

## Michel Foucault in the memoirs of the Porto Alegre Group: on the Incursion of the French Philosopher's Thinking into Brazilian Educational Research

*Michel Foucault en las memorias del Grupo Porto Alegre: sobre la incursión del pensamiento del filósofo francés en la investigación educativa brasileña*

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**Abstract:** This article examines how Michel Foucault's theories have been received in Brazilian education research, highlighting his ideas' diverse interpretations and applications. The discussion is divided into three main areas of reception. The first area examines the effects of the Brazilian publication of "Discipline and Punish," which contributed to labelling Foucault as a "theorist of power." The second area discusses the reinterpretation of Foucault's work by the Porto Alegre Group, which has been instrumental in fostering a new understanding and spreading Foucauldian studies in Brazil. The third area reviews current academic work that explores themes like neoliberalism, curriculum, education, and teaching. In summary, this article aims to provide a thorough overview of Foucault's impact on Brazilian education research while recognising that addressing the full scope of his work is challenging. Ultimately, it argues that Foucauldian theories are valuable tools for educational research that go beyond established frameworks.

**Keywords:** Foucault; Education; Reception; Brazil.

**Resumen:** Este artículo examina las formas en que las teorías de Michel Foucault han sido recibidas en la investigación educativa brasileña, destacando las diversas interpretaciones y aplicaciones de sus ideas. La discusión se divide en tres áreas principales de recepción. La primera área se centra en los efectos de la publicación brasileña de "Disciplinar y castigar", que contribuyó a etiquetar a Foucault como un "teórico del poder". La segunda área discute la reinterpretación de la obra de Foucault por parte del Grupo Porto Alegre, que ha sido fundamental para fomentar una nueva comprensión y difundir los estudios foucaultianos en Brasil. La tercera área revisa el trabajo académico actual que explora temas como el neoliberalismo, el currículo, la educación y la enseñanza. En resumen, este artículo tiene como objetivo proporcionar una visión completa del impacto de Foucault en la investigación educativa brasileña, al tiempo que reconoce que abordar el alcance total de su trabajo es un desafío. En última instancia, argumenta que las teorías foucaultianas son herramientas valiosas para quienes se dedican a la investigación educativa que va más allá de los marcos establecidos.

**Palabras clave:** Foucault; Educación; Recepción; Brasil.

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Matheus Trindade Velasques is a lecturer in language studies. He is interested in teacher education, language education, and digital technologies in education. His research is based on Foucauldian Studies, specifically on discourse, subjectivity, power and knowledge. Moreover, it is in his range of interests to investigate the effects of neoliberal rationality on education and teacher practices.

## 1. Introduction

Michel Foucault's theoretical tools encompass diverse theoretical frameworks that shape his contributions across various fields of knowledge. Despite his untimely passing in 1984, Foucault has left a lasting intellectual legacy that features critical explorations of power, institutions, sexuality, and the methodologies of Archaeology and Genealogy of knowledge. His work critically interrogates contemporary notions of rationality, subjectivity, and freedom.

Examining the reception of Michel Foucault's theoretical contributions within Brazilian educational research means an analysis of a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. This process has yielded diverse interpretations and appropriations of the French philosopher's ideas, often characterised by significant divergence. Such variations reflect the nuanced ways in which Foucault's theorisation has been integrated into Brazil's discourse and education practices.<sup>1</sup> Unsurprisingly, Foucault's extensive body of work invites many interpretations, reflecting his three decades of rigorous intellectual production, which continues to resonate within academic circles worldwide. The diverse interpretations of Foucault underscore not only the importance of recognising the complexity of his thought but also the substantial impact of his theoretical and methodological tools across various fields of knowledge, including the Human Sciences, Social Sciences, and Health Sciences.<sup>2</sup>

Another essential aspect to consider is the distinctive characteristic of Foucauldian thought, which researchers often categorise into phases<sup>3</sup> – the Foucault of Archaeology, the Foucault of Genealogy and the Foucault of Ethics – which shift and develop, creating a complex framework composed of theoretical movements and problematisations. Thus, to fully engage with the French philosopher's thought, it is essential to recognise the presence of multiple facets, discontinuities, tendencies, interpretations, influences, and modes of operation within his work. As Gilles Deleuze aptly puts it, he is not merely a “theoretician of diversity” but a practical or even a great experimenter of multiplicity. This is evident not only in his ability to work on several fronts simultaneously but also in his exploration of multiplicative practices within his theoretical framework.<sup>45</sup>

Forty years after his passing, scholars engaged in Foucauldian studies continue exploring diverse developments and opportunities within the French philosopher's theories. While education was not a primary focus of Foucault's research, studies

1 AQUINO, Julio Groppa. “O pensamento como desordem: repercussões do legado Foucaultiano.” In *Pro-Posições*, no. 74, vol. 25, 2014, 15-21.

2 RAGO, Margareth; VEIGA-NETO, Alfredo. *Para uma vida não-facista*. Autêntica Editora, Belo Horizonte, 2009.

3 DREYFUS, Hubert; RABINOW, Paul. *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1982.

4 DELEUZE, Gilles. *Foucault*. Les Éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1986.

5 All translations made from the original language of the publication into the English language are the responsibility of the author.

in this area have drawn on his insights to critically examine school issues, their policies, and the subjects they encompass. These investigations have yielded significant research that provides compelling perspectives on the underlying phenomena associated with these topics.<sup>6</sup>

In Brazil's educational research context, Michel Foucault's theories have opened avenues for examining education from alternative perspectives, igniting debates and inspiring new lines of inquiry. Drawing on the works of Brazilian scholars such as Silvio Gallo, Alfredo Veiga-Neto, Rosa Fischer, and Tomaz Tadeu da Silva, I intend to concisely discuss the critical reception of Foucault's ideas within Brazilian educational research. To achieve this, I will explore how some of his key concepts—such as discourse, power, and governmentality—have gained significant relevance in education discussions.<sup>7</sup>

In addition, I have organised this paper in three domains of the reception of Foucault's work in Brazil: i) the publication of the Brazilian edition of the book "Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison" in 1977 and its repercussions in the Brazilian academic environment throughout the 80s, ii) the productions of the Porto Alegre Group, from the 90s onwards, and its developments in the production of a new way of reading and working with Foucault that extend to contemporaneity and iii) some developments of contemporary readings of Michel Foucault in educational research. More specifically, I explore a set of graduate works developed in the context of Porto Alegre to point out some of the current concerns and trends in education research based on Foucauldian thinking.

In the first domain, I explore the adoption of Foucauldian thought in early Brazilian studies, which primarily focuses on the concept of power. Within this framework, educational research rooted in Foucauldian theories has generated scepticism among researchers who align with humanist perspectives. This has contributed to a perception that Foucault, perceived as both anti-humanist and a problematic theorist of power, may hinder the progress of ideals such as the freedom and autonomy of the school subject.<sup>8</sup>

In the second domain, I explore how the Porto Alegre Group's interpretation of Foucault enhances disseminating a refreshed understanding of the French philosopher's ideas within Brazilian educational research. It is essential to clarify that Brazilian professor and researcher Silvio Gallo introduced the term "Porto Alegre Group" to describe education scholars from universities in Porto Alegre, southern Brazil, whose work is rooted in Michel Foucault's theories.<sup>9</sup> In this analysis, I investigate the theoretical tensions between Foucauldian thought and the prevailing Marxist perspective within Brazilian academia. Additionally, I delve

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6 VEIGA-NETO, Alfredo. *Foucault e a Educação*. 2nd ed., Autêntica, Belo Horizonte, 2007.

7 VEIGA-NETO, Alfredo (Ed.). *Crítica pós-estruturalista e educação*. Sulina, Porto Alegre, 1995.

8 GALLO, Silvio. "Editorial: 'O 'efeito Foucault' em Educação." In *Pro-Posições*, no. 74, vol. 25, 2014, 15-21

9 GALLO, Silvio. "Foucault. (Re)pensar a educação." In RAGO, Margareth; VEIGA-NETO, Alfredo. *Figuras de Foucault*. 2nd ed., Autêntica, Belo Horizonte, 2008, 253-260.

into the ongoing relevance of the research conducted by the Porto Alegre Group, emphasising its significance in contemporary discourse.

Concerning the third domain, I examine the academic works produced by graduate researchers engaged in contemporary educational research within the framework of Foucauldian Studies in Porto Alegre. I specifically present studies that utilise Foucauldian theorisation to explore the impact of neoliberal rationality on education. These studies illuminate significant changes in teaching methodologies, curriculum conceptions, and perceptions of teacher identity.

To delineate the boundaries for exploring the reception of Michel Foucault's thought in Brazilian educational research, it is essential to acknowledge the multifaceted nature of his writings and the challenge of fully tracing their developments and appropriations over time. With this understanding, this paper aims to examine the bibliography produced by Brazilian researchers regarding the reception of Foucauldian thought in discussions of education in Brazil without striving for an exhaustive or in-depth analysis of every aspect and effect of its influence in Brazilian contexts. Instead, I intend to provide a panoramic overview, offering the reader a general understanding of the context, the conditions leading to the emergence of Foucauldian studies in Brazilian education, and their primary effects.

## 2. An author of Power: A First Reception in the 80s.

To comprehend the reception of Michel Foucault in Brazilian educational research, it is crucial to consider the sociopolitical context in which this occurred. From 1964 to 1985, Brazil was under a violent military dictatorship marked by censorship and the persecution of individuals deemed potential adversaries of the regime.<sup>10</sup> In this context, the dictatorial government perceived the educational system as a means to instil a specific ideology aligned with its ideals and foster a workforce capable of meeting the demands of industrialisation policies. This was achieved through the impartation of knowledge and skills during schooling. Consequently, it became essential to “tailor the educational system to the needs of the labour market, prioritising technical training and preparation for employment, often at the expense of critical and reflective education.”<sup>11</sup>

The enactment of Law 5.692/71 represented the most significant educational reform during the dictatorship era. This legislation shifted the focus of education towards the labour market by introducing technical and vocational training in the latter years of secondary education. It also diminished the emphasis on the Humanities within the curriculum, reducing hours for subjects such as Sociology

10 FICO, Carlos. “Ditadura militar brasileira: aproximações teóricas e historiográficas.” In *Revista Tempo e Argumento*, no. 20, vol. 9, 2017, 5-74.

11 SAVIANI, Dermeval. *História das ideias pedagógicas no Brasil*. Autores Associados, Campinas, 2008.

and Philosophy. Furthermore, the law required the inclusion of courses like Moral and Civic Education and Social and Political Organization in Brazil, which aimed to instil specific patriotic values and promote political propaganda aligned with the ideals of the dictatorship.

At the same time, educational research within the academic sphere was affected by the policies of repression, censorship, and persecution implemented by the military regime<sup>12</sup>. As a result of structural reforms, Brazilian public universities were compelled to adjust their focus, prioritising undergraduate programs that emphasised professional training more closely aligned with labour market demands. Courses in the Humanities, often regarded as “subversive” by the military regime, were frequently relocated to remote campuses, distancing them from urban populations. Additionally, university professors accused of violating the regime’s policies or openly expressing dissenting views faced persecution, dismissal, imprisonment, or even exile<sup>13</sup>.

However, this movement could not stifle the research and debates in education rooted in Critical Theory, the Humanist tradition, Marxism, and, from the 1970s onward, Critical Pedagogy pioneered by the Brazilian philosopher Paulo Freire. As a result, from the late 1960s through the 1970s, the Brazilian educational landscape was characterised by a complex struggle among various societal sectors attempting to shape its constitution and configuration. Within this environment of limited freedom of expression, state impositions, and academic resistance, the concept of power emerged as a particularly compelling and promising area for scholarly inquiry within the Human Sciences, especially in the field of Education.

At this crucial juncture in Brazilian history, Michel Foucault’s ideas gained traction within academic circles, significantly contributing to the theorisation of power. Although some university professors had previously made individual efforts to translate specific works by the philosopher into Portuguese, the publication of the Brazilian edition of *Discipline and Punish* in 1977 marked a pivotal moment, introducing Foucauldian thought into educational discourse on a broader scale. This development initiated studies on discipline within the Brazilian school context, aligning these analyses with Foucault’s theories.<sup>14</sup> It is from the publication of *Discipline and Punish* that:

#### Michel Foucault’s historical and philosophical thinking and production

12 Considering that it is not the objective of this article to discuss in depth the mechanisms of surveillance and control of the Military Dictatorship over Brazilian universities, but that, nevertheless, this constitutes an interesting point to understand the reception of Michel Foucault’s thinking, I suggest the article by Motra (2008), entitled “The eyes of the Brazilian Military Regime on the campuses: the security and information advisories of universities” Available only in Brazilian Portuguese at: <https://www.scielo.br/j/topoi/a/zMNpct3W9cjrNbQdVWbZTs/?format=pdf&lang=pt>

13 MOTTA, Rodrigo Patto Sá. «A ditadura nas universidades: repressão, modernização e acomodação». In *Cienc. Cult.*, vol. 66, nº 4, São Paulo, 2014, 21-26.

14 GALLO, Silvio. «Foucault. (Re)pensar a educação», 257.

proved extremely important for the practice and theorisation in the educational field [...] It was from Foucault's domination of being-power that the modern school came to be understood as, among other things, the central machinery in charge of kidnapping child and juvenile bodies, disciplining and docilising them [...] it was precisely as a result of this role that the school — perhaps more than the prison, The hospital, the army, the asylum, the convent, the factory — became the decisive institution for the constitution of disciplinary societies.<sup>15</sup>

During that period, scholars acknowledged that Foucault's ideas offered valuable tools for reflection and resistance against the backdrop of the authoritarian regime, which employed the microphysics of everyday power to foster a compliant populace. The aspiration to re-establish a democratic system led the academic community to consider Foucault an ally in exploring the concept of freedom and its connections to various forms of power.<sup>16</sup> It is also important to note that even before the Brazilian edition of *Discipline and Punish*, the French publication of *The Discourse on Language* had already generated interest among certain Brazilian academic circles, though on a much smaller scale than *Discipline and Punish*<sup>17</sup>. An author who contends in his writings that societal structures exert control and regulation over discourses in multiple dimensions and highlights the inherent risks associated with language would likely engage the interest of educators who have, over decades, witnessed the profound implications of this phenomenon in their pedagogical practices.

Despite the significant influence of Michel Foucault's ideas on education during this period, it is essential to acknowledge specific aspects of this engagement. Firstly, it is crucial to recognise that access to his works was still relatively limited in the 1980s, with few translations available in Portuguese, even within university libraries. This scarcity impeded researchers from adopting Foucault as a central figure in their studies or engaging with his works from his conceptual framework.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, it is essential to recognise that Foucault was primarily interpreted by researchers operating within the framework of Critical Educational Theory, many of whom approached his work through a Marxist theoretical lens. In this context, his concept of power enriched discussions surrounding domination, oppression, and other prevalent themes. During this period, educational research concentrated mainly on social class issues and the effects of socioeconomic relations. Reflecting on this period, Professor Tomaz Tadeu da Silva notes:

We have had a very long period of creative, innovative and vigorous intellectual production in this theoretical and political field. It began

15 VEIGA-NETO, Alfredo. *Foucault & a Educação*, 13.

16 ALBUQUERQUE JR, Durval Muniz de. *Voices sem rosto, sombrias silhuetas: A contribuição da publicação do livro Vigiar e Punir de Michel Foucault para a historiografia brasileira*, n.d., 1-10.

17 FISCHER, Rosa Maria Bueno; VEIGA-NETO, Alfredo. "Foucault, um diálogo." In *Educação & Realidade*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2004, 7-26.

18 FISCHER, Rosa Maria Bueno; VEIGA-NETO, Alfredo. "Foucault, um diálogo", 10.

at the end of the sixties, a moment that can be characterised as a paradigmatic rupture if we want to evoke the old Kuhn. There, first, with the French, Bourdieu, Baudelot and Establet, Althusser, and with the capitalist School of Bowles and Gintis; then, with the Anglo-Saxons, already directly in the most restricted area of curricular theorising: the “New Sociology of Education”, Michael Young, Michael Apple, William Pinar and, a little later, Henry Giroux, to name only the most visible, a period was inaugurated not only in the area of curricular theorising but in the broader area of educational theorising. Despite the various theoretical influences already existing, the dominant trend was Marxist, and the primary discipline was sociology.<sup>19</sup>

Although the political climate was conducive to the reception of Michel Foucault’s ideas, the academic environment was less supportive of disseminating his theories. While some scholars integrated Foucauldian concepts into their theoretical frameworks, others sought to apply his analysis of power to explore issues related to the subject and social classes. However, this often resulted in misinterpretations, reducing the intricate complexities of power, its dispositifs, and mechanisms to a mere concern with state power.<sup>20</sup>

Through studies developed from this perspective, Foucault is increasingly recognised in educational research as contentious, theorising an inescapable power over a “dead subject” shaped by power relations. Additionally, he is interpreted as an author who emphasises concepts such as discipline, norm, and subjugation yet fails to propose potential avenues for resisting the very power he delineates. This has led to perceptions of him as a reactionary, undermining the feasibility of organised political action through his theoretical frameworks.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, a kind of Brazilian counter-reception of Foucault emerges, which becomes more prominent in works such as *O Homem e o Discurso: A Arqueologia do Pensamento de Michel Foucault*, by Sérgio Paulo Rouanet (1971)<sup>22</sup> and *Foucault ou o nihilismo de cátedra*, by José Guilherme Merquior (1985)<sup>23</sup>. At the same time, the works *Esquecer Foucault*, by Jean Baudrillard (1984)<sup>24</sup> and *O Pensamento 68: Ensaio sobre o Anti-humanismo Contemporâneo*, by Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut (1985)<sup>25</sup> are published in Portuguese.

The initial reception of Foucauldian thought in Brazilian educational research was predominantly centred on power analyses, which earned Foucault the title

19 SILVA, Tomaz Tadeu da. “Mapeando a [complexa] produção teórica educacional.” In *Curriculum without Borders*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2002, 5-14.

20 VIEIRA, Ney. “A dupla vinda de Foucault ao Brasil.” In *Itinerários — Revista de Literatura*, no. 9, 1996, 81-89.

21 ALBUQUERQUE JR, Durval Muniz de. *Vozes sem rosto, sombrias silhuetas: A contribuição da publicação do livro Vigiar e Punir de Michel Foucault para a historiografia brasileira*, 4.

22 ROUANET, Sérgio Paulo. *O Homem e o Discurso: A Arqueologia do Pensamento de Michel Foucault*. Rio de Janeiro: Tempo Brasileiro, 1971.

23 MERQUIOR, José Guilherme. *Foucault ou o nihilismo de cátedra*. Rio de Janeiro: José Olympio, 1985.

24 BAUDRILLARD, Jean. *Esquecer Foucault*. Translated by Luiz Paulo Rouanet. Rio de Janeiro: Rocco, 1984.

25 FERRY, Luc; RENAUT, Alain. *O Pensamento 68: Ensaio sobre o Anti-humanismo Contemporâneo*. Translated by Eduardo Brandão. Rio de Janeiro: Bertrand Brasil, 1985.

of “theorist of power.” This emphasis fostered scepticism regarding his potential contributions to a humanistic approach to education among those influenced by his theories. Consequently, Foucault came to be viewed as an anti-humanist thinker, and his work was often regarded as incompatible with a field rooted in ideals of freedom and individual autonomy.

Despite the abrupt reception and fragmentation experienced in the 1980s, the subsequent decades witnessed a flourishing educational research informed by Foucauldian thought. In the following section, I will explore recent efforts to enhance the integration of Michel Foucault’s ideas within Brazilian educational research, as well as the renewed approaches to interpreting and applying the theories of the French philosopher.

### **3. Beyond Power: a renewed reception by the Porto Alegre Group in the 90s**

Although the introduction of Foucauldian thought in the 1980s was characterised by contentious uses and appropriations of the author’s ideas, it played a pivotal role in creating the conditions for the emergence of a renewed effort to promote Foucauldian studies in the 1990s. In a field of investigation dominated by Critical Theory, Paulo Freire’s thought, and constructivism<sup>26</sup>, a group of researchers from universities in Porto Alegre, a city in southern Brazil, began to forge a distinct path for Foucauldian studies in education. The group, referred to by the Brazilian researcher Silvio Gallo as the “Porto Alegre Group”<sup>27</sup>, was organised around Tomaz Tadeu da Silva and Alfredo Veiga-Neto, professors at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, as well as their research groups, composed of master’s and doctoral students, as well as former advisees.

The 1990s marked an increase in investigations centred on the technologies of the self, as developed in Michel Foucault’s later works. However, many studies still emphasise the analysis of power dynamics. Consequently, much of the research within the national context has yet to thoroughly examine the realm of Foucauldian ethics, with the enduring influence of *Discipline and Punish* (1997) and *Microfísica do Poder* (1979) remaining prominent. As a result, for an extended period, a significant portion of educational research engaging with Foucault’s ideas has tended to treat *Discipline and Punish* as his sole work, thereby reducing his concepts to simplistic catchphrases and mechanising their application<sup>28</sup>.

26 VEIGA-NETO, Alfredo. “O currículo e seus três adversários: os funcionários da verdade, os técnicos do desejo, o fascismo.” In RAGO, Margaret; VEIGA-NETO, Alfredo (Eds.). *Para uma vida não-fascista*. Autêntica Editora, Belo Horizonte, 2009, 13-26.

27 GALLO, Silvio. «Foucault. (Re)pensar a educação», 253-260.

28 FISCHER, Rosa Maria Bueno; VEIGA-NETO, Alfredo. «Foucault, um diálogo», 12.



A significant factor contributing to the renewed interest in Foucauldian thought during the 1990s was the academic discourse surrounding postmodernism and poststructuralism. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a “theoretical revolution” emerged within educational research, driven by integrating Cultural Studies, poststructuralism, and postmodernism. This period saw the flourishing of inter-, trans-, and multidisciplinary research approaches, including postcolonial analyses, gender studies, and sexuality studies. As a result, educational research evolved through alternative ways of thinking, discussing, and problematising issues central to education, thereby providing new theoretical frameworks that diverged from traditional Marxist influences<sup>29</sup>.

In this context, the revaluation of Foucauldian thought takes on increased significance, supported by the movements in reception that have emerged alongside the rise of cultural studies and the engagement with the works of French philosophers such as Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Jean Baudrillard, and Jean-François Lyotard. This landscape promotes the spread of post-critical theories’ theoretical and political challenges. In education, it fosters the development of investigative and methodological approaches that resist the totalisation and harmonisation imposed by metanarratives<sup>30</sup>.

Through the lens of Michel Foucault’s thought, discussions emerge regarding the various crises becoming evident in academic debates: the crisis of Marxism, the crisis of paradigms, the crisis of education, and the crisis of the subject. This critique of the knowledge-power relationship in the formation of subjectivities unfolds across the field of education. It encompasses studies that analyse phenomena external to modern pedagogical theory and those that explore the connection between critical pedagogy and the rising dialogues surrounding postmodernism and poststructuralism. It is from these developments that the first publications focused on applying Foucauldian thought to education appear, three of which, in particular, stand out as significant milestones of this period: *Teoria Educacional Crítica em Tempos Pós-Modernos* (1993) and *O sujeito da educação: Estudos foucaultianos* (1994) – organised by Professor Tomaz Tadeu da Silva – and *Crítica pós-estruturalista e educação* (1995) – organised by Professor Alfredo Veiga-Neto.

As education research influenced by Foucauldian thought gains traction in academic circles, it prompts critical questions for those intending to conduct investigations within a framework primarily rooted in modern thought. One of the most pressing challenges is articulating how Michel Foucault’s work can meaningfully contribute to educational analysis within the scientific community. Moreover, addressing the questions and criticisms raised by those who argue that the French philosopher’s ideas exhibit an overemphasis on language at the

29 SILVA, Tomaz Tadeu da. «Mapeando a [complexa] produção teórica educacional», 7.

30 PARAÍSO, Marlucy Alves. “Pesquisas pós-críticas em educação no Brasil: esboço de um mapa.” In *Caderno de Pesquisa*, vol. 34, no. 122, 2004, 283-303.

expense of the subject is essential. This critique raises concerns about the potential ineffectiveness of efforts to foster critical political consciousness through education.

Critics of Foucauldian thought underscore the complexities inherent in advancing the author's concepts to cultivate an educational subject that recognises its contingent nature while simultaneously addressing essential themes of social struggle and the critical imperative of emancipation.<sup>31</sup> Critics contend that embracing the Foucauldian idea that discourse is imbued with power eliminates any space for legitimising critical perspectives. This would blur the lines between "false" and "true," ultimately jeopardising educators' ethical and political involvement. Consequently, it could hinder resistance to authoritarianism and exclusion within the educational sphere.<sup>32</sup>

Conversely, researchers in Foucauldian Studies within education argue that the critique put forth by the author functions as a potent instrument for deconstructing the foundational tenets of contemporary pedagogy. While structuralism views knowledge as stable and attainable, poststructuralism acknowledges the inherent impossibility of definitive knowledge.<sup>33</sup> In Foucauldian studies, truth is perceived as a construct shaped and articulated in power dynamics. Consequently, irrespective of the roles or actions of teachers, pedagogy, schools, or education itself, these processes are intricately embedded in and influenced by power relations rather than being merely straightforward outcomes of human reasoning or the scientific uncovering of previously hidden knowledge.<sup>34</sup>

Recognising education as a realm characterised by knowledge-power relations and understanding truth as contingent upon the presence of power does not result in political inactivity; instead, it cultivates a form of critical thinking that can be applied introspectively. This perspective encourages individuals to reject statements' uncritical acceptance, prompting them to question and continuously scrutinise these assertions. The goal is not merely to ask questions for their own sake but to deconstruct and analyse the conditions under which something is articulated to trace at least some of its effects.<sup>35</sup> Foucauldian thought does not advocate for a perceived political demobilisation or a deficiency in critical thinking within educational contexts. Instead, it fosters alternative methodologies for embracing critical and political engagement.

This phase in the reception and dissemination of Foucauldian thought within the field of education signified a significant shift for many researchers, moving

31 BURBULES, Nicholas C.; RICE, Suzanne. "Diálogo Entre as Diferenças: Continuando a Conversação." In SILVA, Tomaz Tadeu. (Ed.). *Teoria educacional crítica em tempos pós-Modernos*. Artes Médicas, Porto Alegre, 1993, 175.

32 BURBULES, Nicholas C.; RICE, Suzanne. «Diálogo Entre as Diferenças: Continuando a Conversação», 175.

33 CHERRYHOLMES, Cleo H. "Um Projeto Social para o Currículo: Perspectivas Pós-estruturais." In SILVA, Tomaz Tadeu. (Ed.). *Teoria educacional crítica em tempos pós-Modernos*. Artes Médicas, Porto Alegre, 1993, 143-172.

34 VEIGA-NETO, Alfredo. *Foucault & a Educação*, 83.

35 PIGNATELLI, Frank. "Que Posso Fazer? Foucault e a Questão da Liberdade e da Agência Docente." In SILVA, Tomaz Tadeu. (Ed.). *O sujeito da Educação: estudos foucaultianos*. Vozes, Petrópolis, Rio de Janeiro, 1994, 127-154.

from structuralist to post-structuralist perspectives. This transition is characterised by a disruption of confidence in modern pedagogy, which entails distinguishing the concept of power from oppression and separating knowledge from truth and freedom.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, post-structuralist thought elicited unease and discomfort among researchers and educators during that period. This stemmed from concerns that those approaching their investigations from this perspective might inadvertently transgress rationality and the modern Western tradition by diverging from the scientific paradigms that had predominantly shaped educational research previously.<sup>37</sup>

It is important to note that in the 1990s, academic production was influenced by Michel Foucault's ideas in the field of education—mainly that associated with the Porto Alegre Group—which centred on deconstructing modern educational paradigms. This focus contributed to disseminating and legitimising the prevailing crisis surrounding education. Research during this period was aimed mainly at questioning the existence of an autonomous and rational individual by revealing the knowledge-power dynamics that shape its development. Additionally, the school is framed as a space where practices regulate and standardise students, functioning effectively as an instrument of biopolitics. Another significant discussion during this time involves the impact of neoliberal rationality on education and its repercussions for schools, especially concerning the problematisation of human capital and the instrumentalisation of the educational subject. However, this issue had not yet emerged as a central focus.<sup>38</sup>

Consequently, it is plausible that the research, publications, and discussions fostered by the Porto Alegre Group throughout the 1990s reshaped the negative perception of Foucault, gradually moving him away from the label of “theorist of power.” Moreover, it was through the efforts of this group that Foucauldian studies in education began to gain traction and diversify, a trend that intensified in the subsequent decades. In the following section, I will examine some of the applications and impacts of Michel Foucault's ideas within education research, focusing on contemporary works.

#### **4. The unforgettable Foucault: on the author's theorisations in contemporary Brazilian educational research**

36 COSTA, Marisa Vorraber. “Elementos para uma crítica das metodologias participativas de pesquisa.” In VEIGA-NETO, Alfredo (Ed.). *Crítica pós-estruturalista em educação*. Sulina, Porto Alegre, 1995, 109-158.

37 OGIBA, Sonia. “A produção do conhecimento didático e o pós-estruturalismo: potencialidades analíticas.” In VEIGA-NETO, Alfredo José (Ed.). *Crítica pós-estruturalista e educação*. Sulina, Porto Alegre, 1995, 231-244.

38 For a more in-depth notion of the process of contagion and diffusion of Foucauldian thinking in this period, I suggest reading the article “A difusão do pensamento de Michel Foucault na educação brasileira: um itinerário bibliográfico”, by Professor Julio Groppa Aquino. Available at: <https://www.scielo.br/j/rbedu/a/8YPNJ6Yy6q5LSqKqgxDLbtt/abstract/?lang=pt>

Engaging with the theoretical tools of Foucault within the realm of contemporary educational research necessitates, among other considerations, an acknowledgement of the imperative to adopt alternative epistemological frameworks for a nuanced comprehension of the world's complexities.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, education researchers who adopt Foucauldian thinking must acknowledge that there is no fixed foundation for their inquiries; instead, the path is created through walking.<sup>40</sup> The focus should not be on establishing the absolute truth of education and educational processes but on understanding their discursive nature. This involves suspending definitive truths and viewing them as mechanisms for producing subjectivities, arenas of power relations, contexts for knowledge production and contestation, and instruments that facilitate technologies of the self and practices of self-care.

Before delving into contemporary graduate studies in education that utilise Michel Foucault's thought as a theoretical framework, I must clarify that my selection aims to highlight trends rather than provide an exhaustive analysis of the entire critical output in this area. Additionally, I focus exclusively on works produced within the academic context of Porto Alegre to maintain coherence with the initial scope of this article. However, before presenting these studies, it is essential to outline some underlying theoretical markers. This will enable the reader to understand better how Foucault's ideas—contrary to the oblivion suggested by Baudrillard—are increasingly solidifying his position as a central and enduring theorist in education.

A prominent trend in applying Foucauldian thought in contemporary educational research within the academic landscape of Porto Alegre is the examination of how neoliberal rationality intersects with modern life. This rationality permeates various sectors of society, acting not only as an economic doctrine but also as a mode of existence. Foucault<sup>41</sup> posits that American neoliberalism transcends mere economic doctrine, social theory, or political orientation. Instead, akin to liberalism, it represents a way of being and thinking; neoliberalism embodies a rationality that infiltrates and influences all facets of human life, serving as a framework for the relationship between those in power and those subject to that power.

Following Foucault's discussion, Dardot and Laval<sup>42</sup> also examine the emergence of neoliberalism as both an economic model and a way of life. According to Dardot and Laval, neoliberalism establishes a practical normativity that shapes

39 MORAES, Antônio Luiz de. *Pensar com Foucault: a indomabilidade do pensamento*. In Clarice Salete Traversini; Eli Terezinha Henn Fabris; Haroldo de Resende; Sílvia Gallo (Eds.). *Alfredo Veiga-Neto: modos de ser e pensar junto com Michel Foucault*. Pedro & João Editores, São Carlos, 2022, 531p.

40 VEIGA-NETO, Alfredo; LOPES, Maura Corcini. "Há teoria e método em Michel Foucault? Implicações educacionais." In CLARETO, Sônia Maria; FERRARI, Anderson (Eds.). *Foucault, Deleuze & Educação*. UFJF, Juiz de Fora, 2010, 33-47.

41 FOUCAULT, Michel. *Nascimento da Biopolítica. Curso no Collège de France (1978-1979)*. Martins Fontes, São Paulo, 2008.

42 DARDOT, Pierre; LAVAL, Christian. *A nova razão do mundo. Ensaio sobre a sociedade neoliberal*. Boitempo, São Paulo, 2016.

lifestyles, enabling individuals to operate within its economic framework. Despite widespread criticism regarding the lack of market regulation fueled by private interests and a state that increasingly limits its role in protecting the fundamental rights of the population—thereby worsening the precarious living conditions of the poorest and widening the gap of inequalities—neoliberalism remains the predominant normative system. It continues to guide the practices of governments, corporations, and millions of individuals who have come to know no other way of living than through competitiveness.

The authors argue that neoliberalism is a rationality that, as such, “tends to structure and organise not only the action of the rulers but even the conduct of the governed”,<sup>43</sup> with its main characteristic being the generalisation of competition as a model of subjectivation. Thus, neoliberalism “can be defined as the set of discourses, practices and devices determining a new mode of government of men according to the universal principle of competition”.<sup>44</sup>

Dardot and Laval utilise the term “rationality” based on Michel Foucault’s theories regarding political rationality in their research on governmentality. In *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault examines neoliberalism by analysing what he calls “governmental reason,” which refers to the forms of rationality that guide how individuals are governed through state administration. The authors conclude that political rationality is essentially governmental rationality, asserting that governance, according to Foucault, involves overseeing individuals’ conduct within a specific context using state instruments. This results in a complex discursive network that supports neoliberal governmentality globally, creating a “global normative framework that, in the name of freedom, and based on the leeway provided to individuals, directs their conduct, choices, and practices in new ways.”<sup>45</sup>

Establishing a new social order necessitates innovative ways of existing within the world. Through its governance techniques, neoliberal society aims to cultivate subjects capable of navigating and functioning seamlessly within its institutions, conforming to the norms of a corporate society composed of individuals. Dardot and Laval contend that this rationalisation captures the essence of individuals—their souls and desires—propelling them to seek methods to “learn how to learn” continuously. This drive ensures they maintain consistent control over their lives, managing themselves to guarantee ongoing self-improvement and adherence to the standards of efficiency demanded by the market. The emerging paradigms shaping this subject’s development are employability and lifelong training—essential for successfully engaging in the labour market.

It is crucial to highlight the significant shifts in the concept of work that have occurred during the transition from industrial capitalism and liberalism to

43 DARDOT, Pierre; LAVAL, Christian. *A nova razão do mundo. Ensaio sobre a sociedade neoliberal*, 17.

44 DARDOT, Pierre; LAVAL, Christian. *A nova razão do mundo. Ensaio sobre a sociedade neoliberal*, 17.

45 DARDOT, Pierre; LAVAL, Christian. *A nova razão do mundo. Ensaio sobre a sociedade neoliberal*, 21.

financial capitalism and neoliberalism. This analysis helps contextualise the factors contributing to the contemporary school distancing itself from the modern school model—originally established as a State institution—and increasingly adopting the school-as-enterprise model. Foucault suggests that the emergence of neoliberalism transforms the understanding of work and its relationships. As economic science evolves from examining economic processes (focusing on land, capital, and labour) to investigating human behaviour, work is redefined as an active component within a more extensive production mechanism. Consequently, neoliberalism emphasises calculating the factors that motivate individuals to allocate scarce resources toward a specific, unavoidable goal, often at the expense of other alternatives<sup>46</sup>.

It is essential to emphasise the objective of American neoliberalism. According to Foucault, the focus has shifted from the Marxist concept of surplus value—typically associated with the value of labour or its compensation—to how workers manage their resources. As a result, the concentration now lies on individuals, examining work as an economic behaviour. From this viewpoint, salary is no longer seen simply as the price of labour; it is understood as the worker's income. If wages are perceived not merely as payment for labour performed over a designated period but as a form of capital income, then the physical, psychological, and emotional attributes that enable a worker to earn a wage become their capital<sup>47</sup>.

It is, therefore, a matter of considering capital not only in its monetary form but also as encompassing the worker's set of skills. Thus, the classical notion of labour-power is replaced by capital competence. In Foucault's words:

It is not a conception of labour power; it is a conception of capital-competence, which receives, as a function of various variables, a certain income that is a wage, a wage-rent, so that the worker himself appears as a kind of enterprise for himself. We have here, as you see, taken to the extreme, this element that I have already pointed out to you in German neoliberalism and, to a certain extent, in French neoliberalism, the idea that economic analysis must find an essential element of these decipherings, not so much the individual, not so much processes or mechanisms, but companies. An economy is made up of business units, and a society is made up of business units. This is what, at the same time, the principle of decipherment is linked to liberalism and its programming for the rationalisation of both a society and an economy<sup>48</sup>.

Consequently, an individual worker is viewed as being in a situation comparable to a company, overseeing their capital competencies and making strategic decisions throughout their professional journey. Foucault posits that American neoliberalism

46 DARDOT, Pierre; LAVAL, Christian. *A nova razão do mundo. Ensaio sobre a sociedade neoliberal*, 25.

47 FOUCAULT, Michel. *A sociedade punitiva: curso no Collège de France (1972-1973)*. Trans. I. Benedetti. Martins Fontes, São Paulo, 2015.

48 FOUCAULT, Michel. *A sociedade punitiva: curso no Collège de France (1972-1973)*, 310.

reinterprets the concept of *homo oeconomicus*—traditionally explored in classical economics—while broadening its implications. As the author articulates:

The homo oeconomicus is an entrepreneur; he is an entrepreneur of himself. This is so true that practically the object of all the analyses that the neoliberals make will be to replace, at every moment, the homo oeconomicus partner of exchange by a homo oeconomicus entrepreneur of himself, being himself his capital, being for himself its producer, being for himself the source of his income<sup>49</sup>.

The concept of “human capital” emerges from the understanding that individuals and their competencies are intrinsically linked within labour relations. Foucault addresses this idea, pointing out that classical economic analysis often overlooks the nuanced characteristics that constitute human capital. He highlights that human capital consists of innate elements—rooted in genetic factors and the economics of human reproduction—and acquired elements, which neoliberal theorists tend to emphasise by focusing on educational, emotional, and psychological development. The competencies required by the worker-enterprise dynamic must be cultivated, continuously maintained, and updated. Consequently, workers can only generate the income necessary to support their chosen lifestyle if their human capital aligns with the labour market demands<sup>50</sup>.

Sylvio Gadelha, drawing on the insights of sociologist Oswaldo Lopez-Ruiz, examines the concept of human capital as a collection of skills and abilities that possess exchange value. According to Gadelha, these individual attributes must be framed within a purpose external to themselves, thereby assigning market value to the individual—transforming human beings into a form of capital, a collection of exchange values contributing to the State’s and the company’s wealth. Moreover, informed by the ideas of Canadian economist Harry Gordon Johnson, Gadelha contends that while in an industrial society, workers primarily rely on physical labour, in a neoliberal society, it is their knowledge and skills that they contribute to the workplace. This set of competencies results from capital investment in their education, made by the State, the individual worker, and the employer. Consequently, the worker emerges as a piece of capital equipment, reflecting a shift in the framework for economic analysis encouraged by discussions from the Chicago School. According to Gadelha:

In this sense, the research and analysis of the Chicago School are developed around questions such as: “How is the so-called human capital produced and accumulated? What is it made of? What are its innate or hereditary elements? How can it be acquired through educational policies?”<sup>51</sup>

49 FOUCAULT, Michel. *Nascimento da Biopolítica. Curso no Collège de France (1978-1979)*, 230.

50 FOUCAULT, Michel. *A sociedade punitiva: curso no Collège de France (1972-1973)*, 160.

51 GADELHA, Sylvio. “Governamentalidade neoliberal, Teoria do Capital Humano e Empreendedorismo.” In *Educação & Realidade*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2009, 177.

The author addresses the questions by emphasising the significance of individual educational and professional training. The link between the theory of Human Capital and education lies in the recognition of education as an investment “whose accumulation would allow not only the increase in the productivity of the individual worker but also the increasing maximisation of his income throughout life”.<sup>52</sup> Foucault highlights that the training of workers and the extent of capital they generate is directly linked to investments in education. For individuals, education primarily serves as a means of building human capital. Additionally, the author contends that when addressing the topic of innovation—which includes new technologies, the creation of novel products, and the development of fresh methods for organising production—neoliberalism perceives it as a return on the investments made in human capital<sup>53</sup>. In the context of neoliberal reasoning, innovation requires investment in enhancing the quality of human capital. This investment is expected to drive economic growth, as the key engine of growth is viewed not as the number of hours worked but rather the quality of the available workforce.

Dardot et al.<sup>54</sup> argue that the advancement of neoliberal rationality from the mid-twentieth century onward involved the dismantling of wage labour through the suspension and potential extinction of established social rights and protections. This transformation occurs not only through labour reforms and legislative changes but primarily by replacing “traditional” forms of work with more flexible alternatives that fall outside the boundaries of conventional legal protections. This flexibility allows workers to engage in their tasks at any time and from any location, depending on their availability. In some instances, this new work model aims to eliminate the traditional figure of the boss, empowering workers to take control of their own labour. Consequently, the concept of self-entrepreneurship emerges.

The authors point out that various names, including Uberization, the gig economy, and platform capitalism, have referred to this emerging model of labour relations. They stress that this trend cannot be characterised as hegemonic, as salaried employment remains the predominant form of work globally. However, it is essential to examine the dynamics of this work model, which operates outside established laws and regulations. This situation is central to ongoing discussions regarding labour law reforms that gradually seek to erode the protections afforded to salaried workers. According to the authors, we are witnessing the rise of a self-valorisation economy, where the emphasis is less on an individual’s skills and more on the perceived future value of their potential performance.

At this juncture, it is fitting to examine the shifts in the school system aimed at addressing the pressing demands of the market for human capital, essential for

52 GADELHA, Sylvio. «Governamentalidade neoliberal, Teoria do Capital Humano e Empreendedorismo», 177.

53 FOUCAULT, Michel. *A sociedade punitiva: curso no Collège de France (1972-1973)*, 160.

54 DARDOT, Pierre et al. *A escolha da guerra civil: uma outra história do neoliberalismo*. Editora Elefante, 2021, 112.



sustaining the functioning of a neoliberal society. We must also consider the crises these changes incite within the institution and investigate the transformations in teaching that arise within this context. In his book *The School is Not an Enterprise*, Christian Laval highlights schools' chronic legitimacy crisis. Once viewed as a beacon of progress and human emancipation within the republican tradition, the institution is now subject to intense scrutiny regarding its capacity to achieve effective outcomes in shaping individuals and to remain innovative amidst the continuous and rapid societal changes.

Laval<sup>55</sup> states that the initiative to universalise access to education aimed at creating citizens who, in addition to acquiring basic literacy and numeracy skills, would also be trained to conform to state regulations. However, this approach yielded a different outcome than the anticipated social progress, human development, or a balanced meritocracy. On the contrary, the liberal policies implemented throughout the twentieth century exacerbated significant social inequalities and intensified competition, thereby marginalising segments of the population lacking the resources to excel beyond the most privileged. This dynamic ultimately influenced the functioning of schools in various problematic ways.

The advent of mass media and the significant cultural transformations occurring in the West have substantially changed how children and adolescents socialise. As a key institution for enclosure and socialisation, the school faces direct challenges from the new methods of media engagement in society, raising essential questions about the legitimacy of the normative principles conveyed by schools and families. In light of this context, "reform" is necessary within state discourse. However, Laval poses critical questions: reforming the school to achieve what kind of institution? Furthermore, what kind of society are we aiming to create through these reforms? The author suggests that answering these questions requires a broader perspective. It is essential to explore further: What underlying discourses would support reformist proposals for schools to ensure they address the current demands effectively?

According to Laval, one of the key transformations that has impacted schools in recent decades is the increasing influence of neoliberal discourse across various areas of social organisation, including education. Neoliberal rationality has infiltrated and shaped educational reform debates in recent years. Consequently, a new schooling paradigm has emerged, promising to update and revitalise the fragmented educational system to enhance its competitiveness and alignment with market demands. As a result, the concept of the neoliberal school is introduced, which, according to the author, is:

... the designation of a particular school model that considers education an essentially private good, whose value is above all economic. It is not

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55 LAVAL, Christian. *A escola não é uma empresa. O neoliberalismo em ataque ao ensino público*. Boitempo, São Paulo, 2019, 89.

society that guarantees the right to culture to its members; they are the individuals who must capitalise on private resources whose future income will be guaranteed by society<sup>56</sup>.

In this context, education comes to be conceived in both a utilitarian<sup>57</sup> and a liberal dimension. From a practical perspective, the school is seen as an instrument of economic well-being, regarded as a tool that provides human capital to companies. Concerning its liberal character, it has come to be viewed in the market as a commercial institution. If knowledge is a private resource, then those who promote an educational experience that better aligns with the market's needs, as well as the desires of individuals to succeed in the world of work, will be the ones to attract more consumers in the now competitive education market.

The new educational order anticipates the gradual erosion of school authority alongside the growing emphasis on enterprise, regarded as the normative ideal. Laval contends that education has become an attractor of capital and is increasingly vital in the global strategies of both companies and governments. Among other factors, education indicates competitiveness, playing a fundamental role in economic and social systems. This, in part, explains the direction of liberal reforms in education, which not only promote competitiveness but also highlight the importance of specific knowledge for economic activities. In this context, knowledge is increasingly oriented towards economic value, with its cultural, social, and political dimensions relegated to peripheral importance.

As the driving force behind this movement, Christian Laval identifies globalisation as a context that has allowed multilateral institutions—such as the World Bank, the World Trade Organization, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, and the International Monetary Fund—to play a significant role in formulating goals and objectives for a new educational paradigm that all partner countries are expected to adopt. In this way, a global discourse on education is established, relying on documents that assess, compare, and validate the economic, social, and educational progress of countries engaged with these institutions. This discourse serves as a model and a standard framework for national education systems, increasingly influenced by the financial power of the institutions that developed it, promoting political centralisation and symbolic standardisation.

Although the model of the neoliberal school presented here is not yet a fully realised reality, it is crucial to analyse it to understand the transformations it brings

56 LAVAL, Christian. *A escola não é uma empresa. O neoliberalismo em ataque ao ensino público*, 17.

57 According to Abbagnano (2007), utilitarianism is a current of ethical, political and economic thinking that originated in England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Its main aspects include the attempt to transform ethics into a positive science, to replace the consideration of the end derived from the metaphysical nature of man concerning the motives that lead man to act, and to recognise the supra-individual character of pleasure as movable, which implies that the end of any human activity is the greatest possible happiness shared by the most significant number of people. The acceptance of this formula presupposes the coincidence between individual utility and public utility, which all modern liberalism has admitted. James Mill and Stuart Mill justified this coincidence by arguing that each individual desires the happiness of others because it is closely associated with his happiness or because of the feeling of human unity.

about. It is also important to emphasise that schools require reforms to engage more effectively with the society in which they are embedded. Furthermore, it must be argued that liberal reforms in education are not solely responsible for all the challenges faced by education in recent decades. For example, concerning inequality in education, schools have historically operated within a system that favours the education of the wealthiest at the expense of the poorest<sup>58</sup>. However, when discussing reforms, it is necessary to examine the directions taken – and the foundations upon which they are based – particularly about the educational objectives in place, as the school is an institution capable of fostering different ways of living in society, with the potential to both resolve and amplify inequalities.

In contrast to the reforms and suggestions put forward by multilateral institutions, Laval argues that neoliberalism presents itself to the school as an unequivocal solution to its problems. However, it constitutes a “medicine that feeds the evil it should cure”.<sup>59</sup> The advancement of the neoliberal model transcends mere economic considerations and evolves into a civilisational issue, where capital accumulation takes precedence over other societal aspirations. Access to education, supported by adequate public funding that fosters equity among citizens, stands in stark contrast to the neoliberal tenet of reducing taxes and promoting competitiveness. As a result, private institutions emerge within the education market, seeking to provide high-quality educational services to families who can afford them, thereby serving as an alternative to the weakened and underfunded public system. This situation exacerbates the divide in access to education and perpetuates the notion of meritocracy as yet another contemporary myth.

It is important to note that the practical and liberal conceptions currently vying for influence over education did not emerge suddenly or systematically organised nor as part of a centralised strategy for domination. Instead, the development of the liberal discourse on education appears to be decentralised, evolving gradually over time and forming an alternative perspective. Following the economic recovery after World War II, particularly from the early 1950s to the late 1970s, the demand from industries for specialised labour across all educational levels prompted states to expand their school systems. This expansion aimed to support economic recovery and enhance the welfare state<sup>60</sup>.

According to Laval, the educational logic of the period could not have been different: quantity and productivity were prioritised, making the school an object of interest to the productive system. It was not enough to train qualified workers for the market; they also needed to be refined consumers capable of using

58 VARELA, J., & ÁLVAREZ-URÍA, F. (1992). A maquinaria escolar. *Teoria & Educação*, (6), 68–96.

59 LAVAL, Christian. *A escola não é uma empresa. O neoliberalismo em ataque ao ensino público*, 21.

60 According to Gomes (2006), the *welfare state* is a “set of social services and benefits of universal scope promoted by the State to ensure a certain ‘harmony’ between the advance of market forces and relative social stability, supply society with social benefits that mean security for individuals to maintain a minimum of material base and levels of standard of living, that can face the deleterious effects of a developed and excluding capitalist production structure”.

increasingly complex products manufactured by the industry<sup>61</sup>. In the 1960s, significant criticism of the educational system and its traditional teaching methods emerged. Organisations like the OECD emphasised the need for mass education to prepare students to meet the job market demands effectively. As a result, there was a prevailing belief that schools and universities would be ineffective if they did not equip students for life—specifically, for the workforce.

The figures of the enterprise model provide a normative framework for educational institutions, encouraging them to prioritise high performance over the mere transmission of knowledge and the practice of teaching, compromising the humanist tradition of knowledge cultivation. If the State's role is to contribute to societal modernisation, then public education must align with the demands of the business sector. According to Laval, neoliberal reforms in education, which emphasise competitiveness, aim to boost economic productivity by enhancing the quality of work. It is also crucial to recognise that these reforms intend to yield tangible benefits for society while optimising the educational process to make it more productive without necessitating increased investment—ideally, even reducing public expenditure. This approach reflects the management of public affairs in a manner akin to private sector efficiency.

From the 1980s onward, there was a significant shift in the understanding of the role of schools, influenced by social changes in the market and the dismantling of the Fordist model along with its associated employment patterns. The principles of the market began to play a more prominent role in the organisation of public policies during a time when the State reduced its scope of action in response to transformations in capitalism, such as the globalisation of trade, the retreat of the State, privatisations, the financialisation of economies, the increasing anxiety surrounding employment, and challenges to wage protection. The author asserts, “What is at stake is the weakening of everything that serves as a counterbalance to the power of capital and everything that institutionally, legally, and culturally limits its social expansion”.<sup>62</sup>

In this context, the concept of the “flexible” school emerges, designed to prepare students for a workforce that demands more than just compliance. It requires proficiency in new technologies, ability to navigate uncertainties, initiative, autonomy, adaptability, and versatility. Employers should not impose rigid efficiency standards; instead, employees are expected to conduct themselves appropriately, reflecting the norms of production, which hinge on self-discipline. Self-discipline and self-directed learning are interconnected. Consequently, based on the human capital theory, workers must continuously accumulate knowledge and develop skills throughout their lives, engaging in lifelong learning without expecting stable employment. The market is fluid, shifting according to current

61 LAVAL, Christian. *A escola não é uma empresa. O neoliberalismo em ataque ao ensino público*, 25.

62 LAVAL, Christian. *A escola não é uma empresa. O neoliberalismo em ataque ao ensino público*, 39.

demands. Those wishing to thrive must possess the skill set to align with its dynamics and maintain competitiveness.

The impact of this new organisational structure quickly made its way into the education sector, both at primary and higher levels. Educators faced the challenge of becoming the benchmark for cultivating individual employability by providing comprehensive skills and competencies. These skills are not limited to a specific professional area but empower learners to explore opportunities. This prepares them to navigate the ever-evolving professional landscape, where adaptability across various roles becomes the norm. As Laval aptly puts it:

The “non-directive” and “flexibly structured” pedagogy, the use of new technologies, the vast “menu” offered to students, and the habit of “continuous control” is thought of as a propaedeutic for the “management of scenarios of uncertainty” that the young worker will encounter when completing his studies<sup>63</sup>.

Thus, the primary competency to be developed in education is the ability to “learn to learn,” particularly in the face of uncertainty, enabling individuals to remain engaged and competitive in the workforce. In this context, researchers within the education field, drawing on Foucauldian studies, have focused on exploring and discussing the intersections of neoliberal rationality in education. They examine shifts in power relations within schools, the challenges faced by the educational subject, the ambiguities and changes in contemporary teaching methods, and the emergence of alternative approaches to education and learning.

One graduate work that mobilises Foucauldian thinking in this perspective is that of researcher Rafaela Thomaz<sup>64</sup>—titled “Learning the English Language: An Imperative for the Self-Enterprising Subject,” her master’s thesis aimed to explore the contemporary significance of acquiring the English language. To accomplish this, she analysed statements on English language instruction in essays written by educators in this field. The research drew from a corpus of 70 essays authored by candidates vying for English teacher positions at a vocational education institution in Rio Grande do Sul, with submissions between 2016 and 2018. The theoretical framework for this research was informed by the works of notable scholars such as Michel Foucault, Sylvio Gadelha, Oswaldo López-Ruiz, and Zygmunt Bauman, focusing on concepts like self-entrepreneurship, Human Capital, and Globalization.

In her analytical approach, the author utilised a Foucauldian-inspired discourse analysis, drawing on Foucault’s archaeological perspective to explore the meanings associated with English language learning within her empirical corpus. She also examined the context that facilitated the emergence of these meanings. This analytical process enabled the author to assess the implications

63 LAVAL, Christian. *A escola não é uma empresa. O neoliberalismo em ataque ao ensino público*, 41.

64 THOMAZ, Rafaela Silva. *Aprender a Língua Inglesa: um imperativo para o sujeito empreendedor de si*. Master’s thesis, Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Porto Alegre, 2018.

for language teaching and learning critically. The findings of the research were organised into three primary axes: 1) teachers view learning English as a means to transform their futures, enhance their personal development, and contribute to a developed nation; 2) the English language is regarded as a crucial human capital skill, equipping learners with the necessary tools to navigate a society heavily influenced by globalisation and technological advancements; 3) in a context where only inclusion in the business world is deemed viable for survival, proficiency in English is considered essential for securing employment in large companies and attaining the most prestigious positions.

The research concluded that proficiency in the English language holds a prominent status in Brazilian society, being recognised as a vital component for individual success in today's world. While it acts as a means to validate the employment of English-speaking individuals, positioning them as valuable and productive members of society, the lack of this skill results in exclusion from a wealth of opportunities. In this context, the study illustrated that English aligns with professional achievement and functions as a governance mechanism over the population.

Another research based on Foucauldian thinking in education is that of Silvane Petrini, entitled *In the Plots of Entrepreneurship: The Emergence of New Subjects in/of Education*<sup>65</sup>. The master's dissertation had as its primary objective to examine the ways of being a teacher and student engendered by Educação em Revista (ER)<sup>66</sup> - a journal of the Private Education Union of the State of Rio Grande do Sul (SINEPE/RS) - when it addresses the theme of entrepreneurship in schools. The research had specific objectives: to analyse the enunciations about entrepreneurship that circulate in ER, to examine how educators are positioned when they carry out practices involving entrepreneurship, and to highlight the marks that RE attributes to students when engaged in entrepreneurship-related activities. The theoretical contributions supporting this investigation are rooted in post-structuralist theorising, particularly the work of the French philosopher Michel Foucault and his commentators, among whom Alfredo José da Veiga-Neto, Pierre Dardot, Christian Laval, Sylvio de Sousa Gadelha Costa, Zygmunt Bauman, Paula Sibilia, Gert Biesta, and Byung-Chul Han are notable.

The empirical material utilised in this study comprised digitised copies of *Educação em Revista* (Education in Review), covering the period from 2013 to 2020. The analytical approach employed to scrutinise this material was discourse analysis, as articulated by Michel Foucault. The findings were categorised into two central units of meaning. The first unit, titled "In the Plots of Entrepreneurship: A New Teaching Ethos," explores the emergence of entrepreneurship within the educational landscape. Entrepreneurship aligns new school practices with educational values and objectives in this context.

<sup>65</sup> PETRINI, Silvane Gema Mocellin. *Nas tramas do empreendedorismo: a emergência de novos sujeitos na/da educação*. Master's thesis, Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Porto Alegre, 2016.

<sup>66</sup> Available at <https://issuu.com/educacaoemrevista> (in Brazilian Portuguese).

Consequently, a (re)positioning of the teacher is identified, fostering a new ethos to guide teaching practices. It is noted that the decline of traditional teaching methods enhances this ethos, while design emerges as a fundamental element in this new configuration of the teaching role. The second unit, “In the Plots of Entrepreneurship: Heroes and Despots of Themselves,” highlights the potential for emerging learning subjects, focusing on the rise and virality of entrepreneurship-related practices in schools. This analysis reveals the development of a narcissistic student-subject, who begins to be shaped as a hero, characterised by self-exploitation, among other traits.

Finally, the doctoral research that draws on the theorisations of Michel Foucault is that of Camila Fabis<sup>67</sup>, entitled *Effects of the Implementation of the New Secondary Education Curriculum: Flexibility, Entertainment and the Emergence of a Letified Curriculum*. The thesis is the result of research developed to problematise the effects produced by the implementation of the recent Brazilian Secondary Education Reform on teachers and students in a network of schools dedicated to professional and industrial education, which is positioned as one of the first institutions to implement the new programme (Law 13.415/2017<sup>68</sup>). Linked to this general objective are the following specific objectives: 1) to examine the curricular effects engendered for teachers and students by the implementation of the reform proposal in the school; 2) to discuss marks of the new curriculum, permeated by processes related to curricular flexibility and entertainment in the post-industrial school. The theoretical contributions supporting the investigation are the theorisations of Michel Foucault.

The empirical research corpus comprises eight manuals that facilitated the implementation of the reform at the investigated school, as well as questionnaires for teachers and students, online interviews with four teachers, and three online group discussions involving over 25 students. The analytical approach employed to assess the material was influenced by Foucauldian discourse analysis. This examination revealed that the transition from an industrial model of productivity in the school, prompted by the adoption of the reform curriculum, led to enhanced flexibility in three operational areas: 1) the diversification, engagement, and enjoyment of classroom practices; 2) the aesthetic enhancement of physical spaces, along with variations in time and teaching methodologies; and 3) continuous and systematic evaluations driven by a focus on performance and outcomes.

The thesis contends that reforming the school of industry establishes an aesthetic and performative framework characterised by flexibility, shaped by the dynamics of performance and the excesses of contemporary society. Flexible curricular interpretations of learning are enacted by employing strategies that

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67 FABIS, Camila da Silva. *Efeitos da implementação do (novo) ensino médio: flexibilidade, entretenimento e a emergência de um currículo letificado*. Doctoral thesis, Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Porto Alegre, 2023.

68 The law is available at: [https://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil\\_03/ Ato2015-2018/2017/Lci/L13415.htm?msckid=99fb7879d0c211ec91a329a85274182b](https://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/ Ato2015-2018/2017/Lci/L13415.htm?msckid=99fb7879d0c211ec91a329a85274182b) (only in Brazilian Portuguese).

resonate with the interests of youth and are connected to entertainment practices. This mobilisation occurs through a “Donjuanesque,” generalist, and interactive teaching approach, where seduction and freedom serve as tactics to guide, perform, and professionalise young individuals for the contemporary workforce.

The three investigations summarised in this section provide a general insight into articulating Foucauldian thought within educational research in the post-graduate context of Porto Alegre. It is also important to emphasise that the studies discussed here are associated with the Research Group on Education, Neoliberalism and School Subjects (GPENSE). Consequently, we can confidently assert that various approaches and themes in education research draw upon Foucauldian concepts. Nonetheless, among the contemporary trends that have gained notable attention in recent years, examining neoliberal rationality’s implications in education has inspired a substantial body of research. In the following section, I will offer concluding remarks to summarise this discourse.

## 5. Conclusion

The discussions undertaken in this work suggest that Foucault’s thinking is characterised not only by transversal theorising that spans various fields of knowledge but also by a philosophy of multiple receptions, particularly within the context of research in Brazilian education. Although education was not an area in which Foucault specifically focused in his writings, his theorisations can contribute meaningfully to discussions within this field, offering alternative perspectives on teaching, curriculum, and school subjectivities.

From perceiving Foucault as a theorist of power within the field of education to recognising him as an author of diversity, there exists not only a reading and investigation effort that encourages the appropriation of his ideas as conceptual tools but also a desire to reevaluate the phenomenon of the school, alongside its subjectivities and power-knowledge relations, in innovative ways. It is essential to highlight that engaging with Foucault—whether in education or any other discipline—demands a continual re-examination of our paths and a commitment to critique, including self-critique. The goal is not to remain in Foucault’s shadow by taking him as a master, but rather to inhabit a space of perpetual questioning and the ongoing suspension of accepted truths—not to dismiss these truths since they are part of our reality, but to comprehend their origins and investigate at least some of their effects.



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