

THE LEARNING-MARKET OF EDTECHS IN BRAZILIAN EDUCATION FROM THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC OF COVID-19

A MERCOAPRENDIZAGEM DAS EDTECHS NA EDUCAÇÃO BRASILEIRA A PARTIR DOS IMPACTOS DA PANDEMIA DA COVID-19

EL MERCADO-APRENDIZAJE DE EDTECHS EN LA EDUCACIÓN BRASILEÑA DESDE EL IMPACTO DE LA PANDEMIA DE COVID-19

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ABSTRACT: The text seeks to discuss the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the educational sector considering the deepening of learning-market. Remote education emerges as a solution by governments to reduce the consequences of the suspension of classes. The use of these resources in a centralized way expresses the interests of the learning market, since the financialization of education is deepened by the purchase of packages from EdTechs companies by the public sector. It appears that business sectors linked to some spheres of education, especially distance education through the sale of technological resources and with the work of EdTechs seek to carry out learning-market in an opportunistic way and without considering the future of state public education and students from popular layers.

KEYWORDS: Covid-19. Learning-market. EdTech.

RESUMO: O texto busca discutir os impactos da pandemia da Covid-19 no setor educacional considerando o aprofundamento da mercoaprendizagem. A educação remota surge como solução dos governos para reduzir as consequências da suspensão das aulas. A utilização desses recursos de modo centralizado expressa os interesses do mercado da aprendizagem, uma vez que a financeirização da educação é aprofundada a partir da compra de pacotes de empresas de EdTechs pelo setor público. Constata-se que setores empresariais vinculados a algumas esferas da educação, sobretudo da educação a distância por meio de venda de recursos tecnológicos e com atuação de EdTechs buscam efetivar a mercoaprendizagem de modo oportunista e sem considerar o futuro da educação pública estatal e dos estudantes das camadas populares.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Covid-19. Mercoaprendizagem. EdTech.

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RESUMEN: El texto busca discutir los impactos de la pandemia Covid-19 en el sector educativo considerando la profundización del mercapreñtamiento. La educación a distancia surge como una solución de los gobiernos para reducir las consecuencias de la suspensión de clases. El uso de estos recursos de manera centralizada expresa los intereses del mercado del aprendizaje, ya que se profundiza la financiarización de la educación a través de la compra de paquetes a empresas EdTechs por parte del sector público. Parece que los sectores empresariales vinculados a algunos ámbitos de la educación, en especial la educación a distancia a través de la venta de recursos tecnológicos y con el trabajo de EdTechs buscan realizar merco-aprendizaje de manera oportunista y sin considerar el futuro de la educación pública estatal y los estudiantes de capas populares.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Covid-19. Merco-aprendizaje. EdTech.

Introduction

The Covid-19 crisis expresses a scenario of unprecedented nature and scale in the 21st century, in which its impacts are felt in all fields of life. Thus, the education sector on a global scale is being directly affected by the pandemic. Moreover, as the main way to prevent the irradiation of the virus was through social isolation, resulting in the closing of institutions, many schools and professionals had to find strategies that could meet the demands demanded by the capitalist society. If, on the one hand, the need to guarantee the school curriculum is something worrisome, the cessation of activities through lockdown in several countries, in an attempt to guarantee the most precious asset - human life - is something to reflect upon and discuss. To what extent is the economic system willing to give in? In spite of this scenario that implies great pedagogical losses in the students' schooling, another aspect that has emerged in the face of all this is the rise of digital learning through remote teaching and the consequent protagonism of educational technology companies (EdTechs).

The reconfiguration of training processes through technology packages during the pandemic period enabled new forms of private-market expansion within public education, in effect, resulting in the deepening and consolidation of a learning market that already existed, however, now supplemented by the planetary landscape of Covid-19 to deepen the mercolearning of EdTechs in the public school system.

With these considerations in mind, this paper seeks to discuss the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the education sector considering the rise and deepening of the learning market. Therefore, the opening section addresses the global landscape in which Covid-19 emerged and radiated, consolidating as a pandemic and impacting educational systems across the globe. The second section analyzes the logic of globalization of nation-states and the relationships between

public and private that make feasible the logic of exogenous privatization extending the reach of market learning. The third section, in turn, will analyze the impacts of the pandemic on the Brazilian educational sector, emphasizing the emergence of remote education and the consequent performance of EdTech corporations on the national scene.

The impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the global territory

The new coronavirus is called severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) (VAN DOREMALEN *et al.*, 2020). It has emerged in Whuham, the seventh largest city in China. The World Health Organization (WHO) issued a global alert on the disease on December 31, 2019. The disease was officially named by the WHO as COVID-19 on February 11. In March, the organization defined the outbreak of the disease as a pandemic. Coronavirus is a zoonotic virus, an RNA virus of the classification Nidovirales, of the group Coronaviridae. This group generates respiratory infections, being isolated "for the first time in 1937 and described as such in 1965, due to its profile in microscopy resembling a crown" (LIMA, 2020, p. 5). In addition, according to the aforementioned author, the known coronavirus types are: "alpha coronavirus HCoV-229E and alpha coronavirus HCoV-NL63, beta coronavirus HCoV-OC43 and beta coronavirus HCoV-HKU1", SARS-CoV (causing severe acute respiratory syndrome or SARS), MERS-CoV (causing Middle East respiratory syndrome or MERS).

The contamination that spread to all corners of the globe carried implications in all economic sectors. The reach of the contagion has directly reached the economic sector, implying a crisis that expresses a different pattern when compared to the subprime crisis in 2008, as it is not restricted to purely economic and financial elements. Under these circumstances, the educational systems of several countries have been severely impacted. One of the actions to contain the Covid-19 pandemic, according to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), was the temporary closure of educational institutions by the vast majority of governments. This containment action has impacted more than 70% of the global student population.

The closure of basic education schools has shaken the educational reality of, according to UNESCO, 1,198,530,172 students, 68.5% of the total enrolled students, since 153 countries have adhered to the closing of schools as an action to combat the spread of Covid-19. In this scenario, governments, in partnership with multilateral agencies, met to design strategies that would act directly in the educational scenario in order to avoid so much damage. UNESCO

(2020), seeking to reduce the consequences of the suspension of classes, proposed that countries should keep their school calendars going through remote education, with special emphasis on the most vulnerable and disadvantaged populations.

The education systems have been adjusting themselves within the limits of the guidelines of multilateral agencies and governments, in Brazil, in particular, these guidelines were led by state and municipal departments, given the political situation we are experiencing and the proactive absence of the Ministry of Education (MEC), since the implementation of the remote learning model, as it was denoted, was not unanimous among the national states. However, those that adhered to this format migrated their in-person classes to the online form, according to a report in *The Economist* (2020), China and South Korea have had their schools closed since January. Until September there are no plans to return to face-to-face classes in Portugal or in the subnational state of California. Regarding national exams, China has postponed the Leaving Certificate (gaokao) exam. Great Britain and France have canceled their 2020 exams.

Public and private and the emergence of mercolearning

The phenomenon of globalization directly affects the modus operandi of republican institutions, especially the educational ones. Within this rationality, the knowledge economy stands out (AFONSO, 2015; OLSSSEN; PETERS, 2015; JARVIS, 2000). This concept makes it feasible to evoke a type of society that supports and legitimizes the approval of policies and the "definition of economic and business orientations or the induction of social and educational practices directed to meet what are considered, in generic terms, the [...] demands of capitalism (AFONSO, 2015, p. 270).

Thus, the capital finds itself in a painful situation, thus embarking on the search for other areas, so it can perform its extraction of surplus value and surplus-value. In this scenario, education appears as a strategic sector for the capital, since the public-state financing configures itself as a seductive source to be absorbed. From this perspective, we understand that it is inconceivable to think of a transformation in the social framework, considering that the educational practices present in society cannot overcome the barriers imposed by the economic system. Education is an ideological complex that should help to break the fetters created by the capital; however, the current social mode 'is irreformable because by its own nature, as a systemic regulatory totality, it is totally incorrigible' (MESZÁROS, 2008, p.27). Since

education is a complex of the superstructure of capitalism that contributes to the reproduction of its *modus operandi*.

According to research by Verger *et al.* (2017 *apud* RIKOWSKI, 2017), the global education market in 2015 had a value of US \$4.9 trillion (USD). Added to this is the approximate US \$2 billion in venture capital investment in education in 2014, which highlights a growth in investment of around 45% over the Great Depression period of 2009 to 2014. This global education scenario, therefore, highlights the source of business sector interests, thus stimulating the *commodification of education*.

With the need to minimally instruct workers, the school benches that until the 1970s in Brazil were mostly occupied by the bourgeoisie, start receiving the proletariat. The State, which before provided education for a minimum and wealthy portion of the population, needed to supply the educational needs of the working class children, and with this, the level of teaching in public schools fell, because it was not interesting for capitalism that the majority of the population became conscious. The State, commanded by a minimum portion of the population, understands that giving knowledge to the people endangers everything that the bourgeoisie has usurped historically. However, it is necessary to falsify what is provided directly by the State, and in the act of deceiving the workers, those in power intend to gain the gratitude of those they exploit, claiming that without them (the holders of the means of production), everyone would succumb to misery. In reality, what is hidden in benevolence are profits - directly through exploited labor, or, indirectly through social marketing of services rendered in the form of charity to workers, which later return to the capitalist in the form of new capital.

Inevitably, the first steps of a major social transformation in our epoch involve the need to keep under control the hostile political state that opposes, and by its very nature must oppose, any idea of a broader restructuring of society. In this sense, the radical negation of every political command structure of the established system must assert itself, in its inevitable predominant negativity, in the initial phase of the transformation being aimed at. But even at that stage, and indeed before the conquest of political power, the necessary negation is only adequate to the role assumed if it is effectively oriented by the overall target of the social transformation aimed at, as the compass of the entire journey. Therefore, from the very beginning the role of education is of vital importance to break with the predominant internalization in political choices circumscribed to the "democratic constitutional legitimation" of the capitalist state that defends its own interests. For also this "counterinternalization" (or counterconsciousness") requires the anticipation of a general, concrete, and comprehensive vision of a radically different way of managing society's global decision-making functions, which goes far beyond the long-established expropriation of the power to make all fundamental decisions, as well as its unceremonious impositions on individuals through policies as a form of alienation par excellence in the existing order (MÉSZÁROS, 2005, p. 61).

Faced with the exposed need to strengthen bonds that promote "inclusive exclusion", capitalism, under the figure of the State, seeks to attribute responsibility to individuals for their rise or decline. Entrepreneurship is the word and the action that moves the present society, in view of the constant search for strategies that make possible the stability or the progress of men in the current conjuncture. In view of the responsibility directed towards education and continuing education, even if it is precarious and unreliable, the dynamics of the "school company" outlines goals and proposals to meet the market's expectations, bargaining for labor power and, at the same time, for these professionals to be efficient within the limitations imposed on them. The secret to a positive leap in the social pyramid or to staying on top of it, is in *learning to be competitive*, and comparing the competition between the worker and the bourgeois, the bourgeois wins, who will have an advantage by exploiting the cheap and qualified labor force.

In this society ruled by Capital, the logic of education is the logic of the market. Under this logic, individuals must be prepared for the flexibility of labor relations and for the adaptation to everything that is imposed, besides guaranteeing a job for themselves. In this type of sociability, education - which has the function of mediating men's consciousness in order to reproduce it - is a powerful mechanism in the process of reproduction of alienated social relations. [...] Therefore, education is placed today as a mechanism that intends to silence the voice and prevent the actions of individuals towards a radical change in society (BRAGA *et al.*, 2010, p. 7).

The financial sector has constituted a complex web of privatization processes in education. In Brazil, this configuration is aligned with the guidelines of multilateral agencies, as well as its particular dependent capitalist nature that reflects the inflection of the national state to central countries. As of the 1980s, with the resumption of global economic expansion, structural adjustments were undertaken in national states seeking to raise financial profitability. In effect, this process encouraged atrophied State action with regard to guaranteeing rights and, consequently, engendered greater State ties to the market. The greater link between the public-state sphere and the market has made possible the creation of a myriad of policies to blur the boundaries between the public and the private. The logic of the creation of policies based on the globalization phenomenon is explained by Ball (2001, p. 102):

National policy making is inevitably a process of "bricolage"; a constant process of borrowing and copying bits and pieces of ideas from other complexes, of using and improving on tried and tested local approaches, of cannibalizing theories, of research, of adopting trends and currencies, and sometimes of investing in whatever might work. Most policies are fragile,

products of agreements, something that may or may not work; they are reworked, refined, rehearsed, sifted with nuances and modulated through complex processes of influencing, producing and disseminating texts, and ultimately recreated in the contexts of practice. [These fields are constituted differently in different societies. In short, national politics need to be understood as the product of a nexus of influences and interdependencies that result in "interconnectedness, multiplexity, and hybridity" [...], that is, "the combination of global, distant, and local logics.

In the global scenario, educational policies are undergoing interventions, on an increasing scale from new actors - many of which are linked to the private sector - implying a new educational morphology in which the opportunity for profit is on the agenda (BALL, 2018). In these circumstances, the commodification of education is not an abstraction. For Peroni, Caetano, and Lima (2017, p. 427), the boundaries between public and private "have been changing in this period of crisis of capitalism, in which its overcoming strategies - neoliberalism, globalization, productive restructuring, and the Third Way - redefine the role of the State, especially towards social policies."

In this sense, Leyshon and Thrift (2007) consider that in the last 30 years one of the most persistent financial stories has been the search for a reliable income that can be expanded. Certainly, the education sector is strategic because it is configured as an emergent trend. Ball (2018, p. 2) asserts that "the state's relationship with private providers of education services is now commonly articulated by market logic, within which the state becomes a market maker, contractor, and monitorer," while "the private sector and other providers increasingly take over the practical work of government in the immediate and mundane sense."

Although private and corporate actors have been involved in global basic education since the 19th century (CARNOY, 1975; MOELLER, 2020), in recent decades they have gained more influence and power - as a result of the processuality of financial capital - in setting educational guidelines and policies on a global scale. It is legitimate to consider that education, during this period, has contributed significantly to the expansion of corporate profits and market expansion through exogenous privatization processes (BALL; YOUDELL, 2007). "This expanded reach of private actors occurred in the context and as a consequence of the reversal of state investment and increased ideological attacks on public education in diverse global contexts" (MOELLER, 2020, p. 1).

In this way, a true metamorphosis in education is operated, deepening the learning market, as a result of the sale of services that constitute professional training and in-service training for basic education teachers, such as the actions of the Lemman Foundation and the Ayrton Senna Institute. This logic "expands in an increasingly wide and transnational scope,

with the creation of [...] its tutoring systems supported by information and communication technologies" (AFONSO, 2015, p. 280). Therefore, what we conventionally call "mercolearning" refers to the contemporary and tendential form of the manifestation of education as merchandise.

The investment made by corporate philanthropy in the field of education is backed by a so-called humanitarian project, but in fact has as its "last motive which determines the possessor of a capital to apply it, whether in agriculture or manufacture or in a particular branch of commerce in gros or détail, is the point of view of profit itself" (SMITH *apud* MARX, 2015, p.269)

It is through exploited labor that man is able to produce surplus value as a response. For Marx (2013, p. 294), this result corresponds to the expression of the degree of exploitation of labor power by capital, that is, the exploitation of the worker by the capitalist. Thus, it is in the bourgeoisie's best interest to endorse measures that protect the existence of the proletariat.

In Brazil, the Covid-19 pandemic has engendered several implications that have directly affected and are directly affecting school education, especially public education, since the aspects related to infrastructure and the student body are different from those in private-market education, especially in terms of the objective conditions of the families served by the school system.

Remote teaching as an expression of the EdTechs' learning mercolearning in Brazil

The Brazilian school system is faced with an attempt to spread the idea that basic education schools and universities are functioning normally through remote teaching, with the subterfuge of continuing the school and academic calendar in the country. On April 28, 2020 the National Council of Education (CNE) approved guidelines for basic education schools and higher education institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic. The guidelines for basic and higher education, in summary, propose virtual approximation of teachers and families, non-face-to-face activities that use the family as mediator, supervision by a family adult to accompany during online studies, and the use of educational videos. Regarding remote teaching, Maria Helena Guimarães de Castro, Counselor of CNE, understands this type of teaching as a set of diversified teaching-learning practices that include online teaching, video classes, activities sent to students and reading books (TODOS PELA EDUCAÇÃO, 2020).

In this sense, it is fair to consider that since the 1990s multilateral agencies such as the World Bank (WB), World Trade Organization (WTO), and UNESCO have proposed Distance

Education (DE) to expand education in peripheral countries. With the pandemic of COVID-19, what used to be a more explicit threat on the benches of higher education institutions now becomes part of basic education, which is also affected and takes on a new face with remote emergency education.

In addition, these multilateral agencies seek to disseminate a model of education and school institutions advocated by capital, strictly speaking, a model oriented by the business agenda in which training is based on competencies and has as its objective the formation of human capital. A training that offers the worker an education in homeopathic doses that corresponds to the interests of capital, but that keeps the worker alienated from his class and from the mechanisms of oppression to which he is submitted in this logic.

Despite the rhetoric of distress about the educational situation due to social isolation, the defense of the interests of educational corporations and Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) is the order of the day. The implementation of hybrid teaching, with synchronous classes, competency-based teaching, traditional study plans and memorization exercises to meet large-scale assessments (GIROUX, 2018), highlight the need to pay special attention to assessments in online format, such as the proposed digital National High School Exam (ENEM).

The Colemarx (2020, p. 13) document points out that there is a global coalition involving business sectors and governments, and that this coalition is led by UNESCO and involves other multilateral agencies, as well as business groups such as "Microsoft, Google, Facebook, Zoom, Moodle, Huawei, Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, Telefonica Foundation, and others." The most used resources in the educational landscape during pandemics come from this coalition: "Google, Google classroom, Google suite, Google Hangout, Google Meet, Facebook, Microsoft one note, Microsoft, Google Drive/Microsoft Teams, Moodle, Zoom, Youtube".

The centralized use of these resources expresses the interests of the learning market, since the financialization of education is deepened through the purchase of packages from educational technology companies (EdTechs) by the public sector. According to Moeller (2020, p. 3), EdTechs are in the business of software aimed at the development of competencies and skills in given knowledge, up to products that enable "significant changes in the operation and management of schools", even resulting in "hiring specific services or entire schools". This panorama was already operating in the US through for-profit Educational Management Organizations (EMOs) that develop and/or manage schools. Examples of EMOs that best characterize this scenario are: Edison Learning Inc. which runs public charter schools, and the

Electronic Classroom of Tomorrow, which set itself up as an online school. In addition, there are EdTechs, such as Pearson, which market educational packages like curricula, instructional programs, assessment services, and professional development, and although they are for-profit companies, they are funded by the public sector through financial transactions (KOYAMA, 2010).

EdTechs constitute a multi-billion dollar corporate field, and corporate players such as Google, Microsoft, and Apple are at the epicenter. Moeller (2020, p. 6) asserts that "Google, Microsoft, and Apple are fighting for dominance in classrooms. They all want their devices to be in the hands of the next generation of consumers." It is a valuable market niche to be dominated. Strictly speaking, as a company, EdTechs, in 2019, have reached a value of \$43 billion, with approximately half of that being in basic education.

Indeed, if we look at the movement of shares in the period from April fifteenth to May fourteenth on the São Paulo Stock Exchange (BOVESPA) we see a drop in the shares of the two largest S/A holding companies in the education sector, Cogna Educacional (COGN3 - 24.18) and YDUQS (YDUQ3 -20.52%), however, three of the companies that provide the educational resources to operationalize remote learning in the pandemic period, have seen their shares appreciate. According to the NASDAQ index, Zoom Video Communications (ZM 10.79%), Alphabet Inc.

In this sense, we see a scenario of continuity in the deepening of the financialization of education, however, diverting the emphasis from transactions, i.e., once focused on institutions, to emphasize on technological resources. This phenomenon has had severe implications on the training of subjects, on pedagogical work, and on the access and permanence in education. Teaching has migrated from the classroom to videoconferencing applications.

With the migration of class formats, training processes, and forms of interaction, teachers had to reorganize their pedagogical work, running roughshod over the school's Political Pedagogical Project, thus losing the character of the training objectives. It is worth mentioning that a good number of the teachers are not trained and do not master the EdTechs that are being used to mediate the teaching-learning process. At the limit, access and permanence is another glaring problem in Brazil, considering that there is a gap between public and private schools, constituting a true educational apartheid, Moreover, a recent study by the Covid-19 Social Observatory of the Sociology Department of the School of Philosophy and Human Sciences of the Federal University of Minas Gerais (Fafich-UFMG), exposes that 20% of Brazilian households are not connected to the Internet, making it impossible for students to access distance learning materials made available on the portals by several public elementary and high

schools (COLEMARX, 2020). This scenario is characterized by what Leher (2020) calls Social Darwinism, since there is a hierarchy of races, cultures and human natures. The defense of the cooling of social rights, and the understanding of the market as a locus of natural selection implies for those who are negatively selected, their succumbency as a side effect of the law of the strongest.

By way of conclusion

Considering the CNE guidelines, there is nothing to indicate what the future of deconfinement of basic education will look like. The private-market sectors point to the growth of educational technologies, since Brazil is reported to have more than 400 EdTechs. In a live broadcast on May 13, organized by the Brazil at Silicon Valley project, the following topic was debated: EdTech & Philanthropy: we will start soon. Jorge Paulo Lemman from the Lemman Foundation and Sal Kahn from Khan Academy participated in the live. The points were that from Covid-19 onwards governments and institutions should become aware that digital education must be central and that in the future there will be educational institutions in the cloud, and that teachers will need to master many soft skills to act in this new educational reality.

Public school students who cannot afford to study, either because of the lack of structure at home or because of the lack of resources such as computers, laptops, smartphones and internet will be left behind. In view of this, it is worth reflecting on the many compliments to the American educational model, despite the No Child Left Behind program. However, in the Covid-19 Pandemic scenario at hand, of the rise of remote emergency education via EdTechs, one can use Bastos' (2018) expression: No Profit Left Behind - No Profit Left Behind - in effect, the scenario is ripe for doing the mercolearning experiment.

The scenario is perverse for humanity. The pandemic is sinking the global health system and the finances of the capital metabolism system. However, corporate sectors linked to some spheres of education, especially the performance of EdTechs, seek to effect the learning market in an opportunistic way and without considering the future of public state education and popular students. As a result, it is necessary to question this logic, to seek to implement the National Education System (SNE) supported by cooperative and collaborative relationships among the federated entities, thus seeking a quality public education, in which technological resources supplement the curriculum, the pedagogical work and training, and that profit interests be elided

so that public (free) state education can meet the desires of society in the post-pandemic scenario.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: We thank the Fundação Cearense de Apoio ao Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico (FUNCAP) for the financial support.

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How to reference this article

DE PAULA, A. S. N.; OLIVEIRA, C. M.; ARAÚJO, S. B. The learning-market of Edtechs in Brazilian education from the impact of the pandemic of Covid-19. **Revista on line de Política e Gestão Educacional**, Araraquara, v. 26, n. 00, e022001, Jan./Dec. 2022. e-ISSN:1519-9029. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22633/rpge.v26i00.15230>

Submitted: 02/11/2021

Revisions requested: 04/12/2021

Approved 09/02/2022

Published: 31/03/2022

Management of translations and versions: Editora Ibero-Americana de Educação.