

**The discourse of literacy statistics:
biopolitics in managing the risk of child illiteracy caused by
the Covid-19 pandemic**

***O discurso das estatísticas de alfabetização:
biopolítica no gerenciamento do risco do analfabetismo infantil
provocado pela pandemia de Covid-19***

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Abstract: The problem of literacy among Brazilian children spans decades of discussions and is accentuated after almost two years of remote teaching, due to the covid-19 pandemic. In face of this scenario, this article aims to analyze how literacy statistics discursively produce a notion of risk related to the learning of the child population with the pandemic period as an aggravating factor. Methodologically, it uses discourse analysis inspired by Michel Foucault. The empirical consists of the following documents, analyzed as monuments: 1) Technical Note “Impacts of the pandemic on children's literacy” (TODOS PELA EDUCAÇÃO, 2021) e 2) Executive Summary of the report “The State of the Global Education Crisis: A Path to Recovery (UNESCO; UNICEF; BANCO MUNDIAL, 2021). Based on the concepts of biopower and biopolitics, the power-knowledge relationship put into operation by statistics to govern the population is discussed. The analyses of the empirical material make visible the risk of child illiteracy linked to four factors: 1) socioeconomic factors; 2) gender factors; 3) racial factors; and 4) Risk projection.

Keywords: Literacy; Illiteracy; Statistics; Biopolitics; Michel Foucault studies

Resumo: O problema da alfabetização das crianças brasileiras atravessa décadas de discussões e encontra-se acentuado após quase dois anos de ensino remoto, decorrente da pandemia de Covid-19. Diante deste cenário, o presente texto objetiva analisar como as estatísticas de alfabetização produzem discursivamente uma noção de risco relacionada à aprendizagem da população infantil, tendo o período de pandemia como agravante. Metodologicamente, utiliza-se da análise do discurso de inspiração foucaultiana. A empiria é composta pelos seguintes documentos, analisados



na qualidade de monumentos: 1) Nota Técnica “Impactos da pandemia na alfabetização de crianças” (TODOS PELA EDUCAÇÃO, 2021) e 2) Resumo Executivo do relatório “O estado da crise global da educação: um caminho para a recuperação” (UNESCO; UNICEF; BANCO MUNDIAL, 2021). A partir dos conceitos de biopoder e biopolítica, discute-se a relação poder-saber posta em funcionamento pelas estatísticas para o governo da população. As análises do material empírico visibilizam o risco do analfabetismo infantil atrelado a quatro fatores: 1) fatores socioeconômicos; 2) fatores de gênero; 3) fatores raciais e 4) Projeção do risco.

Palavras-chave: Alfabetização; Analfabetismo; Estatísticas; Biopolítica; Estudos foucaultianos

1 Introduction

In contemporary, graphocentric societies where countless practices - from the most every day to the most specialized ones - are mediated by writing, enhancing the population's strengths involves achieving increasingly sophisticated reading and writing skills and capacities. In other words, literacy and reading and writing skills indicate a population's development potential.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development proposed by the United Nations (UN), of which Brazil is a member, offers the universalization of literacy and has as one of its goals “by 2030, to ensure that all young people and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, are literate and have acquired a basic knowledge of mathematics” (ORGANIZAÇÃO DAS NAÇÕES UNIDAS, 2015, p. 20). Therefore, literacy is tied to one of the steps toward creating a better world and future. Furthermore, considering that “the Sustainable Development Goals and targets are integrated and indivisible” (ORGANIZAÇÃO DAS NAÇÕES UNIDAS, 2015, p. 13), failing to make the population literate would imply a loss of the world's development. Consequently, the effects of non-literacy go beyond school life, spreading beyond it, and may affect the capacity of individuals to act as citizens and their possibilities of entering and advancing in the labor market. Thus, the consequences caused by childhood illiteracy extend into adult life.

The stage that comprises the initial reading and writing learning encompasses, according to the Common National Curricular Base (BRASIL, 2017), the first two years of elementary school. It is expected that, during these two years, the child will understand

how the alphabetic writing system works and develop initial skills in reading, comprehension, and production of written texts. Reading and text production continues to be improved throughout schooling, but in the early stages of elementary school, this learning is highlighted in the pedagogical practices.

Given this panorama that emphasizes the need for children's literacy, the present text aims to analyze some biopolitical strategies put into operation to make visible and minimize the "risk of child illiteracy" (SPERRHAKE; BELLO, 2018) aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Through a Foucauldian-inspired discourse analysis, we take the following documents as empiria: 1) Technical Note "Impactos da pandemia na alfabetização de crianças" (In English "Impacts of the pandemic on children's literacy") (TODOS PELA EDUCAÇÃO, 2021) and 2) Executive Summary of the report "O estado da crise global da educação: um caminho para a recuperação" (In English "The state of the global education crisis: a path to recovery") (UNESCO; UNICEF; BANCO MUNDIAL, 2021).

2 Theoretical framework

The discussion about power takes up a considerable part of Michel Foucault's theories, even though the author stated that his concern was "to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects" (FOUCAULT, 2013, p. 273). In fact, without constituting a theory on power, Foucault took it in its exercise and functioning, presenting it through different analyses, as in the book *Discipline and Punish* and in the courses *Society must be defended* and *Security, Territory, Population*. It is not without interest that the book published in 1975 and the courses lectured between 1976 and 1978 at the Collège de France are mentioned since the concepts of biopower and biopolitics will be helpful in the discursive analysis of literacy statistics and the risk of child illiteracy that this text seeks to explore.

The discussion undertaken by Foucault that leads him to the concept of biopower is related to the formation of a sexuality apparatus, on the one hand, and the issue of State racism, on the other. In addressing these issues, the author develops the idea of "acquisition of power over man insofar as man is a living being" (FOUCAULT, 2010, p. 201). As analyzed by the author, the power exercised over man would have two poles of

action: one intended for man as a body that needs to have its minimal gestures disciplined. This power, adjectivally disciplinary, can be described as “[...] all devices that were used to ensure the spatial distribution of individual bodies (their separation, their alignment, their serialization, and surveillance) and the organization, around those individuals, of a whole field of visibility” (FOUCAULT, 2010, p. 203). The other pole of action is centered on man as a species, focusing on a category hitherto new in political discussion: population. Foucault calls this power biopolitics, and it is on this power that we will focus our theoretical and later analytical construction.

According to Foucault (2008), population is understood both as subject and object of knowledge-power mechanisms. Object, because it is on population that action is taken; population is the target. Subject, because it is the population who must assume this or that behavior, this or that way of being. “The final objective will be the population. The population is pertinent as an objective, and the individuals, the series of individuals, the groups of individuals, the multiplicity of individuals, this is not going to be pertinent as an objective. It will simply be pertinent as an instrument, intermediary, or condition for achieving something at the level of the population” (FOUCAULT, 2008, p. 56).

The State became interested in managing its population, especially after the seventeenth century, when not only the territory was understood as important for the sovereign but also the elements that are part of this territory. First, the population was understood as a “collection of a sovereign’s subjects” (FOUCAULT, 2008, p. 91) on whom laws and regulations could be imposed. In the eighteenth century, this understanding changed, and population started to be considered in its own phenomena, in its variables, in its “naturalness” (FOUCAULT, 2008).

The population is a set of elements in which we can note constants and regularities even in accidents, in which we can identify the universal of desire regularly producing the benefit of all, and with regard to which we can identify a number of modifiable variables on which it depends (FOUCAULT, 2008, p. 97-98).

A new technique of power comes into existence to operate on this level, on the level of the man-species. Focusing on the multiplicity of men and the phenomena that are peculiar to them, a “biopolitics of the human species” (FOUCAULT, 2010, p. 204) appears.

As much of the analysis undertaken by the French philosopher focuses on the relationship between power and knowledge, along with the emergence of this new technology of power, we see the development of specific knowledge capable of visualizing this population in its dynamics and movements: demography and, later, statistics. In this sense, it is worth mentioning Foucault's assertion that power produces knowledge, "[...] that the exercise of power itself creates and causes to emerge new objects of knowledge and accumulates new bodies of information" (FOUCAULT, 2015, p. 170), and, of course, "[...] knowledge induces effects of power. In this sense, and within the governmentalization of the States, statistical knowledge worked strategically so that the exercise of power was increasingly effective. According to Desrosières (2004, p. 32), modern statistics is "[...] an important component of the language necessary for the saying and doing of societies [...]", being constituted from the articulation between "two forms of authority": science and State. The function of statistics in the government of populations is characterized by giving visibility and allowing analysis, having quantitative data as a tool for knowledge and decision-making because from them, it is possible to access "[...] elements that allow the maintenance and development of forces" (BELLO; TRAVERSINI, 2011, p. 859). Thus, "[...] we highlight the existing relationship between 'practices of power' and 'practices of knowledge,' between governing and knowledge [...]" (BELLO; SPERRHAKE, 2016, p. 418).

We can also understand statistics as a technology of biopower because it is able to combine a disciplinary power, which is individualizing, with a biopolitical power, which is massifying. It happens because statistics

[...] at the same time it organizes a space of visibility from the distribution (classification) of what has been quantified or measured, it also puts into operation, from these quantifications, mechanisms of forecasts, of estimates, with an intervention focus at a global level. In other words, it starts from a mapping at the individual level - of the body man - for an intervention at the population level - of the man-species. (SPERRHAKE, 2016, p. 53-54).

The centrality of statistical knowledge for population knowledge and decision-making continues to the present day, as we will show in the analyses of this text. To this end, we also rely on the concept of Numeramentality (BELLO, 2012; SPERRHAKE; BELLO, 2019) to highlight "[...] the combination between these arts of governing and the

practices and normativities around numerating, measuring, accounting, serializing, which guide the enunciative production of practices [...]” (BELLO, 2012, p. 104).

Linked to the operation of statistical knowledge is the notion of risk, which, according to Bernstein (1997, p. 2), is “one of the prime catalysts that drive modern Western society.” Foucault (2008, p. 80) points out that “[...] there are differential risks that reveal, as it were, zones of higher risk and, on the other hand, zones of less or lower risk” (FOUCAULT, 2008, p. 80). With this, it is possible to identify what is dangerous. “We cannot quantify the future because it is an unknown, but we have learned how to use numbers to scrutinize what happened in the past” (BERNSTEIN, 1997, p. 7). In this sense, statistics that seek to quantify populations’ literacy also function as a way to locate risk zones or situations.

Foucault (2008) points out that one of the ways to act on the population is through education. In 1970, Foucault pointed out that “every educational system is a means of maintaining or modifying the appropriateness of discourses with the knowledge and power they bring with them” (FOUCAULT, 1992, p. 44). In this way, we see how it is possible to delineate a relation between the governance of the population through school education and the school population, specifically regarding literacy.

It is by thinking of the population as the axis of power and as an object of knowledge, in its articulation between knowledge-power, that we will analyze the discourses that circulate and that put at risk the child population that does not become literate. In other words, we will examine a series of statements that contemporarily create the risk of child illiteracy through statistical production and indicate that, after remote education, we live in a period of crisis regarding literacy.

3 Methodology

In the inaugural lecture delivered by Foucault in December 1970 at the Collège de France, the author states that “discourse is little more than the gleaming of a truth in the process of being born to its own gaze [...]” (FOUCAULT, 1996, p. 49). Previously to this, in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, when discussing archaeology as an analytical tool, the author refers to other characteristics of discourse, pointing to the impossibility of a hidden discourse, that is, in Foucault’s perspective, meanings lie on the surface: “[...] there is

nothing behind the curtains [...]” (FISCHER, 2001, p. 198). In this sense, the researcher who works with Foucauldian discourse analysis does not have the task of revealing a hidden truth.

The definition of discourse guiding the materialities analysis in this study is described in *The Archeology of Knowledge*:

[...] no longer treating discourses as groups of signs (signifying elements referring to contents or representations), but as *practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak*. Of course, discourses are composed of signs; but what they do is more than use these signs to designate things. It is this *more* that renders them irreducible to the language and to speech. It is this ‘more’ that we must reveal and describe. (FOUCAULT, 1986, p. 56, our emphasis).

In other words, some discourses on literacy will be analyzed, considering them as possible elements that pose a risk to child illiteracy, supported by the vertiginous production of educational statistics. Thus, a Foucaultian-inspired discourse analysis, as the one we propose in this text, implies problematizing the representational relationship that links word and thing. Moreover, it means considering that the field of discourses is a field of struggles. Foucault (1996, p. 10) states that discourse is “[...] a power to get hold of.”

Fischer (2013) points out four elements that must be considered when undertaking a Foucauldian bias discourse analysis: “the radically historical inscription of ‘things said’; the unappealable condition of discourse as practice; the materiality of the enunciations; and, *last but not least*, the struggle waged in and by the constitution of subjects - subjects of certain truths or discourses” (FISCHER, 2013, p. 125, author’s emphasis added). Based on these elements, we will problematize the production of effects of truth through the discourses on illiteracy circulating in a given historical time. Considering the theoretical framework adopted here, we seek to take documents as monuments. That is to say, betting on a monumental analysis, we examine the *empiria* in its surface, exteriority, and volume without looking for a hidden discourse. It is in this “other way” of doing research, taught by Foucault that we draw our inspiration and use it to analyze the empirical material.

4 Analysis

Concern and visibility of the non-literacy of children are tied to the historical time in which we live. The debate about illiteracy in Brazil is not new and runs through several areas of study and research. Ferraro (2009) refers to the “secular trend of illiteracy” in Brazil, a trend produced from the numerical data of the Census and the PNADs - National Household Sample Survey. More recently, especially since the 2000s, literacy has also been measured using instruments derived from external evaluations. In other words, we have gone from a concern with illiteracy among the adult population, often deprived of the possibility of access to schooling, to a matter with the “non-literacy” of the child population enrolled in primary education institutions.

If before, we were already worried about growing non-literacy among children, now this concern has gained more visibility with the closing of schools between the years 2020 and 2021 due to the global health crisis caused by the new coronavirus pandemic. This particular worry is present in the discourse about the pandemic’s implications on children’s learning in the literacy phase. A technical note produced by “Todos Pela Educação” (All for Education) intends to make visible the “impacts of the pandemic on children’s literacy.” In this technical note, the numerical discourse came to the fore since it pointed out that between the years 2019 and 2021, the number of children who could not read and write went from 1.4 million to 2.4 million (TODOS PELA EDUCAÇÃO, 2021). The graph below presents, in percentages, the portion of the population of children who cannot read and write according to information from their guardians.

Figure 1 - Chart in the Technical Note: Impacts of the pandemic on children's literacy



Source: Todos pela Educação (2021, p. 4).

We consider that this numerical discourse not only represents a certain reality but, insofar as it makes it visible, it also acts in the discursive production of a risk situation that must be faced when it becomes known. Not that this child population that is not yet literate does not exist in the material world; it certainly does. Our argument goes in the direction of analyzing the effects of this production. The numerical discourse, when it reveals these children aged 6 and 7 who have not learned to read and write, encourages actions to be taken in order to enable them to become literate and, as a result, reduce these numbers. The statistical knowledge alerts about the increase of 66.3% of this child population that is not fully exercising their right to be literate (TODOS PELA EDUCAÇÃO, 2021), which contributes to the magnitude of the problem.

The non-literacy of these 1st and 2nd-grade elementary school students goes against what is expected in terms of primary learning common to this group, as the Common National Curriculum Base (BNCC) recommends: “although, from birth and in Early Childhood Education, the child is surrounded by and participates in different literate practices, it is in the initial years (1st and 2nd years) of Elementary School that the child is expected to become literate” (BRASIL, 2017, p. 89). Considering that the BNCC is a normative document, children who fall outside this norm, i.e., those who do not become literate by the 2nd year of elementary school, are considered to be at risk, as this implies effects throughout the course within the school and also effects on the life path outside it.

As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, the world population was affected in several spheres, one of them being the educational one, culminating in the vulnerability of certain subjects. And this vulnerability varies according to characteristics and contexts. In the words of Foucault (2008, p. 79), “for each individual, given his age and where he lives, and for each age group, town, or profession, we will be able to determine the risk [...]”. This means that some segments of the population, according to so-called objective criteria, can be characterized as “at risk.” This discursive production about risk is strengthened when supported by statistical knowledge, which confers objectivity and legitimacy to its assertions. Therefore, based on empirical data, four analytical axes were developed that can make visible the risk of child illiteracy caused by the pandemic: 1) socioeconomic factors; 2) gender factors; 3) racial factors; 4) risk projection.

The empirical material reiterates the indication of the poorest population as being a population at risk, as exemplified by the excerpts below.¹

“It is also possible to visualize a relevant difference between the children residing in the richest and poorest households in the country. Among the poorest children, the percentage of those who could not read and write increased from 33.6% to 51.0% between 2019 and 2021. Among the richest children, on the other hand, the increase was from 11.4% to 16.6%” (TODOS PELA EDUCAÇÃO, 2021, p. 3).

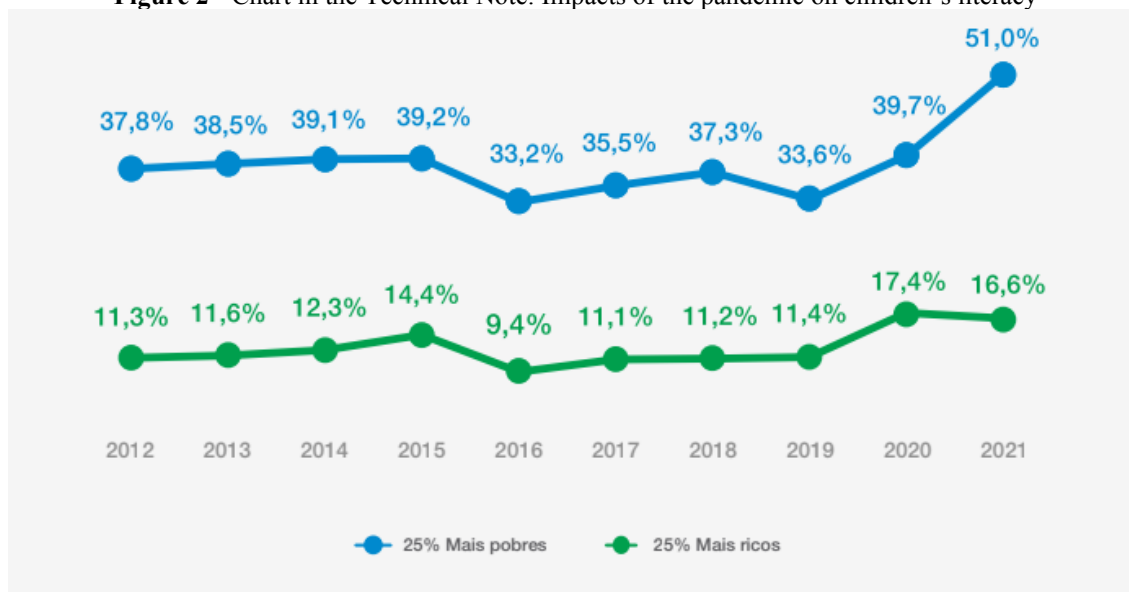
“The crisis has further accelerated inequality in education. Globally, total and partial school shutdowns lasted an average of 224 days. However, in low- and middle-income countries, schools remained closed longer than in high-income countries, and policy responses were generally less effective. Teachers in many low- and middle-income countries received limited support for their professional development, which made the transition to remote teaching difficult and left them unprepared to interact with students and their guardians and caretakers. At home, families’ ability to respond to the shock varied according to income level. Children from deprived families were less likely to benefit from remote learning than their peers, usually due

¹ Excerpts from the empirical material will be presented in text boxes to differentiate them from direct quotations.

to a lack of electricity, connectivity, devices, and support from guardians and caregivers.” (UNESCO; UNICEF; BANCO MUNDIAL, 2021, p. 2).

This information is also highlighted in the chart:

Figure 2 - Chart in the Technical Note: Impacts of the pandemic on children’s literacy



Source: Todos pela Educação (2021, p. 7).

The impacts related to socioeconomic issues are recurrently mentioned in the analyzed materials. Moreover, in addition to the identification of the lower classes as comprising a population at risk, other possible risks are also projected, for example, when it is announced by the report jointly prepared by UNESCO, Unicef, and the World Bank, that school closures - which UNESCO statistically mapped - project risk of impoverishment for the population of students who were deprived of access to schools:

“The global learning crisis has grown by even more than previously feared: this generation of students now risks losing \$17 trillion in lifetime earnings in present value as a result of school closures, or the equivalent of 14 percent of today’s global GDP, far more than the \$10 trillion estimated in 2020” (UNESCO; UNICEF; BANCO MUNDIAL, 2021, p. 1, our emphasis).

Another form of risk made visible by the empirical material refers to gender factors:

“Girls faced compounding barriers to learning amidst school closures, as social norms, limited digital skills, and lack of access to devices constrained their ability to keep learning.” (UNESCO; UNICEF; BANCO MUNDIAL, 2021, p. 2).

“Advances in gender equality are threatened, with school closures placing an estimated 10 million more girls at risk of early marriage in the next decade and at increased risk of dropping out of school” (UNESCO; UNICEF; BANCO MUNDIAL, p. 2, our emphasis).

The excerpts point to a greater vulnerability of girls, meaning that the female population of children is more acutely affected by the risk of not learning. Furthermore, the consequences go beyond purely school-related issues since data suggest that 10 million girls are at risk of early marriage in the next decade because of the effects on education generated by the pandemic. In this sense, the analyses point to a short- and long-term risk, which goes beyond the school walls and spreads to the social life of girls. There is a risk of going back to a time when the average number of years of schooling for women was lower than for men, an occurrence that is no longer observed in Brazil since the generation born between 1950 and 1960, as shown in the 2000 Demographic Census data analyzed by Ferraro (2010).

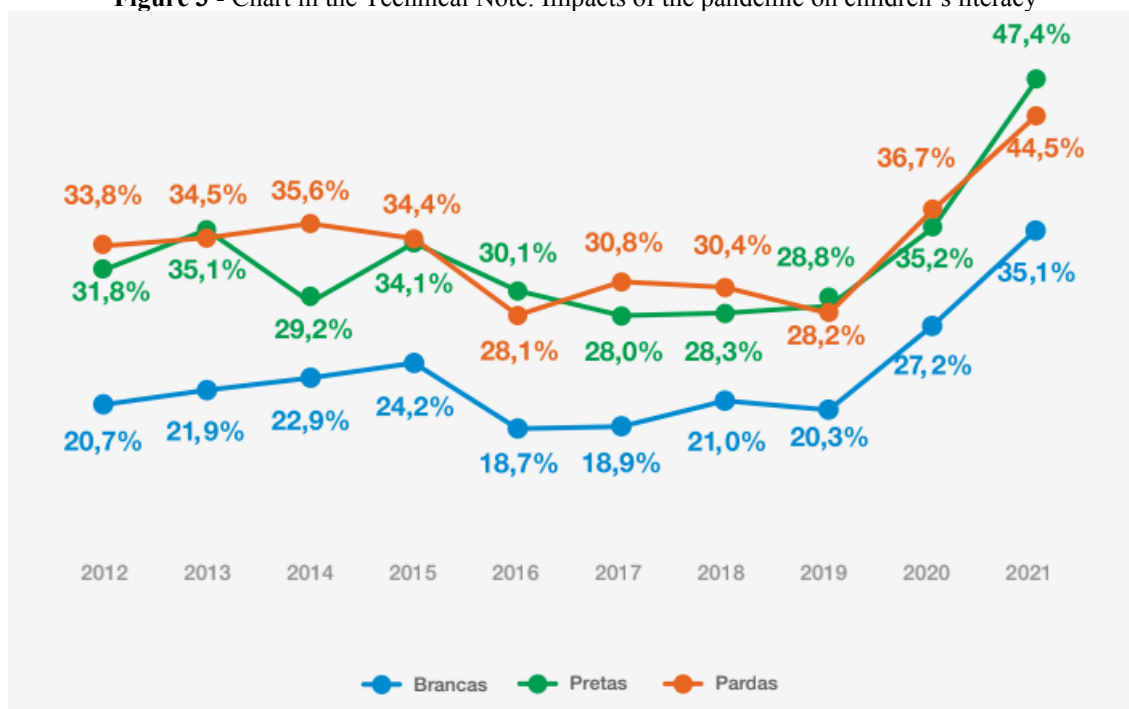
The notion of risk is also manifested differently among children of different races, as the excerpts show:

“This impact reinforced the difference between white children and black and brown children. The percentages of black and brown children aged 6 and 7 who could not read and write reached 47.4% and 44.5% in 2021, compared to 28.8% and 28.2% in 2019. Among white children, the percentage went from 20.3% to 35.1% in the same period” (TODOS PELA EDUCAÇÃO, 2021, p. 3).

“[...] and black and mixed race children already had worse indicators were even more impacted. The difference between the percentage of white and black children who could not read and write rose from 8.5 percentage points (p.p.) to 12.3 p.p. between 2019 and 2021” (TODOS PELA EDUCAÇÃO, 2021, p. 6).

Inequality according to race was already found in Brazilian educational data, as shown in Ferraro’s study (2010), and continues to be visible in more current statistics, as shown in the latest edition of the Census, held in 2010, which reveals a majority of whites in all levels of education (INSTITUTO BRASILEIRO DE GEOGRAFIA E ESTATÍSTICA, 2013). The data presented in the materials also refer to this discrepancy, which tends to become even more accentuated with the pandemic, reinforcing a historical inequality not yet overcome. The following chart gives statistical treatment to these data:

Figure 3 - Chart in the Technical Note: Impacts of the pandemic on children’s literacy



Source: Todos pela Educação (2021, p. 6).

Socioeconomic, gender, and race factors characterize the population, which we call “imagined similarity.” Lockmann (2013, p.99) argues that statistics produces groups through an “[...] imagined similarity, which highlights traits, profiles, and characteristics that are related to specific groups in order to find similarities and to be able to group them.

Grouping them together makes acting on them to control and govern easier.” In addition to locating and circumscribing the population at risk concerning early learning in reading and writing, other, usually long-term, risks are projected.

“The non-literacy of children at an adequate age causes immense harm to their future learning, which also increases the risks of a school career marked by failure, dropping out, and/or school evasion” (TODOS PELA EDUCAÇÃO, 2021, p. 3, our emphasis).

“In low- and middle-income countries, the share of children living in Learning Poverty—already over 50 percent before the pandemic—will rise sharply, potentially up to 70 percent, given the long school closures and the varying quality and effectiveness of remote learning” (UNESCO; UNICEF; BANCO MUNDIAL, 2021, p. 1).

According to Mitjavila (2015, p. 121), “risks do not exist as concrete, real threats; rather, they are manufactured by a type of knowledge that is always the result of statistical and impersonal calculations aimed at identifying the probability of occurrence of undesirable events.” Therefore, the idea of risk is directly related to probability. Statistics are capable of projecting risks:

For they, while organizing space of visibility from the distribution (classification) of what has been quantified or measured, also put into operation, from these quantifications, mechanisms of forecasts, of estimates, with a focus of intervention at a global level (SPERRHAKE, 2016, p. 53).

This notion of risk encourages the search for resources and techniques to avoid and overcome it. When the risks are communicated to the population, it also becomes possible to lead this population to more desirable behaviors, deviating from the damage that could be suffered. Statistical data shows and creates risks that need to be prevented numerically and discursively. In this logic, it is recommended through the Executive Summary that more data on children’s learning be produced as a strategy to reverse the “crisis in education” and literacy, consequently.

“To tackle the learning crisis, countries must first address the learning data crisis, by assessing students’ learning levels. While substantial losses in reading and math have now been documented in several countries and show variations across countries, grades, subjects and students characteristics, evidence on learning loss generally remains scarce. It is critical for policymakers, school administrators, and teachers to have access to learning data that reflect their context, and for learning data to be disaggregated by various sub-groups of students, so that they can target instruction and accelerate students’ learning recovery. (UNESCO; UNICEF; BANCO MUNDIAL, 2021, p. 2)

“The information reported by respondents to the IBGE survey (Pnad Contínua), which shows a significant increase in the number of illiterate Brazilian children, with the most serious impact among black and poorer students, corroborates what has been shown by assessments on learning that states and municipalities have been applying to their students. Therefore, the present and future actions of the government - at the municipal, state, and federal levels - are critical to the mitigation of so many negative effects” (TODOS PELA EDUCAÇÃO, 2021, p. 8).

Building back better requires countries to measure how effective their policy responses are at mitigating learning loss and to analyze their impact on equity—and then to use what they learn to keep improving. Improving systems to generate timely and reliable data is critical to evaluate policy responses and generate lessons learned for the next disruption to education. (UNESCO; UNICEF; BANCO MUNDIAL, 2021, p. 4).

This discourse proposed by the organizations corroborates the idea that “[...] statistics as a scientific knowledge becomes indispensable to good government” (TRAVERSINI; BELLO, 2009, p. 142). The recommendation is to create public evaluation policies, that is, to produce data that statistically represents the school population as a way to reverse the crisis in learning. It is interesting to note the cycle here: this population is made visible through the statistical discourse to, then, be governed and acted upon through the creation of strategies to reverse the learning gap that is made

visible statistically. The idea is to expose data that describe and create a reality for teachers, managers, and policymakers and produce truth effects that will later encourage action. In other words, “[...] one quantifies to know, one quantifies to govern” (TRAVERSINI; BELLO, 2009, p. 141).

5 Conclusion

From the Foucaultian analyses performed in this text, we show how the numerical production of statistics acts as a biopolitical strategy because we understand that

As conduct shapers, statistics are not mere logical systems but a field of cultural practices that normalizes, individualizes, and divides. Numbers govern not as numbers per se but by the possibility they offer of intersecting other discourses that circulate by profiling and inventorying/inventing individualities - hence the technological character of statistical indexes [...]. (BELLO; TRAVERSINI, 2012, p. 23).

When we pay attention to the recurrences, to what is constantly said, we consider that both the Executive Summary and the Technical Note prepared by Todos pela Educação discursively produce a notion of risk regarding the non-literacy of children. The very term “risk” appears in both cases. This risk is linked to not learning to read and write and threatens a portion of the child population with specific characteristics: black children, poorer children, and girls.

The non-literate child population is discursively taken as an object of power - because it is on them that actions to combat and prevent illiteracy will be directed - and is subject of power because, from the actions, it is their relationship with reading and writing that should be modified. According to our analyses, statistical knowledge works as a biopolitical strategy when it reveals the factors that characterize a population as being at risk with regard to the initial learning of reading and writing. Socioeconomic, gender, and race factors circumscribe this profile and call for actions that should be targeted, with a more defined focus, and that makes it possible to reach the individuals who, as instruments of biopower, will allow the expected results to be achieved at the population level (FOUCAULT, 2008).

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Contribution

Dhietelly Morghana Almeida Santos: Conceptualization, Data curation, Research, Writing - analysis and editing; **Renata Sperrhake:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Research, Writing - analysis and editing; **Camila Alves de Melo:** Investigation, Writing - analysis and editing.

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