

# Plural School

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## **Antecedents**

**T**HE FIRST years of the decade of the 1990s witnessed across the entire national territory a great increase of Elementary School registrations in order to meet the requirements of the Republic's new Constitution. Some challenges were immediately obvious to the municipal school boards. Access to public school for all school age children was the first major challenge for public educational policy.

Belo Horizonte, at that time, already counted on the elementary level teaching staff being sufficiently qualified (more than 80% with a university degree), since the city had adopted a merit hiring system for teachers, that is, exclusively hiring through public exams. Besides being well qualified, a large part of the teaching staff was participating in pedagogical renewal movements, pressing for radical and significant changes. Some of the improvements being progressively implemented, like a democratic means of choosing school directors and the members of the school faculty; the introduction of pedagogical projects in the schools, and continuing education programs for teachers. But an overall municipal-level orientation to pedagogical policy that would direct these changes and contribute to the modification of the culture through a new conception of education was absent. The new school board committed itself to introducing pedagogical innovations that would contribute to the improvement of the quality of the public school. The main objective was to have a non-discriminatory, pluralistic, democratic, non-exclusionary public school capable of encompassing the entire student population independent of race, ethnicity and gender. In the breadth of the proposals, there was the implementation of a new conception of education and, consequently, of a new logic of school organization. The intention was to have a more culturally diversified curriculum that would incorporate art activities, place value on history and literature, and be open to the community without neglecting traditional disciplines. The intention also was for the students of public municipal schools to have progressive advancement in their scholarly development. There was severe criticism of the culture of student failures and grade repetition. In the discussions happier and more pleasurable school was emphasized, open to the community, that would contribute to the new challenge of public policy: retaining children and adolescents in the public schools.

The road was set for the adoption of a Pedagogical Project Policy that would establish principles capable of orienting the municipal public school system. At that moment, Brazilian society was debating the new Law of Directives and the Basis of National Education (LDB) in the National Congress.

Within the municipal system of Belo Horizonte there was dissatisfaction with the quality of teaching provided and a desire to supersede the independent projects of each school by the adoption of a proposal that would incorporate principles that the group of educators were discussing in forums about LDB, with which they would like to create an identity for the school system. Some years earlier, Paulo Freire, as the head of the municipal school board of São Paulo, had developed the concept of the citizen's school. His principles were an important inspiration for the team of the school board. The local teaching staff also requested that the adopted pedagogical guideline would respect the autonomy of each school in developing its own pedagogical project.

The new challenge was to promote a break with the old organizational logic of the school that all of us considered elitist and construct a new school structure capable of producing a quality public school.

### **How was the Plural School born**

#### *What were the challenges to be faced?*

The new School Board had no project ready and finished to suggest. They knew that it was necessary to construct this project and that its development should be done collectively. There was a conviction in the group that the municipal system would not accept ready and imposed projects.

As previously mentioned, the municipal system was implementing pedagogical projects in each school, each decided on by its own faculty. These projects were extremely diverse. Each school proposed a different innovation, such as language teaching (English and French), remedial learning, art and sports activities etc., using available human resources and with financial and material support that was possible from the Municipal School Board (SMED). Among our first tasks was the gathering of these experiments to detect the most significant and those capable of producing changes. In order to avoid discontinuity, as well as to reassure the teachers, we made an observation at that time that I consider important: all significant projects would be continued. This made it possible for us to establish a dialogue with the teachers and a favorable climate of cooperation and acceptance of changes in the majority of the 178 municipal schools.

One year later we had an analytical report about the principal projects in the system. In spite of numerous innovations, the structure of municipal education had not been altered and continued as the same as the majority of the country's public systems. Some severe problems were analyzed and detected:

- the present pedagogical proposals were not facilitating the progress of the children of the lower classes: they were continuing to be elitist and anti-lower class. The children of the lowest social classes that were entering the system were not capable of overcoming the cultural differences – they ended up being expelled from the schools, worn out from so many failures, they lacked the minimal standards for studying, having little stimulus to learn, having no guarantees of their right to remain in the school;
- teaching practices were conducive to repeating. Very frequently the student who would flunk a subject one year would have to repeat everything the following year, making up what had been lost but ending by flunking another subject. The repetition was no guarantee of learning the material that had been responsible for the failure;
- the dropout rate increased in relation to the student's proximity to working age. Repeaters lost self-esteem by having to be around much younger classmates;
- the school years, that all along had been fragmented – the courses, previously yearly, came to be single semesters, later three months, then every two months, etc. – made it difficult for students to learn. The schools didn't respect the students' rhythm, since the same content had to be learned simultaneously and in the same sequence by everybody but each time in a much shorter period of time;
- the teacher's work was quite solitary, each one involved in his own discipline and unconcerned with interdisciplinary matters or with the work of his colleagues.

These were some of the challenges which needed to be confronted in the attempt to collectively construct a new proposal. It was necessary to elaborate a politically aware pedagogical project that, respecting the autonomy of each school, would be capable of establishing principles to be followed by the entire system in order to resolve the municipal educational problems of Belo Horizonte.

#### *How was the program designed?*

Various seminars and discussions took place for the purpose of discussing proposals. A quality school should begin from this principle: "Everyone is able to learn, some more quickly, some more slowly, but everyone learns." The maxim that guided all the analyses was a school in which everyone could learn at his own pace and at which we could guarantee all students would stay. Various core axes were discussed at these meetings. One group of teachers recorded the proposals to develop in order to serve as a point of departure for the following meeting. Thus emerged the first draft of the proposal for discussion with the mayor and his team, once the increased cost of implementation was taken into account that made their approval necessary.

## The program

Improvement of the learning level of children entering the system; reduction of the dropout rate, recovering children from the streets; reducing the student failure rate; making the school a community cultural center; making the school agreeable so that children would enjoy going; in sum, seeking to ensure that students would remain in the public school.

The proposal of the Plural School (Mayor's office..., 1994) was centered on four main points. The first point referred to the guiding axes. These axes were the guiding principles of all later Plural School actions. They are:

- a more radical collective intervention;
- sensitivity in relation to the totality of human development;
- a school with time for cultural activity;
- a school with the space for cultural production;
- the educational potential of the school with regard to its resources
- uninterrupted development for each age
- appropriate socialization for each age group – formative cycle;
- a new identity for the school, a new professional identity.

The second nucleus involved reorganization of school time. The program proposed increasing the student's school time in elementary School from eight to nine years, seeking continuity in the schooling process, eliminating serialization and enhancing the building of the student's self-identification as a student. With this new logic the learning process came to be the center of the educational process, for which the objective is the formation and socio-cultural experience appropriate to each age group. The school came to be organized in three cycles:

- 1<sup>st</sup> Cycle (Childhood) comprising students from six to nine years of age;
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Cycle (Pre-adolescence) comprising students from nine to twelve years of age;
- 3<sup>rd</sup> Cycle (Adolescence) comprising students from twelve to fourteen years of age.

The formative cycles were one of the important pillars of the Plural School. The organization in cycles represented a new organizational logic of school time. Organization of the grade level by curricular content ceased being the guiding principle in favor of those who were being educated. The school's content and the allocation of its time and space were subjected to a more pluralistic central objective: the socio-cultural education and experience appropriate to each age group of those being educated. The time in school came to be more flexible, longer, and more attentive to the multiple dimensions in the development of the socio-cultural subjects. Respect for the organization of classes by age should facilitate interaction and favor development of more balanced identities.

Organization by cycles thus incorporated the concept of global education of the student's development, from the point of departure of recognizing the enrolled students' diversity and their different learning rhythms. The school came to have the role of making room for varied experiences and of providing opportunity for autonomous development and development of knowledge about reality. The student came to have more time to learn in the cycle and working collectively his teachers came to have more time to care for different groups of students.

For each formative cycle, the basic school content for different disciplines was defined from a standpoint pedagogically appropriate for each age group from a plural perspective. The school content included in each cycle should be significant for the enrichment of the student's potential. In addition the following became part of the school content: the visual arts, dance, theater, gastronomy, photography, computer science, labor laws, ecology, garden cultivation, questions concerning affective-sexuality, family, citizenship, work, etc.

It was necessary to prepare the organization of classes by age group. In the turbulence of the first years of implementation the mayor's office worked with accelerated classes. In 1995 the greatest amount of attention was given to the first two formative cycles. In 1996 we went on to also work with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Cycle and education of young adults and adults.

The third nucleus is related to the processes of plural formation. This started from a questioning of the process of teaching and learning in the existing school culture, which was seen as synonymous with copying and memorizing already established, existing knowledge as if it were absolute truth needing to be assimilated by the student. As a consequence teaching had been understood as a transmission process of knowledge frequently disconnected from reality. Teachers had a commitment to carry out the program.

In the logic of the Plural School, learning ceased to be an act of memorization or accumulation of information and took on new significance. Knowledge came to be constructed in strict relation to the contexts in which it was being employed, thus associated in this manner with already present cognitive, emotional and social realms. One of the challenges put forth was to conjoin "learning to learn" with "learning to live." Knowledge came to be understood in a global sense, having many dimensions to take into account, such as participatory learning, experiencing feelings, decision-making according to the facts, choosing procedures in order to reach determined objectives.

From this standpoint, some aspects that had until then been sidelined in the school routine came to enhanced valuation in the formation of the whole, highlighting the physical and manual processes and the processes of socialization. Construction of values, the representation of and attitudes with respect to the dignity of life, rights, differences in gender and race, sexuality, communal celebrations, the arts and work assumed a fundamental role.



Plural School students participate in “Meeting Vegetables.”



Children of the Plural School during class break.



Students of the Plural School taking part in the Plural Show event in Belo Horizonte (MG).

The Plural School proposed a break with the traditional conception of teaching and learning in order to incorporate social reality and consider the questions and problems confronted by the men and women of our time as an object of knowledge. School content was rethought and reevaluated. It was proposed that the compartmented model of isolated disciplines be abandoned so as to work with interdisciplinary and comparative themes. The insertion of comparative themes in curriculum content made it possible to relate the curricular disciplines to contemporary reality and give them social value.

To make the change feasible the Plural School went on to work with more encompassing proposals for pedagogical intervention. Interdisciplinary work projects were given emphasis around an axis of the student's participation in the learning process to produce something that would have significance as well as make sense to them. School knowledge came to be built based on recognition of questions of social interest and reflections about it, with the accumulated cultural knowledge of the disciplines as its reference.

The fourth nucleus sought to give renewed significance to evaluation which came to have decisive importance in the Plural School. In the culture of the traditional school, evaluation generally is centered on only one aspect of the students' learning process, that is, on their cognitive performance. It was done in certain static moments of the process, without taking into account the students' ongoing process of living, but only the number of points they were able to accumulate. Overwhelmingly, then, it was a quantitative model of evaluation, centered on the student, whose only judge was the teacher and the only end of which was to pass or fail. This vision was being questioned by the professionals in the municipal schools who were looking for options to break with it.

For a school conceived in a plural dimension a new model for evaluation was needed. Understanding education as a right, the Plural School could not continue evaluating by classification, exclusion, passing or failing. Evaluation came to be thought of as a global process involving various dimensions of the teaching and learning process, such as the intervention of the teacher, the school's curriculum, the organization of school work, the socialization and cultural functions of the institution, the formation of identities, of values and of ethics. Thus it was no longer possible to continue assuming that the only focus for evaluation should be the student.

Evaluation became a way to identify the school's problems and advances and to offer another dimension to the teaching process. The concept of evaluation as a formative and continuing process was adopted. Everyone in the educational process came to be evaluating agents. Several stages of evaluation were discussed and included in the school's pedagogical practice.

- An initial evaluation – which should serve to organize the students within the same formative cycle, not with the intent of



homogenization but to organize groups which could interact and maintain open channels for the exchange and confrontation of ideas.

- Ongoing evaluation – which should have the role of identifying problems and difficulties and programming diversified activities in a manner that could resolve and overcome them and not allow them to continue accumulating. By ongoing evaluation the teachers could sequence their teaching projects and define competencies within them to be prioritized.
- The final evaluation looking to an overall diagnosis of the living process and underpinning the next formative cycle. Coterminous with ongoing and procedural evaluation, the cycle's terminal evaluation would not have pass or fail as its objective. It might happen that some student could not attain a balanced development of all formative dimensions appropriate to the age cycle, creating difficulties in interaction with their reference group. This situation might result in a recommendation to retain the student for another year at the same age cycle. However, this should be decided collectively and considered an exceptional circumstance.

The Plural School project in this way attempted to break with the logic of summative evaluation in which in order to go on the student would need to have a certain number of points, and proposed that other evaluative instruments of a more qualitative nature be rethought and constructed based on the defined criteria and proposed objectives.

### *Why Plural School?*

Various aspects led to the name Plural School, especially the idea of a more democratic, broader school, more open to cultural differences and communities. From the very beginning it was possible to realize that the suggestions were driving toward the proposition of a school with pluralistic characteristics, in accord with a democratic society. It was necessary to respect the singularity of the pedagogical projects of each school, but it was also necessary to establish principles that could provide orientation for the entire school system. The pluralism of ideas given value by the Federal Constitution itself could be the basis for the proposal. From that beginning it was possible to highlight the dimension of plurality that should be present. Thus the teaching of scientific knowledge would no longer be based exclusively on accumulated knowledge, but should be expanded with the objective of introducing other dimensions into the holistic formation of a human being. Plurality, then, would suggest a new operative perspective for educators. A more collective, more holistic, less individuated, and less fragmented work. Little by little, other dimensions of this “plural” were reinforcing the meaning of the proposal.

## The implementation

The implementation of the Plural School proposal was not easy, but was met with determination and enthusiasm by a good part of the teaching staff and with the political will of the government. In order to implement the pedagogical proposal aspects of the management of the schools needed to be changed:

- the criterion of one teacher per class was changed to a group of three teachers for two classes, towards elimination of the present teacher's school load;
- from pedagogical management conducted by specialists to management by a group of educators;
- the formation of classes based on schoolroom abilities was replaced by formation based on age, on prior school experiences and on the student's cultural experiences.

These changes had significant financial impact since Elementary Teaching Board would need more than 500 new teachers in order to adopt the criterion of three teachers for every two classes of students, and a project of "material" improvement of the school for what had been approved by the population in the participatory municipal budget, resources on the order of R\$3,000,000 for a small improvement to the most immediate physical need of each school.

The project was approved by the State Educational Council as a pedagogical experiment, if the Municipal School Board would commit to an outside evaluation after a period of four years.

The implementation was initiated in 1994 by means of discussions with the various groups comprising the municipal school system. Various events with the system's teachers, parents and students were launched in the nine regions of the city. In December 1994 a Municipal Education Conference took place with 1500 delegates representing each school and each segment of the school. The proposal was approved at the event by acclamation.

In 1995 the school year began with a major formation course in which the proposed changes were presented to all of the elementary school teachers from the 1<sup>st</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> grades. At this time the main changes were occurring in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> formation cycles. Beginning in 1996 changes were implemented in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Cycle and in the education courses of youths and adults.

In 1997 a new pedagogical team took over the Municipal School Board giving continuity to the implementation. A proposal so radical which aimed at such significant changes in the school culture could not be implanted in only four years, but would have to be a State project, continuing through subsequent governments. Various Congresses took place to discuss and improve the Plural School. Continuing education classes were offered to the teachers for orienting the implementation of the pedagogical practices. And many changes persist to our time.

## Results

Through a monitoring of the implementation we have opinions from the teachers, parents and the general public. These opinions were highly differentiated.

The group of teachers who had participated in the discussions strove to correctly implement the proposal, extending themselves in the preparations with their colleagues. But one sufficiently numerous group of professionals – many of whom had not taken part in the discussions – were resistant to the proposals and contributed to the dissemination of criticism, whether grounded or not.

The Plural School was approaching questions of practical pedagogy that were rooted in school culture, and the lower classes, even being the most discriminated against by some of the preexisting practices that it intended to modify, could not understand the changes which would be necessary.

The majority of criticism came from the parents and the politicians, especially based on two fears:

First was the interpretation that the project adopted criteria of automatic grade promotion. Therefore, there would be no more flunking and all the students would pass, independently of attainment of an adequate learning level. Since they had a guarantee of passing, many students would lose interest in studying.

The second was the fear that the children would get to the 8<sup>th</sup> grade without knowing how to read and write, mainly because of the elimination of flunking. Implementation of the mechanism holding back students at the end of each cycle had not been done as it should have been and was not able to calm the parents. These questions were not clarified, endangering the implementation of the program.

It is important to mention that the new LDB, Lei nº 9.394/96, included in its text various proposals that already were included in the Plural School, in a sense legitimating it.

A proper methodological evaluation was done by the Educational Evaluation and Measurements Group (GAME) of the College of Education of UFMG, summarized in the book *Avaliação da implementação do projeto político-pedagógico Escola*

Plural (UFMG/FAE/Game, 2000) (Evaluation of the Implementation of the Plural School Political-Pedagogical Proposal). This evaluation was commissioned by the Municipal School Board in response to the recommendation of the State Education Council.

The sampling studies by UFMG included 31 schools selected among those that considered themselves plural or not, that is, schools which had undertaken the principles and values of the Plural School. These schools reflected quite diverse conditions: some claimed to be plural but showed equivocations in the interpretation of the proposal; others that said they were resistant nonetheless demonstrated advanced practices, that were

based on the principles of the proposal; while still others gave evidence of internal struggles, lack of comprehension of the proposal, and personal power struggles.

The proposal generated debates. The text of the evaluation made reference to some of them. The proposal, for example, was affirmed to be the fruit of the practices emerging from the daily life of the schools, but

these practices were specific to some of the schools or to teams in the schools or of groups of teachers at a particular school. Taken together, seen from the format of the “Plural School” program, these practices diluted and cloaked in great complexity, articulated and involved by the ordinary guiding principles of pedagogical questions. (ibid,p.57)

Many teachers who had involved themselves in the discussions and developed the practices that became the origin of the Plural School didn't recognize their input in the discussions and felt insecure. This observation justified part of the resistance by many teachers and parents.

What the group concluded from this situation was

that the process of building the Plural School was taking on its own dynamic in the assimilation of its principles [...] To be plural, as its own name says, is to be constantly building the pedagogic project of a school, in conformity to the possibilities and necessities of the context of pedagogical action. (ibid, p.59)

Another observation was the “enthusiasm and the theoretical knowledge of the program demonstrated by many teachers in the sample case studies, reinforcing the possibilities of consolidating the proposal” (ibid, p.60). The report also mentioned that “a sufficiently significant number of teachers believed in the proposal and they made an effort to change pedagogical practice as a whole.” (ibid).

It was also observed, however, that various schools continued operating traditionally. The main explanations for this resistance were summarized thusly:

1. a lack of continued training process more directed toward strategic difficulties of the process;
2. the political-ideological factor, derived from the PT having been the party implementing the proposal;
3. the difficulty of establishing a balance point between respect for autonomy of the school, diversity, and the need to maintain minimum standards of combined action in a system such as that of PBH. (ibid, p.60)

The report, moreover, commented that the implementation of the proposal brought insecurity and dissatisfaction to the teachers who were acting in schools where they were ministering to the middle levels of the population whose parents idealized a traditional school, certainly closer to private schools.

For the parents in these schools the Plural School represented a retreat, since it broke the dynamic they considered a reference to the community.

At other schools, the initial deconstruction of existing practices was making many teachers feel insecure with regard to this new mode of approach. When a period of inertia had passed, however, they were incorporating into the school on a daily basis practices they considered positive.

The principal positive points of the Plural School pointed out in the statements of the teachers in the schools that were examined (ibid, p. 63) were:

- the teaching projects;
- the non-imposing of content sequences that needed to be mastered;
- the opportunity for growth of the teachers who needed more study and research;
- the artistic-cultural activities that became part of the school routine;
- the setting aside of a regular time period for planning and for studies (project time periods and weekly pedagogical meetings during work time);
- sharing of information;
- and democratization of decisions.

Up to the present time the directives of the Plural School are continuing in force, while some modifications have been introduced during the time since the implementation thirteen years ago.

Evaluating the situation with regard to the school system at this moment it is possible to state that, overall, there has been an improvement in the quality of the Belo Horizonte public school. For example, in the new national index calculated by INEP, the IDEB (Index of Development of Basic Education), the students from the initial series of the capital city's Elementary School reached a result superior to nearly all the rest of the capital cities (4.9) except one, which was only one decimal point higher. It is possible that many students were still finishing Elementary School with a low learning level. These, probably, were those who the traditional school flunked in the first years. Having remained in school, it is probable that they have had the opportunity for a longer period of socialization.

During the last mayoral election, the Plural School was present in the speeches of the opposition candidates, who condemned it because it hadn't happened that all of the students had a good school performance. Many people came out in defense of the proposal. The most significant was the one from Father Geraldo Magelo, former rector of PUC-MG and the present rector of UNA, who wrote an article in the newspaper Estado de Minas from September 11, 2004, in which he mentioned some of the failures in the implementation of the project, such as the inadequacy of training given to the teachers and the introduction of change simultaneously in all the schools. But he added:

it is not for these limitations that we should condemn absolutely the most beautiful school project that has arisen in the last 50 years. With adequate teacher training and more firmness in the demands made of the students,

“without being unkind,” the Plural School could recover its place in society and continue building itself as a new, effective and beautiful educational experience.

Summing up, the Plural School is, for many reasons, a very innovative pedagogical project, one of the most courageous attempts to combat dropout rate and repeating students and to recover the right to and the pleasure of learning. If corrections of its path are necessary, this is part of the dynamic of collective and democratic processes and develops in the day-to-day school system and its units. What is important is to not lose the way.

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*ABSTRACT* – This paper presents the Plural School implemented in Belo Horizonte’s local educational system from 1993 to 1996. This educational proposal has been considered innovative by many people and controversial by others since it attempted a break from the traditional culture of public schooling to initiate a broader, democratic, inclusionary and plural conception of education into the system. It also attempted to take into account the multiple dimensions of an individual’s educational potential and to provide adequate conditions for the success of children from lower social classes. Moreover, it aimed to meet the requirements of public policies of expanding elementary and middle level education and, above all, improving the quality of public schools. The article presents the proposal, some controversies concerning it and an assessment of the results.

*KEYWORDS* – Plural School, Education, Elementary and Middle Level Education, Public School.

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