

A historical-critical perspective on neoliberalism and its impacts on Brazilian education

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Abstract – The present study aims to critically analyze the impacts of neoliberal educational policies in Brazil from the perspective of political metabolism, identifying their implications for the universalization of education and the critical formation of individuals. It is based on the premise that education, historically structured as an instrument for social reproduction and the maintenance of inequalities, is intensified in the neoliberal context through processes of commodification, the precarization of teaching labor, and the curricular subordination to market demands. The research is characterized as a qualitative bibliographic review, developed within the scope of an interdisciplinary investigation and supported by a theoretical-critical approach and by the concepts of neoliberal State, expanded State, and political metabolism, as outlined by Alves. The systematic review includes books, scientific articles, dissertations, and official documents, prioritizing works that articulate historical analysis, critical reflection, and empirical evidence regarding neoliberal educational policies in Brazil. The results indicate that, since the colonial period, education has played a structuring role in maintaining social inequalities. In the contemporary context, neoliberal policies intensify management practices oriented by goals and indicators, standardize curricula, and consolidate the commodification of education, compromising its emancipatory potential. Political metabolism articulates economic interests and governmental agendas to reproduce these practices and ensure the maintenance of the prevailing social order. It is concluded that understanding political metabolism is essential to identify structural mechanisms of inequality, guide public policy formulation, and enable alternatives that promote a public, critical, democratic, and socially just education, emphasizing the centrality of teacher valorization, pedagogical autonomy, and the comprehensive formation of individuals to realize the right to education.

Keywords: Brazilian education. Education policies. Neoliberalism. Political metabolism. Social inequality.

Um percurso histórico-crítico sobre o neoliberalismo e seus impactos na educação Brasileira

Resumo – O presente estudo objetiva analisar criticamente os impactos das políticas educacionais neoliberais no Brasil a partir da perspectiva do metabolismo político,

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identificando suas implicações para a universalização do ensino e a formação crítica dos sujeitos. Parte-se do pressuposto de que a educação, historicamente estruturada como instrumento de reprodução social e de manutenção das desigualdades, é intensificada, no contexto neoliberal, por processos de mercantilização, precarização do trabalho docente e subordinação curricular às demandas do mercado. A pesquisa caracteriza-se como revisão bibliográfica qualitativa, desenvolvida no âmbito de uma investigação interdisciplinar, sustentada em abordagem teórico-crítica e nos conceitos de Estado neoliberal, de Estado ampliado, e de metabolismo político, conforme delineado por Alves. O levantamento sistemático inclui livros, artigos científicos, dissertações e documentos oficiais, priorizando obras que articulam análise histórica, reflexão crítica e evidências empíricas acerca das políticas educacionais neoliberais no Brasil. Os resultados indicam que, desde o período colonial, a educação cumpre papel estruturante na manutenção das desigualdades sociais, sendo que, no contexto contemporâneo, políticas neoliberais intensificam práticas gerenciais orientadas por metas e indicadores, padronizam currículos e consolidam a mercantilização do ensino, comprometendo seu potencial emancipador. O metabolismo político articula interesses econômicos e agendas governamentais para reproduzir essas práticas e assegurar a manutenção da ordem social vigente. Conclui-se que compreender o metabolismo político é imprescindível para identificar mecanismos estruturais de desigualdade, orientar a formulação de políticas públicas e viabilizar alternativas que promovam uma educação pública, crítica, democrática e socialmente justa, ressaltando a centralidade da valorização docente, da autonomia pedagógica e da formação integral dos sujeitos para efetivação do direito a educação.

Palavras-chave: Desigualdade social. Educação Brasileira. Neoliberalismo. Metabolismo político. Políticas educacionais.

Un recorrido histórico-crítico sobre el neoliberalismo y sus impactos en la educación Brasileña

Resumen – El presente estudio tiene como objetivo analizar críticamente los impactos de las políticas educativas neoliberales en Brasil desde la perspectiva del metabolismo político, identificando sus implicaciones para la universalización de la educación y la formación crítica de los individuos. Parte del supuesto de que la educación, históricamente estructurada como instrumento de reproducción social y mantenimiento de desigualdades, se ve intensificada en el contexto neoliberal mediante procesos de mercantilización, precarización del trabajo docente y subordinación curricular a las demandas del mercado. La investigación se caracteriza como una revisión bibliográfica cualitativa, desarrollada en el marco de una investigación interdisciplinaria y sustentada en un enfoque teórico-crítico y en los conceptos de Estado neoliberal, Estado ampliado y metabolismo político, según lo delineado por Alves. La revisión sistemática incluyó libros, artículos científicos, tesis y documentos oficiales, priorizando aquellos trabajos que articularan análisis histórico, reflexión crítica y evidencia empírica sobre las políticas educativas neoliberales en Brasil. Los resultados indican que, desde el período colonial, la educación ha desempeñado un papel estructurante en el mantenimiento de las desigualdades sociales. En el contexto contemporáneo, las políticas neoliberales intensifican prácticas de gestión orientadas por metas e indicadores, estandarizan los currículos y consolidan la mercantilización de la educación, comprometiendo su potencial emancipador. El metabolismo político articula intereses económicos y agendas gubernamentales para reproducir estas

prácticas y asegurar el mantenimiento del orden social vigente. Se concluye que comprender el metabolismo político es esencial para identificar mecanismos estructurales de desigualdad, orientar la formulación de políticas públicas y habilitar alternativas que promuevan una educación pública, crítica, democrática y socialmente justa, enfatizando la centralidad de la valorización docente, la autonomía pedagógica y la formación integral de los individuos para la efectivización del derecho a la educación.

Palabras claves: Desigualdade social. Educação Brasileira. Neoliberalismo. Metabolismo político. Políticas educativas.

Introudction

The formation of the Brazilian State is intertwined with the construction of a societal project marked by power struggles, economic interests, and political arrangements that, since the colonial period, have determined who could access rights and exercise full citizenship. When the Jesuits arrived in 1549 and established the first institutionalized form of education, schooling extended beyond teaching literacy; it functioned as a mechanism of discipline and cultural conformity, aimed at reproducing the prevailing social order (Bartholomeu, 2024). Since then, the school has been constituted as a privileged space for maintaining inequalities, materializing the divide between the dominant and the dominated.

Considering these historical processes, recent scholarship has indicated that such practices may also be interpreted through the analytical lens of acculturation, understood as a mechanism of cultural imposition and symbolic subordination that sustain political projects of domination (Trevisol; Almeida, 2024). Incorporating this concept sharpens the analytical scope of educational dynamics by revealing how, across distinct historical conjunctures, schooling has operated as an apparatus of cultural regulation, actively shaping subjectivities and reinforcing the reproduction of the prevailing social order.

Although social organization has evolved over the centuries, the logic of subordinating education to structures of power persists. In contemporary Brazil, especially since the 1990s, the rise of neoliberalism has redefined the role of the State, shifting it from the guarantor of rights to the managerial administrator of social life (Silva, 2024; Leme; Valente, 2023). Education, historically tied to citizenship and universal access, has come to be regulated by performance metrics, managerial rationality, and public-private partnerships, thereby undergoing a gradual conversion into a commodity. This process has intensified social inequalities, worsened the precariousness of teachers' working conditions, and deepened the colonization of schooling by economic imperatives.

It is precisely at this juncture that it becomes necessary to clarify the use of the concept of *political metabolism*, which is central to the analytical framework adopted here. This category, marked by conceptual complexity and polysemy within social sciences, must be distinguished from the notion of *social metabolism*. While the latter refers to the ontological mediations between human beings, nature, and productive processes, *political metabolism* denotes a dynamic process through which economic interests, state structures, and forms of power are articulated to ensure the expanded reproduction of capitalist relations and the stability of social order. By delimiting this specific meaning, the analytical scope of the category is made explicit, along with its relevance for understanding how the neoliberal state reorganizes and conditions educational policies.

From this distinction, it becomes possible to conceptualize the Brazilian neoliberal state as a contemporary expression of oligarchic-bourgeois power that reproduces itself through mechanisms of adaptation, restructuring, and control. In this sense, Alves (2024) characterizes political metabolism as an ongoing process of recomposing between economy and politics, oriented toward sustaining the reproduction of capital. This metabolism directly shapes educational policies, subordinating schooling to market imperatives and constraining its emancipatory potential.

The relevance of this study lies precisely in framing education as a strategic field of dispute between competing societal projects. Understanding the school beyond statistics or government plans requires acknowledging it as a site of both symbolic and material struggle, where it is decided whether human formation will be reduced to a commodity or constituted as a practice of freedom. By bringing the category of political metabolism to the center of the analysis, this study seeks to illuminate the structural connections linking neoliberalism, the State, and education, revealing the barriers that hinder the development of a democratic, critical, and emancipatory educational project.

The guiding question of this research can thus be formulated as follows: despite the constitutional recognition of education as a social right, how do public policies continue to reproduce and deepen historical inequalities, particularly affecting the popular classes and limiting the school's emancipatory function?

The general objective of this article is to critically analyze the impacts of neoliberal educational policies in Brazil through the concept of political metabolism, emphasizing their consequences for the universalization of education and the development of critical human formation.

The contributions of this research unfold in three interdependent dimensions. On the theoretical level, the articulation between political metabolism and the critique of neoliberal education broadens the analytical horizon by connecting the reproduction of capital to contemporary disputes surrounding the roles of the State and public schooling. On the methodological level, the adoption of a historical-critical approach allows for the identification of continuities and ruptures within the educational field, moving beyond interpretations limited to technical indicators or managerial narratives of efficiency. Finally, on the social and political level, this study offers insights that can strengthen the public debate in defense of a democratic, high-quality public education system, reaffirming education as a social practice oriented toward human emancipation.

Methodological framework

From a methodological standpoint, it is pertinent to emphasize that this study is situated within the domain of explicitly interdisciplinary inquiry, consonant with contemporary analytical frameworks that integrate insights from education, sociology, history, philosophy, and political science. The adoption of this epistemological orientation does not modify the analytical procedures themselves; rather, it delineates the scope and complexity of the approach, enabling categories such as neoliberalism, the State, and political metabolism to be examined across multiple dimensions, historical, sociocultural, and political-economic. This articulation enhances the analytical rigor of the study and reinforces the theoretical coherence of the advanced interpretations.

This study is characterized as a qualitative bibliographic review based on a theoretical-critical approach, conceptually grounded in the assumptions of the neoliberal State, the expanded State, and political metabolism, as formulated by Giovanni Alves (2024). This methodological choice stems from its capacity to integrate historical analysis, critical interpretation, and theoretical synthesis, thereby enabling a comprehensive understanding of the structural effects of neoliberalism on Brazilian education.

The bibliographic survey was conducted in a rigorous and systematic manner, involving the selection of relevant academic works, books, scientific articles, dissertations, government documents, and institutional reports addressing neoliberal educational policies and their social, economic, and political implications. The selection of sources followed criteria of thematic relevance, contemporaneity, and methodological rigor, prioritizing studies that combine theoretical grounding, empirical analysis, and critical reflection.

The adopted methodology allows for the systematization of existing knowledge by articulating the historical, political, and economic dimensions of the investigation. Through this approach, the study seeks to highlight the mechanisms by which educational inequalities are reproduced and to elucidate how the State, under neoliberal regimes, articulates economic and political interests to shape public policies, in accordance with the perspective of political metabolism.

The study is organized around three complementary analytical axes. The first, *historical-educational*, examines the evolution of education in Brazil, emphasizing the structural, political, and social transformations that have shaped the educational system, as well as the historical mechanisms of social reproduction and educational segregation. The second axis, *neoliberalism and education*, analyzes the consolidation of neoliberalism within the Brazilian educational context, emphasizing the commodification of schooling, the precarization of teachers' work, and the implementation of managerial practices guided by targets, indicators, and public-private partnerships. Finally, the third axis, *political metabolism and educational policies*, investigates how political metabolism articulates economic interests and governmental agendas, influencing the formulation and implementation of educational policies and affecting the State's capacity to ensure a democratic and emancipatory public education.

By combining critical analysis, historical contextualization, and robust conceptual grounding, this methodological framework enables a deep reflection on the impacts of neoliberalism on Brazilian education. It contributes to the understanding of both the limits and the possibilities of public policies aimed at the universalization of education and the formation of critical, autonomous subjects.

Results and discussions

Some historical aspects of Brazilian education

Education constitutes a structuring element in the development of societies, shaping citizens and establishing the foundations for social, cultural, and economic progress. In Brazil, its historical trajectory reveals, simultaneously, institutional advances and persistent structural constraints, demonstrating how political, economic, and social transformations have configured both the aims and limitations of the educational system over the centuries (Rodrigues; Silva, 2023).

The colonial period, spanning the sixteenth century to the early nineteenth century, was marked by the predominance of the Portuguese Crown, whose administration delegated to Jesuit missionaries the initial organization of formal instruction. The educational practices of the Society of Jesus, guided by catechesis and the diffusion of the Catholic faith, structured the first institutional model of schooling in the territory, articulating pedagogy, religion, and a civilizing project (Silva, 2023).

In the European context, however, a robust humanist movement was transforming pedagogical conceptions and deeply influencing the educational imagination of the modern period. Erasmus of Rotterdam stood out for his emphasis on moral formation and the humanist method (Erasmus, 1997); Antonio de Nebrija

contributed to establishing the relationship between language, politics, and pedagogy (Veronelli; Daitch, 2021); Juan Luis Vives systematized one of the most comprehensive Renaissance reflections on education (Bernardo, 2005); and Philipp Melanchthon consolidated a school model linked to the Protestant Reformation, with a strong emphasis on teacher training and intellectual discipline (Ulrich ; Klug, 2016). To this constellation, one may add figures such as Trotzendorf, a key reference in humanist school organization (Silva et al., 2019), and Johannes Sturm, whose Gymnasium model exerted long-lasting influence in France and Germany and became a pedagogical reference well into the seventeenth century (Cazavechia, 2023).

It is within this broader intellectual and institutional landscape that Martin Luther is situated. His advocacy of literacy and the translation of the Scriptures into German expanded access to religious knowledge and reinforced the link between faith and instruction. Nevertheless, these initiatives must be understood as part of a broader constellation of humanist reforms, whose pedagogical contributions were often more systematic and enduring than Luther's own educational interventions (Cazavechia, 2023).

In Brazil, the reforms implemented by the Marquis of Pombal (1750-1777) marked a profound rupture with the Jesuit educational model. The expulsion of the Society of Jesus in 1759 resulted in the secularization and state control of schooling, the closure of institutions, and the loss of extensive convent libraries. Pombaline's measures sought to strengthen the Portuguese state, diminish ecclesiastical influence, and promote scientific, artistic, and cultural development, as well as to form a literate elite capable of occupying strategic administrative positions (Silva; Santos, 2021).

During the nineteenth century, Brazilian educational organization underwent structural transformations. The Law of 15 October 1827 established compulsory primary schooling for children aged seven to fourteen, marking a historic milestone in the consolidation of elementary education (Rodrigues; Silva, 2023). Subsequently, the Additional Act of 1834 decentralized education, transferring responsibility for primary and secondary instruction to the provinces, while higher education remained under central government jurisdiction (Castanha, 2020).

The transition to the republican order and the beginning of the twentieth century established new regulatory frameworks. The 1890 Constitution reorganized primary and secondary schooling by linking them to access to higher education, while the Benjamin Constant Reform of 1891 institutionalized the gratuity and secular character of primary schooling (Castanha, 2020). The 1891 Constitution reinforced the dual structure of the educational system, deepening the divide between elite-oriented secondary and higher education and the restricted access of popular sectors to primary and vocational schooling (Castanha, 2020).

The Revolution of 1930 introduced structural reforms responding to demands for economic modernization and professional qualification. It established the Ministry of Education and Public Health, the National and State Councils of Education, and the University Statute, which sought to organize and expand secondary and higher education (Oliveira et al., 2023). The civil-military coup of 1964, however, imposed significant setbacks, characterized by bureaucratic centralization, repression of critical pedagogical practices, and reduced institutional autonomy—aligning the educational system with the ideological project of the authoritarian regime (Castanha, 2020).

The 1964 civil-military coup thus interrupted ongoing modernization processes, installing an authoritarian regime that centralized administrative control, restricted institutional autonomy, and suppressed critical pedagogical approaches in accordance with its ideological orientation (Castanha, 2020).

With the 1988 Constitution, a decisive normative milestone was established: education was affirmed as a right of all and a duty of the State and the family. The Charter defined free and compulsory access as a subjective public right and stipulated that schooling should promote the integral development of the person, citizenship, and work (Brazil, 1988). It instituted principles such as the freedom to learn, teach, research, and disseminate knowledge, as well as the pluralism of ideas and pedagogical conceptions, consolidating education as a pillar of the Democratic State of Law.

Reconstructing the historical aspects of Brazilian education demonstrates that its evolution cannot be understood merely as a linear sequence of institutional reforms, but rather as a field shaped by disputes among societal projects, state interests, religious directives, economic demands, and movements for pedagogical renewal. By articulating the national trajectory with broader European processes, particularly those of Renaissance humanism and the Protestant Reformation, it becomes evident that Brazilian educational formation belongs to a long historical duration, marked by tensions between cultural hegemony, political centralization, formal democratization, and persistent structural inequalities. Such a historicized reading constitutes an indispensable foundation for the critical analysis of contemporary educational policies.

Neoliberalism and Brazilian education: teacher precariousness and commodification

Neoliberalism emerged as a response to the structural crisis of capitalism in the 1970s, a period marked by stagflation, the oil crisis, and the exhaustion of the Keynesian model. In this context, the Welfare State, once aimed at economic regulation and the guarantee of social rights, was replaced by a governmental rationality that prioritizes market mechanisms and reduces state intervention (Harvey, 2008).

According to Harvey (2008), this perspective was consolidated through the formulations of Friedrich Von Hayek, with contributions from Ludwig Von Mises, Milton Friedman, and Karl Popper. Academic prestige strengthened the approach when Hayek (1974) and Friedman (1976) received the Nobel Prize in Economics, establishing neoliberalism as a key theoretical reference for the restructuring of capitalism.

Chile, under the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet, became the first neoliberal laboratory. Economic liberalization and privatizations intensified unemployment, union repression, and income concentration (Dumay; Silva, 2024). Later, other major countries also adopted neoliberal reforms, such as the United Kingdom under Margaret Thatcher (1979) and the United States under Ronald Reagan (1980), both seeking to minimize the effects of Keynesian policies considered burdensome for economic elites (Dumay; Silva, 2024).

In Brazil, the incorporation of neoliberal policies took place between the late 1980s and the 1990s, during the governments of Fernando Collor de Mello and Fernando Henrique Cardoso. This period was marked by a reconfiguration of the State's role and by educational reforms such as the decentralization of education in the 1988 Constitution and the promulgation of Law No. 9.394/96, which defined the responsibilities of the federal entities (Alves et al., 2020).

The educational reforms of this period were linked to the broader political and economic restructuring but revealed a central contradiction: while official discourse emphasized the importance of education, state intervention was weakened, and greater space was opened for the private sector and non-governmental organizations

(Saviani, 1996). In this context, neoliberal ideology legitimized both educational reforms, such as the High School Reform, and the expansion of the school-enterprise model, promoting a technocratic and “apolitical” orientation of education. According to Melo and Santi (2021), the concept of a “neutral school” serves to neutralize students’ critical understanding of social inequalities.

The theoretical foundation of neoliberalism in education is based on an outdated historical conception that, nevertheless, gained prominence in the unipolar world order. The neutrality defended by representatives of capital, in practice, interprets history as mere description, assuming that the class conflicts of the twentieth century have been overcome and that there is no need for alternatives to the exclusionary capitalist model. From this perspective, education assumes a predominantly technical function, especially in low-cost private institutions aimed at the training of the working classes. This conception reveals that education, in the neoliberal context, performs an instrumental role, directed toward the formation of labor adapted to the demands of capital. Abreu (2023), reinforces that schools participate in the capitalist accumulation process by providing workers and disseminating values that legitimize the existing social order.

In the early twenty-first century, the structural tension identified by Freitas (2024) persists, according to which the expansion of access to knowledge for the popular classes occurs in a limited manner, preserving ideological control mechanisms that prevent the development of critical and emancipatory pedagogies. This contradiction between minimal qualification and ideological control continues to guide policies and disputes surrounding educational reforms in contemporary Brazil.

The discourse of efficiency and meritocracy, disseminated by neoliberal policies, has intensified the precarization of teaching work, institutionalized managerial models focused on productivity, and devalued the critical formation of students. Within this logic, education ceases to be conceived as a universal public good and becomes treated as a service regulated by market laws (Laval; Dardot, 2016). The so-called “right to learn,” promoted by business actors, operates on both operational and ideological levels, shaping worker training according to hegemonic interests, restricting the curriculum to the essential minimum, and subordinating school performance to standardized assessments that reproduce social inequalities (Freitas, 2014).

The neoliberal state is characterized by minimal public financing of education, centralized control of content and assessments, and the limitation of schools’ and teachers’ autonomy (Gentili, 1996). The right to integral formation has been reduced to basic education, reading, writing, mathematics, and science, defined by the national exam reference frameworks, neglecting subjects essential to civic formation and reinforcing a meritocratic and individualistic logic aligned with market interests (Freitas, 2014; Brown, 2019).

Politically, the liberal conception of democracy is limited to law and order, restricting citizen participation and linking freedom to economic competition. Public education is subordinated to market logic through instruments such as vouchers, while recent reforms, including PEC 241/55, EC 95/16, and the high school reform proposal, have consolidated setbacks that weaken public, secular, and quality education, restrict pedagogical autonomy, and reinforce its commodification (Chauí, 2021; Freitas, 2024; Brasil, 2017).

The notion that education is a commodity often leads to mistaken interpretations, such as the idea that its market character is limited to the service sector and can be regulated only by trade norms, commercial treaties, and consumer protection laws. The inclusion of education in the World Trade Organization’s General Agreement on Trade

in Services reinforces this narrow view, suggesting that commodification is confined to the sphere of commercialization, without addressing its structural, social, and pedagogical impacts (Leher, 2022).

Political metabolism and its impact on Brazilian education

From the understanding of the neoliberal State as a political structure that articulates economic and social interests to ensure the reproduction of capital and the maintenance of social order, as outlined by Alves (2024), it is possible to identify how this model directly affects the Brazilian educational system. The concept of *political metabolism* proposes an analysis of the relationships between the State, the market, and society, highlighting how public policies are shaped by interests that aim at perpetuating an exclusionary economic model.

In the educational context, this metabolism is manifested in the implementation of policies that prioritize efficiency and competitiveness to the detriment of critical and emancipatory education. The commodification of teaching and the deterioration of teachers' working conditions are direct reflections of this logic, which transforms education into a service subject to market laws, disregarding its social and cultural functions (Leher, 2022; Santos, 2023).

Moreover, the adoption of standardized assessments and the imposition of curricula aligned with market demands contribute to the formation of a technically qualified workforce, yet devoid of critical and civic awareness. This process reinforces social inequalities by restricting access to quality education for the popular classes and marginalizing forms of knowledge and pedagogical practices that foster reflection and social transformation (Leher, 2022).

Therefore, a critical analysis of *political metabolism* makes it possible to understand that neoliberal educational policies are not merely technical responses to economic challenges, but rather political strategies designed to consolidate an unequal and exclusionary social model. Recognizing these dynamics is essential for building alternatives that promote free, public, and high-quality education oriented toward emancipation and the full development of the individual.

Final considerations

The present study demonstrated that neoliberal educational policies in Brazil, mediated by *political metabolism*, articulate economic interests and governmental agendas that reproduce historical inequalities, degrade teachers' working conditions, and instrumentalize education by subordinating it to market demands at the expense of its emancipatory function. The historical-critical analysis reveals that, since the colonial period, schooling has played a structural role in reproducing power relations, with the neoliberal context representing an intensification of this logic through managerial practices, standardized assessment, and curricular commodification.

Although limited to bibliographical review, the research highlights the urgency of public policies that ensure adequate funding, pedagogical autonomy, appreciation of the teaching profession, and the promotion of critical curricula capable of consolidating education as a universal social right. It is recommended that future studies combine theoretical and empirical analyses to systematically investigate the effects of *political metabolism* on school practices and the educational trajectories of students and teachers, contributing to the construction of a democratic, inclusive, and emancipatory educational system.

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