approach of establishing a predefined list of practices to follow. Instead, it centers on the everyday reality of educational communities and emphasizes the importance of understanding antidemocratic practices to effectively combat them. By exploring the concept of educational communities, it also creates room for discussing non-institutionalized experiences and addresses both primary and higher education. Nevertheless, in this article, we specifically address the systematic persecution of educators in primary education

Democratic Management and Democratic Education

There are multiple ways to conceptualize the relationship between democratic management and democratic education. While the terms can often be used interchangeably, we propose differentiating them by viewing democratic education as a broader phenomenon that encompasses democratic management. Democratic management would then be one of the key practices that enhance the democratic density of an educational community. This practice is particularly significant as it creates space for the institutionalization of other democratic practices and helps restrain anti-democratic tendencies.

Licínio Lima (2014, p. 1071-1073) identifies three fundamental dimensions of democratic school management: elections for selecting members of governing bodies and representatives, collegiality, and participatory decision-making. It is crucial to recognize that, similar to democratic education, the concept of democratic management is also contested and can be interpreted in multiple ways. Neoliberal thought characterizes it as an irrational management suffering from a leadership deficit and, therefore, as inefficient. Some attempt to neutralize the transformative power of democratic management by reducing it to established democratic structures and processes, while the real decision-making power has been shifted back (or never left) to some traditional political-administrative center. When decision-making power is effectively decentralized and resides within each school, there is the potencial for establishing democratic self-governance:

> In this context, democratically elected and scrutinized collegial bodies exercise autonomy nased on active participation, debate, and dialogue, engaging in practices of direct democracy whenever feasible and suitable. They also participate in representative democracy, thereby reinforcing school self-governance and pedagogical self-management within the framework of national educational policies and systems. This approach promotes diversity in practices and facilitates the decentralization of power to schools. In the context of *instituting democratic management,* the school can be understood in various organizational frameworks. It functions both as a system or political arena where diverse interests and agendas coexist, and as an *educational community* capable of democratically resolving its conflicts. This includes demanding that the State fulfill its obligations and opening itself to the local community

and non-specialists. Such openness serves to broaden and politically strengthen pedagogical discourses and the voices of educators and students within power dynamics that are traditionally quite asymmetrical and disadvantageous to schools and their members (Lima, 2014, p. 1074, italics added).

In an instituting democratic management, where the school can be understood as an educational community, institutional spaces are created for active participation and questioning of various natures and subjects. These institutional spaces for participation and questioning are crucial for fostering democracy within the school, allowing the actions of different members of the educational community to be scrutinized.

Especially when discussing educators (not just teachers), it is essential to recognize that they possess professional knowledge enabling them to plan pedagogical interventions (Tardif, 2014). This professional authority should never turn into authoritarianism and must always remain open to questioning, viewing such inquiries as pedagogical opportunities. The classroom should be an open forum for student inquiries, while the administration should welcome questions from parents and other community members.. This professional authority carries a corresponding responsibility: teachers must be accountable for their pedagogical decisions, and administrators must uphold the institution's democratic principles and ensure respect for all members of the community.

Scientific thinking offers significant contributions to students' lives, and educators possess the professional expertise to guide the construction of academic knowledge. Additionally, the knowledge developed with students in basic education serves as a foundation, enabling them to access their other fundamental rights (Cury, 2006). In this context, legitimate and healthy participation in democratic education involves seeking out existing structures within school management to engage in decision-making processes about school life and, when such such structures are lacking, working to establish them through dialogue. When school management is not democratic, but the demand for participation is, it is entirely legitimate to engage in political struggle to democratize the institution and create spaces for decision-making involvement. Both this political struggle and participation should respect and value scientific knowledge, educators' professional expertise, the exchange of ideas, and, above all, the presence of diversity in school culture, emphasizing the importance of representativeness.

A Definition of Systematic Persecution of Educators

Undertheorization of the Persecution of Educators

This text aims to develop a definition of persecution against educators, viewing it as a systematic social phenomenon. It is understood as an action that repeats itself in various places and moments, sharing common traits significant enough to warrant a unique conceptual framework. First and foremost, why undertake this task?

As we discuss below, the literature on this subject has not yet developed a categorization to name this type of violence committed against educators, which we refer to here as 'persecution'. The lack of a specific term results in a dearth of detailed knowledge production about these acts, ultimately hindering our ability to understand the broader implications of this practice over the medium and long term. The lack of a definition for what constitutes *or not* persecution against an educator is significant. It highlights a gap in our thinking and in our inquiries.

Interestingly, while academia has extensively studied the "Escola sem Partido" (School Without Party) movement, persecution against educators has simultaneously become normalized despite a decline in the School without Party signifier's influence among a segment of the Brazilian population that originally supported its main ideas (Ação Educativa; Cenpec; Cesop/Unicamp, 2022). For all these reasons, we argue that the processes of persecution should have the status of an object of knowledge in themselves, and no longer be subsumed under School Without Party. This subsumption of an entire systematic phenomenon under a signifier is very well illustrated by Luana Pommé Ferreira da Silva (2021, p. 25), in the first chapter of her dissertation:

> It is important to point out the way in which the expression "School Without Party" [...] will name and take various forms by its advocates, sometimes as a movement of "autonomous" individuals from civil society, sometimes as a legal organization/entity that supports these individuals, sometimes as the name of a "Program" for schools, sometimes as the name given to Legislative Bills (PL in Portuguese) aiming to implement the program in schools.
> It is therefore important to emphasize that we will use the expression "School Without Party" in all these forms, depending on the context, but above all as a program or movement that is articulated around a certain conception of education.

The author acknowledges the collapse of objects occurring within the gravitational force of the signifier "School Without Party," even as carried out by its proponents. Her decision to use "School Without Party" in all its forms, as she states, seems to have been taken by much of the literature on the subject, but perhaps less deliberately.

It seems there has been a collapse between the signifiers "School Without Party" and persecution, censorship, attacks on teacher autonomy, among other terms that refer to silencing and hindering the profession (see Alves's systematic review, 2022).

"School Without Party", *stricto sensu*, is a specific group founded in 2004, with social media networks under its own name, presided over by an individual named Miguel Nagib. Over time, the literature has correctly indicated that the group's ideas have spread widely, and were adopted by many individuals and groups across various spaces, generating a multitude of political and organizational strategies to engage in political struggle on its behalf. However, this collapse of meanings prevents us from seeing that one of these strategies has become autonomous from "School Without Party" initiative and has taken on a life of its own, becoming both the modus operandi of figures willing to profit through cultural warfare (Castro Rocha, 2021) and a practice entrenched in the political culture of parents, mothers, and guardians who consume far-right content vilifying educators.

This means that persecution has become so widespread and disseminated that it can be carried out both professionally by political entrepreneurs, like Deputy Gustavo Gayer (Liberal Party-GO), and spontaneously, as in the case of families mobilizing through school WhatsApp groups to intimidate educators, as has happened to education professionals Daniela Abreu (RJ) and Juliana Andozio (SC) in 2023. All this occurs without any reference to the "School Without Party" by the agents of persecution. What has become hegemonic is the idea of indoctrination, leading us to now consider a "discourse of indoctrination" where researcher Silva (2021) spoke of "School Without Party."

Another indication of the under-theorization of this phenomenon, aside from the absence of an established category for it, is the scarcity of studies that use the keyword "persecution" to describe situations of censorship, attacks, threats, and similar issues. Among the research on the discourse of indoctrination

and School Without Party enterprise, many studies address significantly persecution but do not include it as a keyword in their texts.

The dissertation "O professor de história no fio da navalha: o Escola sem Partido no cotidiano do trabalho educativo" (The History Teacher on the Razor's Edge: School Without Party in the Everyday Work of Education) by Felipe Dias de Oliveira Silva (2020) lists the following keywords: School Without Party, history teaching, educational work, teaching practices. Despite this, the dissertation includes a subchapter titled "Persecution of Teachers: Between Absences and Denunciations," in which the author explicitly states that School Without Party has developed "a series of measures capable of instituting systematic persecution of teachers and their public exposure" (Silva, 2020, p. 116). In this chapter, the author analyzes and describes many situations and actions that demonstrate self-censorship and persecution against educators, perpetrated not by established representatives of School Without Party, but by several members of school communities.

The work "Onda conservadora na educação pública: (auto)censura e resistência entre os profissionais do magistério do Município de São Paulo" (Conservative Wave in Public Education: (Self-)Censorship and Resistance among Teaching Professionals in the Municipality of São Paulo) by Sartori (2021) lists the following keywords: pedagogical ideas, pedagogical practices, educational policies, "School Without Party," São Paulo Municipal Department of Education. Despite the absence of references to the persecution of educators in these keywords, this study is one of the most detailed we have found on the broad concept of persecution. It addresses the concern of identifying the general agents of persecution, the methods of persecution, and the themes targeted (Sartori, 2021, pp. 133-135).

It is important to note that much of this discussion is grounded on the authors' knowledge in the field of studies on the School Without Party initiative. Several works mentioned in this article were found during the regular course of our research.

When searching for persecution of teachers, without quotation marks, in the Catalog of Theses and Dissertations of the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (Capes), 33 results returned. In the Capes Periodicals Portal, the same search yields 49 results. Using quotation marks for specific searches provides more focused results: "perseguição de professores" (persecution of teachers) returns one result in the Theses Catalog; "perseguição a docentes" (persecution of academic staff) two results returns; "ameaças contra professores" (threats against teachers) one result returns; and "ódio aos professores" (hatred towards teachers) returns three results. Refining searches without quotation marks within the Theses Catalog to major areas such as Humanities, Linguistics, Arts, and Applied Social Sciences shows specific distributions: "ódio aos professores" (hatred towards teachers) generates 35 results; "perseguição de professoras" (persecution of female teachers) results in 18 results (with nine not relevant to the topic); "perseguição a docentes" (persecution of teachers) lists 14 relevant findings; and "ameaças contra professores" (threats against teachers) brings up 94 results. In contrast, searches on the Capes[1] Periodicals Portal reveal broader results: "*perseguição a professores*" (persecution of teachers) returns 53 results, although many are unrelated to the topic; "ódio aos professores" (hatred towards teachers) lists 49 results; and "ameaças a professores" (threats against teachers) shows 191 results.

In an article on the state of the art of studies on School Without Party published between 2016 and 2018, Guimarães Rossi and Fernandes Pátaro (2020, p. 3, italic added) state:

> To organize the material in this article, we chose not to present each work individually but to group them around common themes addressed by different authors. Thus, based on discussions in the scientific literature we reviewed, we have identified categories that cluster the works into four themes: "School Curriculum," "Ideology and Neutrality," "Gender Ideology," and

"Implications of School Without Party (Escola sem Partido - ESP) for Teachers and Students." It's noteworthy that these categories were not predefined but emerged from successive readings and re-readings of the collected material, which allowed us to identify the aspects receiving greater emphasis in the academic production surrounding ESP.

In another state-of-the-art study on the same object of study, School Without Party, encompassing works published between 2018 and 2020, Alves (2022) created the label "Teaching Work" to categorize a portion of the works. These two state-of-the-art studies (Guimarães Rossi and Fernandes Pátaro, 2020; Alves, 2022) contribute to our assessment of the paths taken by the literature on the subject.

The article by Picoli, Radaelli, and Tedesco (2020), "Anti-intellectualism, neoconservatism, and reactionism in contemporary Brazil: School Without Party movement and the persecution of teachers," is one of the few that theorizes the process of persecution against teachers. We consider this theoretical movement because it examines the organizational structure of anti-intellectualism within School Without Party, where persecution serves as prominent method. The text mentions several methods and how they intimidate teachers while empowering conservative parents to engage in censorship. However, persecution is not directly defined; its meaning is constructed based on its equivalence to synonyms of persecution and signifiers for their consequences: "criminalize" (Picoli; Radaelli; Tedesco, 2020, p. 60), teachers treated as enemies (Picoli; Radaelli; Tedesco, 2020, p. 60), "promote censorship" (Picoli; Radaelli; Tedesco, 2020, p. 61).

Luana Pommé Ferreira da Silva's dissertation (2021), titled " School Without Party: Strategy for Consensus Building or Censorship? A Study in Alagoas," (*Escola sem Partido: estratégia para a construção de consenso ou censura? Um estudo em Alagoas)*, as previously mentioned, lists the following keywords: School Without Party, educational policy, teachers' opinions, integral State, censorship. Employing a Gramscian theoretical framework, the study examined School Without Party, including a field research component with teachers in Alagoas to assess their opinions and the movement's impact on teaching practices. Focusing on School Without Party as part of an integral State with a significant role in capitalist reproduction, persecution is subsumed under the concept of consensuses produced by the movement, including the notion that teachers are indoctrinators. The study does not provide a more detailed elaboration on the persecutory practices generated by this consensus; persecution, it seems, is considered evident in School Without Party 's demands for censorship.

Works that advance the discussion on persecution itself are essential for understanding the intricacies of the phenomenon. Ariane Rebouças Araújo (2023), in her master's dissertation *Professores de história em tempos de autoritarismo: experiências de resistências à perseguição nas redes pública e privada do ensino médio em Fortaleza-Ceará* (History Teachers in Times of Authoritarianism: Experiences of Resistance to Persecution in Public and Private High Schools in Fortaleza, Ceará) (2014-2022), incorporates the concepts of symbolic violence and provides crucial empirical data on the subject, including the documentation of official processes against teachers in Ceará. Her focus on persecution leads to crucial conclusions for understanding and combating the phenomenon: the observation that private school networks constitute spaces of symbolic violence against educators; the use of persecution as an electoral campaign strategy; and the medium and long-term impacts on educators' profession and health. Nonetheless, this dissertation does not include "persecution" or any synonyms in its keywords, which are: far-right, history teaching, teaching experiences, contemporary period.

Previous works by the authors of this text also did not theorize about persecution as we do here, taking it as implied since its meaning in the texts is constructed through its equivalence with other signifiers of violent acts (censorship, criminalization, attacks). Penna's previous texts (2016; 2017; 2021) on hatred

towards teachers analyze this hate speech, which, as we intend to discuss here, is the method employed in the systematic persecution of educators. Previous works by Aquino and Moura, in collaboration with other researchers, similarly approach the object 'persecution' without defining it in detail (Moura, 2018; Salles; Silva, 2018; Mendonça; Moura, 2021; Aquino; Moura, 2022).

The persecution against educators lacks thorough efforts to systematically understand its functioning, specific dynamics, and initiatives to gather more data on it. We need to address several critical questions: Why has persecution become so usual? Are there historical precedents for it? What future does it suggest? Why is the teaching profession particularly vulnerable to these processes? What role do institutions play in this phenomenon? Does persecution occur more frequently in the public or private sectors, and what factors contribute to this trend? Who perpetrates the persecution? How is persecution organized? Is it centralized or decentralized? What are the most targeted issues? Is there a difference in the degree of persecution between elementary and high school education? Do social markers of difference impact the frequency and severity of persecution processes against educators? In what environments do those who commit acts of persecution organize themselves, such as visiting schools or exposing teachers on social media? Who are the main agents of persecution in terms of quantity and severity of acts? Under what circumstances does persecution intensify, and when is it halted to respect educators' academic freedom?

All these crucial questions can only be adequately answered, both for knowledge production and public policy development, when we have a clear definition of 'persecution'. As demonstrated, several studies approach this movement of definition but do not fully conclude on it. It seems that this deficiency arose due to an excessive convergence on signifiers that name the impacts and actions of moral panic and "war on indoctrination." Therefore, we argue that the essential solution is to define persecution not solely based on the actions of the School Without Party initiative, but rather in alignment with our concrete political horizons: democratic education and governance.

The Persecution of Educators as a Threat to Democratic Education

The purpose of this section is to present a preliminary definition, still subject to change in response to new researches, of the concept of 'systematic persecution of educators'. Proposing this definition is important for two reasons: so that the term can serve as a keyword to encompass a series of studies already being produced, which unfortunately do not significantly interact with each other; and so that this dialogue can occur according to a minimal definition of the phenomenon. The proposed definition is outlined according to four key axes, which we believe are formally present in all particular manifestations of the phenomenon. Systematic persecution can be defined by its target object, the method employed, its relationship with institutional spaces for participation, and its objectives and horizons.

The Object: Educators are the Target

We are dealing here with a form of violence against education, or more precisely, against the educational dimension of schools (and universities). The reactionary discourse advocating for a "School Without Party" argued that "teachers are not educators," that education is the exclusive responsibility of the family and religion, and that teachers should limit themselves to transmitting neutral content, without mobilizing values or discussing the students' reality. It is an attack on the educational and, consequently, political dimension of schools, as well as on all practices aimed at enhancing the democratic density of educational communities. Students and their families also become targets of violence when they advocate

for the democratization of schools, but education professionals are often viewed as the prime targets for persecution. Firstly, because of their strategic position as key actors in the struggle for democratization, and also due to a metonymic strategy by the agents of persecution: by attacking educators, they are attacking the entire educational project that these educators represent.

Educators are inseparable from the knowledge they embody in the classroom and from a body invested with characteristics and a way of being in the world that are always socially interpreted. In the classroom, educators embody scientific knowledge, curricular knowledge, and experiential knowledge (Tardif, 2014). This relationship between a body and the knowledge it embodies explains how scientific denialism and attempts to remove topics from curricula that have been mandatory until now are driving forces behind the persecution of educators; it is a rejection of all the accumulated experience of educators.

This knowledge is embodied by a body that is socially interpreted according to its social markers—a teacher's knowledge can be questioned simply because of who they are—a body whose legitimate knowledge the persecutor does not recognize. This is why intersectionality is important, not only to understand how social inequality leads to the exclusion of students but also to consider the differentiated vulnerability of educators in the face of persecution:

> Intersectionality investigates how intersecting power relations influence social interactions across diverse societies, as well as individual experiences in everyday life. As an analytical tool, intersectionality views categories of race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, ability, ethnicity, and age—among others—as interrelated and mutually shaping one another. Intersectionality is a way to understand and explain the complexity of the world, people, and human experiences. (Collins; Bilge, 2021, p. 15-16).

Our hypothesis is that the vulnerability of educators to persecution varies significantly. Depending on factors such as sexual orientation, gender identity, type of employment relationship to the institution where they work, religion beliefs or lack thereof, guiding ideology, and others, certain educators may face higher levels of persecution than others. This hypothesis aligns with Patricia Hill Collins' (2022) proposal to understand violence as a site saturated with intersecting power relations. These saturated sites "bundle together practices, social institutions, representations, and patterns of everyday social interaction that appear and reappear across seemingly separate systems of oppression" (Collins, 2022, p. 328). This is one of the issues to be further investigated regarding systematic persecution, understanding it as a form of violence against educators.

The Method: Hate Speech Against Educators

> In principle, hate speech targets an individual not because they have harmed the speaker, but because they possess a characteristic that associates them with a specific group. [...] A second characteristic of hate crimes is that they stigmatize and defame a group by attributing acts that are detrimental to society, even if proving them is difficult, if not impossible, because they often stem from a distant history of prejudice or are perpetuated through rumors and gossip. [...] Thirdly, hate speech targets a group precisely because obscure myths seek to justify stirring up contempt that society should feel towards that group, according to the creators of these myths. [...] Fourthly, the person uttering hate speech or committing a hate crime believes there is a structural inequality between them and the victim, viewing themselves as superior. [...] Lastly,

another characteristic of hate speech, whether or not it incites violence, is its lack of substantial argumentation; it does not aim to provide reasons but rather to express disdain and encourage others to share it. (Cortina, 2020).

If the target of systematic persecution is the educator, its method is based on hate speech. According to the definition proposed by Adela Cortina (2020), previously mentioned, hate speech targets an individual not because of something they have done, but because they possess a characteristic that associates them with a particular group. When an educator conducts an activity or discusses a topic that contradicts the persecutor, what was done or said becomes less important than portraying the educator as a threat to their values. This first characteristic of hate speech established by Cortina (2020) is strongly linked to the last one; the focus of hate speech against educators is not argumentative (engaging democratically in a debate about a certain practice) but rhetorical: to express and incite hatred so that it is shared, potentially leading to more brutal forms of violence.

The dissemination of hate speech against educators through the signifier *indoctrination* has turned educators into easily attackable figures. The signifier *indoctrination* has become a code for marking a boundary between *friend* and *enemy*, reversing the dynamics of trust necessary for building educational communities, and disrupting practices aimed at constructing, maintaining, and increasing the democratic density of schools. Its establishment in public debates has *encouraged* persecution, creating conditions that make it possible by reframing everyday school practices, which are often mandated by law, as indoctrination. This endangers educators in the medium and long term and serves as a *form* of persecution, once the term labels a violation for which educators must be reported on social media, to institutions, and even on specific platforms, despite Brazilian legislation.[2]

It is important to grasp the dimension of this fact: persecuting educators has become politically profitable. Appealing to the fear of "gender ideology" and the "indoctrinating teacher" has turned into an effective way to attract attention (Aquino & Moura, 2022), and potentially convert that attention into financial and/or political gain.

Relationship With Spaces of Participation: the Weakening of the Democratic Density of Educational Communities

Among the numerous ways to define *persecution*, why do so in contrast to democratic education? Democratic management creates institutional channels for community participation in daily school life. The existence of these channels, with varying degrees of robustness, establishes not only legitimate but also healthy forms of participation. Thus, if a student disagrees with something an educator says but recognizes the educator as a professional with technical knowledge and questions them respectfully, this disagreement becomes a pedagogical opportunity to strengthen dialogue.

When this questioning fails to foster dialogue within the classroom, it takes the form of a complaint: the issue is brought to a higher authority within the school. Complaints can be important for democratic education. In a democratic school management, complaints (submitted through institutional channels) can uncover violence occurring in the school and reaffirm the institution's commitment to adressing such behavior. In schools with undemocratic management that lack spaces for participation or channels for complaints, these complaints serve as a means of political pressure for the democratization of the school environment. In contrast, the complaint that initiates persecution does not have these characteristics. Instead, it disrupt democratic education.

An essencial aspect in characterizing systematic educators persecution is how a complaint relates to institutional spaces for participation. For a topic to be discussed or for the institution to handle a complaint where the accused person's right to a full defense is guaranteed, sufficient time is needed for the proper deliberative or administrative disciplinary process to be initiated and resolved fairly. The complaint that

initiates persecution does not aim to establish respectful dialogue about school practices; instead, it arises from a certainty of the accuser's rightness and is intended to harm the accused and/or benefit the accuser. When an educator, acting in accordance with their professional knowledge, faces aggressive accusations without being directly questioned, it often leads to unwarranted exposure and potential harm.

Systematic persecution may not engage institutional spaces for debate and questioning when educators are exposed on social media or become subjects of legal proceedings. Alternatively, it may mobilize these spaces only formally, ultimately subverting them (de-democratization). In either case, the most likely consequence of persecution is a reduction in the democratic density of educational communities.

The Objective: Fear and (Self)Censorship

Systematic persecution targeting educators relies on hate speech directed at them and does not engage democratic political participation spaces within educational communities. Its aim is to silence educators, either through explicit acts of censorship or through a climate of fear that leads to self-censorship. This persecution has been normalized and accepted as an unquestioned form of violence, spreading fear and insecurity among educators. If the method is hate speech, the objective is to instill fear that leads to self-censorship. This method has been normalized by political actors who encourage such practices and have made it profitable for others seeking to use this platform to gain attention.

The agenda of the School Without Party enterprise[3] serves as a guiding thread in this analysis. The mobilization of hatred against educators was pivotal in the rise of the group that reaped post-2013 political gains and held power between 2019 and 2022. School Without Party, specifically the discursive formation it represents, played a central role in uniting various right-wing groups that formed Jair Bolsonaro's political base and advanced the country's process of de-democratization (Miguel, 2016; Kalil, 2018; Salles & Silva, 2018; Cesarino, 2021; 2022; Mendonça & Moura, 2021) as it framed indoctrination as a politically lucrative concept. This push for censorship also significantly intensified the judicialization of the educational field.

To advance in the theoretical understanding of persecution, as previously discussed in this text, we make a distinction between *discursive formation* and what we term the School Without Party *enterprise*, often referred to in the literature as a 'movement'. We understand the "Escola sem Partido" discourse—or discursive formation (Laclau & Mouffe, 2015)—as characterized by the nodal point of the signifier *indoctrination* (Laclau, 2011). Therefore, we prefer to designate it as *discourse of indoctrination*. The prominence of this term within the discourse delineates its boundaries and determines the meanings assigned to curriculum and the school environment, fostering a distinctly conservative conception of education (Salles, 2017) through reactionary rhetoric (Penna & Salles, 2017).

This conception of education reframes schooling as a constant potential for *indoctrination*. This reframing sparked significant moral panic surrounding "gender ideology" (Junqueira, 2022) in Brazil during the 2010s and led to 237 censorship bills by 2020 (Aquino & Moura, 2022). It transformed educators into targets of hatred (Penna, 2016; 2017; 2021) and culminated in a scenario of systematic persecution of educators in primary education (Human Rights Watch, 2022; IFRJ, 2021; Manual, 2022)

In this context, the discourse of indoctrination aligns with other political currents (such as prosperity theology, the rise of coaches and self-help) that converged under Jair Bolsonaro. According to Rodrigo Nunes (2022), Bolsonarism can be understood as "an entrepreneurial phenomenon in itself" (Nunes, 2022, p. 84), where "'being right-wing' (and gradually, extreme right-wing) has become a career option for many people" (Nunes, 2022, p. 84) as the technical possibilities of social media and YouTube allow individuals to convert attention into financial and political capital through views and likes.

The current federal deputy Carlos Jordy (Liberal Party-RJ) gained prominence in the state of Rio de Janeiro when, as a councilman in Niterói (RJ), he exposed a public school history teacher on his official pages. Already an author of a School Without Party bill in the city council, Jordy used this incident to align himself with the Bolsonaro family (Redação, 2018) and attract more attention. Shortly afterward, the teacher reported to the press that she received death threats directed at her and her family, and she suffered psychological distress as a result (Salas, 2020).

A current State Deputy, Ana Maria Campagnolo (Liberal Party-SC), also follows the typical trajectory of Bolsonarist political entrepreneurs: she gained prominence for her anti-feminist stance and relentless pursuit of her thesis advisor during her master's degree (Portal Catarinas, 2021). Upon becoming a state deputy, she used her newfound prominence and the election of Jair Bolsonaro to encourage the filming and public exposure of teachers, actions that the Supreme Federal Court and the justice system have acted to curb (Redação, 2019).

Bolsonaro family, in turn, acted as the midwife for the idea of enshrining the ideals of the School Without Party initiative into a legislative proposal. They reaped substantial political benefits—media attention, new relationships, and new contacts—from the rise of the indoctrination discourse (Moura, 2018).

Final Remarks

The bibliography addressing persecution against educators is considerably smaller, or at least more difficult to acces compared to the literature on Escola sem Partido. It has predominantly framed the phenomenon through the lens of this movement. Persecution has been essentially defined as what School Without Party advocates, synonymous with censorship and attacks on educators. As we have sought to illustrate, this framing may have constrained deeper reflection on the topic. Therefore, we propose an alternative approach to this discourse, considering persecution on its own terms. This perspective may lead us to reconsider the Escola sem Partido initiative within a broader historical context, including the enduring distrust towards educators, which has been a characteristic feature of anti-communism in Brazil.

In our own research journey, it became clear that focusing on cases of persecution uncovers layers of the phenomenon that the emphasis on the Escola sem Partido initiative had previously obscured. For instance, examining how persecutions often begin on social media highlights the need to incorporate studies on the digitalization of politics and the production of truths in the contemporary world, revealing a clear connection between the persecution of educators and the rise of the post-truth era (Cesarino, 2021; 2022). Thus, we advocate for the detailed study of persecution processes to unveil underexplored aspects of this issue, until now. Considering the phenomenon as systematic changes the analytical requirements: there are now identifiable patterns regarding who persecutes, who is persecuted, the severity of the situations, and other related factors that need thorough investigation.

Asking ourselves what constitutes persecution immediately raised the question: what is not persecution? These questions led us to theorize, not just about what we oppose, but about the political project we advocate for. To define what censorship is, we need to define what freedom is. This allowed us to envision an open future and outline what we desire and what censorship prevents: democratic education.

It was essential to dissect cases of persecution and examine *what* is being targeted, *how* it unfolds, and its underlying *objectives*. The detailed description of persecution illustrates how the metonymic act of violence against educators serves the political agenda of the far-right, exploiting the individual suffering of each persecuted education professional as raw material. This process frequently results in their isolation. With this approach in place, we hope that new research questions emerge and that our political understanding expands regarding the lives of educators in Brazil.

Notes

1. Since searches with quotation marks omit several results that are relevant to our theme, the following results are based on searches conducted without using quotation marks.

2. See Bill No. 1,411/2015, proposed by Rogério Marinho (2015), then a deputy for the Brazilian Social Democracy Party (PSDB-RN), which aimed to create the crime of "ideological harassment" and for years was consolidated with the Escola sem Partido (Schools Without Party) and anti-gender projects.

3. We categorized School Without Party as an enterprise, unlike our approach in previous works, in order to develop a concept highlighting its characteristics that became more prominent after its hiatus and vague return in 2022 and 2023 when its Twitter and Instagram accounts were reactivated. The first characteristic is that there is no evidence that Escola sem Partido organized itself as a social movement. Instead, its representation has been predominantly managed throughout its existence by a single individual, lawyer Miguel Nagib, with occasional and transient participation from other figures (such as Orley José da Silva, Bráulio Porto de Matos, Bia Kicis, and Ruth Kicis — the latter being Nagib's wife and administrator of the Escola sem Partido Facebook page in 2019). The actions undertaken by Escola sem Partido primarily involved the dissemination of censorship tools, maintenance of a website, and social media presence, among other activities that do not require large financial structures. It is evident that the Web 2.0 era has significantly reduced the cost of political action in various ways, and Escola sem Partido has benefited from this trend. The second characteristic lies in the adoption of "fighting indoctrination" as a self-promotion platform by various political entrepreneurs. This established a cycle where these figures gained social and political capital by positioning themselves as "defenders of the family," while Escola sem Partido spread through communication platforms using influence logic to expand adherence to its ideas. This is a defining feature of the formation of Bolsonarism (see citation in Nunes, 2022).

Authors' Contribution

Conceptualization: Penna F, Aquino R, Moura F; **Formal analysis:** Penna F, Aquino R, Moura F; **Investigation:** Penna F, Aquino R, Moura F; **Methodology:** Penna F, Aquino R, Moura F; **Writing:** Penna F, Aquino R, Moura F; **Final approval:** Moura F.

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