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An Analytic Framework for Theorizing the Anti-Gender Agenda in Education

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Abstract: This article theorizes the global anti-gender movement in education. This conservative movement opposes “gender ideology,” which is perceived as a threat to traditional social values. Building on a systematic literature review of how the anti-gender movement shapes educational policies, politics, and practices, with a specific focus on Brazil and the US, this article presents a theoretical framework for conceptualizing: 1) the contested meanings of “gender ideology”; 2) its discursive components; 3) the characteristics and composition of anti-gender alliances; 4) the anti-gender agenda’s manifestations in curriculum, pedagogy, the social relations of schooling, and education policy. We attempt to highlight the ways in which anti-gender politics often operate together with racial politics to reveal the ways in which conservative, right-wing alliances, frequently predicated on and united through anti-Blackness, white supremacy, homophobia, transphobia, and misogyny, exert influence on educational policies, politics, and practices to simultaneously maintain a white supremacist, cis-heteronormative, and patriarchal state. We conclude with a discussion of the contradictions of this agenda and resistances to these conservative attacks on equity, inclusion, diversity, and human rights.

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Un marco analítico para teorizar la agenda antigénero en la educación

Resumen: Este artículo teoriza el movimiento global antigénero en la educación. Este movimiento conservador se opone a la “ideología de género”, que se percibe como una amenaza a los valores sociales tradicionales. Basado en una revisión sistemática de la literatura sobre cómo el movimiento antigénero da forma a las políticas, políticas y prácticas educativas, con un enfoque específico en Brasil y Estados Unidos, este artículo presenta un marco analítico para teorizar 1) los significados controvertidos de la “ideología de género”; 2) los componentes discursivos de la agenda antigénero; 3) las características y composición de las alianzas antigénero; 4) las manifestaciones de la agenda antigénero en el currículo, la pedagogía, las relaciones sociales de la escolarización y la política educativa. Intentamos resaltar las formas en que las políticas antigénero a menudo operan junto con la política racial para revelar las formas en que las alianzas conservadoras de derecha, generalmente basadas y unidas a través de la anti-negritud, la supremacía blanca, la homofobia, la transfobia y la misoginia, ejercen influencia sobre la política, las políticas y las prácticas educativas en un esfuerzo por mantener simultáneamente un estado supremacista blanco, cis-heteronormativo y patriarcal. Concluimos con una discusión sobre las contradicciones de esta agenda y la resistencia a estos ataques conservadores a la equidad, la inclusión, la diversidad y los derechos humanos.

Palabras clave: agenda antigénero; ideología de género; antifeminista; movimientos conservadores; política de derecha; políticas educativas; Brasil; EE.UU

Um quadro analítico para teorizar a agenda antigênero na educação

Resumo: Este artigo teoriza o movimento global antigênero na educação. Este movimento conservador opõe-se à “ideologia de gênero”, vista como uma ameaça aos valores sociais tradicionais. Com base em uma revisão sistemática da literatura sobre como o movimento antigênero molda políticas, políticas e práticas educacionais, com foco específico no Brasil e nos Estados Unidos, este artigo apresenta uma estrutura analítica para teorizar 1) os significados contestados de “ideologia de gênero”; 2) os componentes discursivos da agenda antigênero; 3) as características e composição das alianças antigênero; 4) as manifestações da agenda antigênero no currículo, na pedagogia, nas relações sociais da escolarização e na política educacional. Procuramos destacar as maneiras pelas quais a política anti-gênero muitas vezes opera ao lado da política racial para revelar as maneiras pelas quais as alianças conservadoras de direita, tipicamente baseadas e unidas através da anti-negritude, a supremacia branca, a homofobia, a transfobia e a misoginia, influenciam políticas, políticas e práticas educacionais em um esforço para manter simultaneamente um estado de supremacia branca, cis-heteronormativo e patriarcal. Concluimos com uma discussão sobre as contradições desta agenda e a resistência a estes ataques conservadores à equidade, à inclusão, à diversidade e aos direitos humanos.

Palavras-chave: agenda antigênero; ideologia de gênero; antifeminista; movimentos conservadores; política de direita; políticas educacionais; Brasil; EUA

An Analytic Framework for Theorizing the Anti-Gender Agenda in Education

In recent decades, the anti-gender agenda has emerged as a global phenomenon with different origins and articulations (Butler, 2019; Holvikivi et. al, 2024). Right-wing populist and conservative religious movements in different regions have organized to oppose “gender ideology”

as a perceived threat to traditional social values, including the religious, patriarchal family, heterosexuality, the concept of biological sex, and freedom itself. While gender ideology does not actually exist, as they claim, the discourse has been taken up by conservative movements fearing the influence of feminism, women's rights, sexual and reproductive rights, and LGBTQIA+ rights on the family, education, and the law (Moeller, 2021). It has come to signify anything feminist, queer, or trans that threatens traditional social values. Consequently, conservative movements have sought to defend their values by actively fighting against these influences (Beck et. al., 2023; Butler, 2019; Junqueira, 2018; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017).

In this paper, we theorize anti-gender movements as reactionary movements that have emerged in different geographies around the world (Gago, 2019; Lacerda, 2019). While these movements may be a reaction to advances made by feminists, women and LGBTQIA+ people at the end of the 20th century, as Graff and Korolczuk (2021) explain, and as we will discuss in more detail below, these movements “are not a simple continuation of the anti-feminist backlash dating back to the 1970s, but part of a new political configuration” (p. i). While this political configuration looks different depending on the social-political and historical geographies, a common characteristic in the emergence of the anti-gender agenda is what Graff and Korolczuk (2021) describe as an “opportunistic synergy” between “the ultraconservative anti-gender movement and right-wing populist parties,” which have grown in political power and representation in countries, such as the US, Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Ghana, Hungary, Poland, and Turkey, in recent years (p. 19).

To understand this synergy, or historical articulation of two forces, we begin by examining the rise of the anti-gender movement. Beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, global women's movements and LGBTQIA+ movements advanced radical changes in the “common sense” and in public policies regarding gender and sexuality-based inequalities, including violence against women and LGBTQIA+ communities, which faced heightened discrimination because of the HIV-AIDS epidemic. These movements were institutionalized in the 1980s and 1990s, in part through the United Nations Decade on Women. The Vatican and later Evangelical groups feared that “this deconstruction of the sexual order destroys the social order,” thus sowing the seeds for the anti-gender agenda (Garbagnoli, 2016, p. 189). Since then, these anti-gender campaigns have shifted from primarily religious motivations and actions by largely conservative Catholics and Evangelicals concerned with the collapse of a traditional religious social order towards legal and political ones that more broadly threaten the democratic and human rights foundations of societies around the world (Biroli et al., 2020; Butler, 2019; Corrêa & Parker, 2020; Corrêa & Paternotte, 2018; Garbagnoli, 2016; Graff & Korolczuk, 2021; Juan-Torres, 2023; Junqueira, 2018; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Sosa, 2021; Zaremborg et al., 2021).

To understand this part of the articulation, it is necessary to consider the broader historical rise of right wing-populism around the world. While this has occurred in countries across the Americas, Europe, and Africa, the explanation for why is contingent on the historical and political conjuncture in each country or region. For example, drawing on the case of Poland, Graff and Korolczuk (2021) build on Mouffe's theorizing of the ascendance of right-wing populist movements as part of “‘a new conjuncture’ in which neoliberal hegemony is ‘being called into question by a variety of anti-establishment movements both from the right and from the left’” (Mouffe 2018, p. 5, as cited in Graff & Korolczuk 2021, p. 3). In this way, Graff and Korolczuk argue “the anti-gender mobilization has played an important role in the consolidation of the populist right as a transnational movement, one that successfully harnesses the anxiety, shame and anger caused by neoliberalism” (p. 165).

As Melo (2020) discusses, one could make the counterargument that controversial political statements about gender, sexuality, and morality are “smokescreens” meant to divert public attention from more critical political issues, such as the effects of economic crises, or cuts to social welfare

policies. However, we concur with Melo's (2020) conclusion that "The 'smokescreens' actually reveal a political position. A solid and stable adherence to the fight against 'gender ideology'" (p. 9). In the Brazilian context, she argues that this political position must be understood "as central" to the rise of Brazil's former, far-right President Jair Bolsonaro (p. 9). We will further explore this rise and its effects on Brazilian society and education.

Despite differing interpretations as to why these movements have come together in different geographies, the common thread in the articulation of ultraconservative anti-gender movement and right-wing populist parties is an attack on women's rights, LGBTQIA+ rights, abortion rights, and sex education policies (Graff & Korolczuk 2021). Graff and Korolczuk note, the result is "a transnational phenomenon at the intersection of culture, religion and politics, which links different actors and often disparate ideological agendas" (p. 165). Yet, while "gender" has been a lightning rod of this articulation of ultra-conservative and right-wing populist movements, together these forces are "aiming for a wholesale elite change in the spheres of politics, culture, education and transnational institutions, ending the decades-long ideological and political dominance of progressive liberalism in the West" (p. 4).

Consequently, education is one of the principal targets of these right-wing campaigns. By focusing these efforts on education, particularly in public schools and education policies, proponents claim to be protecting children and youth from being sexualized and manipulated by "gender ideology" (Dalmaso-Junqueira, 2022; Gregis Estivalet & Dvoskin, 2022; Kuhar & Zobec, 2017; Lima & Hypolito, 2019). The agenda has influenced many educational policies and practices across the world in recent years. These include the anti-LGBTQI+ bills in Florida, Texas, and other U.S. states that ban instruction on sexual orientation and gender identity, prohibit gender inclusive bathrooms (Human Rights Campaign, 2023), and criminalize parent's support of trans children (Amirali et. al., 2024); the abolition of gender studies in Hungarian higher education and the prohibition of content considered to be promoting homosexuality in schools (Rédai, 2024); political contestations over comprehensive sexuality education in Ghana (Crescer Online, 2021) and South Africa (McEwen, 2024), among other examples.

Drawing on a systematic review of the literature and data from previous research we have conducted, this article theorizes the global anti-gender movement in primary and secondary education. Through our analysis, we present a theoretical framework for conceptualizing 1) the contested meanings of the term "gender ideology"; 2) the components of the discourse; 3) the characteristics and composition of anti-gender alliances; and 4) the anti-gender agenda's manifestations in curriculum, pedagogy, the social relations of schooling, and education policy. Later in the text, we lay out these components.

We then focus on how the anti-gender movement has developed and shaped educational policies, politics, and practices in national and local contexts in Brazil and the US, in particular. While we focus on these two countries, this framework can be used to think through different manifestations of the anti-gender agenda in education in countries around the world, as well as to explore transnational socio-political linkages that constitute this broader global agenda. Finally, we discuss the contradictions of this agenda and resistances to these conservative attacks on equity, inclusion, diversity, and human rights in education.

While our analysis focuses on the politics of gender and sexuality, this anti-gender and anti-feminist wave has also been intertwined with white-supremacist, militaristic, anti-democratic, and capitalist interests (Biroli et. al., 2020; Gago, 2020; Höppner, 2020; Keskinen, 2013; Lacerda, 2019; Miskolci & Campana, 2017). Recognizing the importance of these intersections, in our analysis of Brazil and the US as primary cases, we seek to highlight how these politics operate together to reveal the ways in which ultraconservative alliances predicated on and united through anti-Blackness, white

supremacy, homophobia, transphobia, and misogyny exert influence on educational policies and practice to simultaneously maintain a white supremacist, cis-heteronormative, and patriarchal state.

Method

To inform our analysis, we conducted a systematic literature review using the databases Scopus and *Portal de Periódicos CAPES* (Journal Portal of the Brazilian Coordination of Improvement of Higher Education Personnel). The searches included publications in English and Portuguese (restricted to the Brazilian production of Portuguese-language articles) with the following search expression: “gender ideology” AND/OR “anti-gender” AND/OR “anti-feminis*” AND “education” in the fields of title, keywords and/or abstracts.

Our search initially focused on understanding the manifestations of this anti-gender agenda in the field of education, aiming to both learn from existing scholarship and identify conceptual gaps. Based on the prolific Brazilian literature about the anti-gender agenda, we observed that these studies have largely focused on the narrative of “gender ideology” as the underlying discourse of this agenda. However, based on 6 literature reviews raised in our search (Barzotto, 2021; Junqueira, 2018, 2022; Hamlin, 2021; Rezende & Sol, 2021; Silva, 2018), we determined that there has not always been a conceptual consensus regarding what constitutes “gender ideology.” Thus, we identified the need to discuss the contested meanings of the concept and establish a working definition that applied to the context we are examining—that being a narrative crafted by conservative groups to attack progressive social movements rooted in feminist, queer, and trans politics. Based on this definition, we also delimited the corpus of articles to be read—of the 83 relevant results raised for the search, 52 were selected because they used the same conceptual understandings that interested us. In this process, articles that used “gender ideology” as a synonym for gender as a social construct within feminist studies (as pointed out by Hamlin [2021] and explained in more detail in the next section) were disregarded. Although relevant, they are focused on a different research object.

Furthermore, when reading these materials, we realized that there was not an existing framework that systematically presents the constitutive elements of the anti-gender agenda in the field of education. Although “gender ideology” and the “anti-gender agenda” have been consolidated as relevant research objects, our review of the literature showed that their manifestations have generally been analyzed based on specific cases and contexts or based on a comparison with similar strategies in international contexts. Recognizing the relevance of these existing analyses for the field of education, and aiming to build on them, we developed a framework to organize conceptual understandings of the phenomenon and encourage new investigations of the different elements. With this framework, we understand that it is possible to establish parallels that are not only comparative, but highlight the organized, transnational nature of the actions and discourses arising from these movements.

Regarding our theoretical framework, we also build on our previous research on the effects of the anti-gender movement on educational policy and practice in Brazil, in particular. Moeller (2021) has analyzed the effects of anti-gender ideology and white supremacy on Brazilian educational policy, particularly the *Base Nacional Comum Curricular* (BNCC), the Brazilian “common core” curriculum, and Dalmaso-Junqueira (2024)¹ has examined feminist teaching practices in the context of Brazilian conservatism. The final section of the article on resistance to the anti-gender agenda draws on Dalmaso-Junqueira’s research across 17 states in Brazil. The research consists of 107 teacher responses to an online questionnaire and six semi-structured interviews in 2022 with

¹ Work carried out with funding from the Brazilian Foundation for the Coordination of Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES Foundation).

teachers regarding their feminist pedagogical and curricular practices in primary and secondary schools.

Drawing on the critical educational studies and intersectional and transnational feminist studies, we aimed to conduct a complex, well-informed analysis that pays attention to the political, economic, and socio-cultural conditions that pervade this emergent process of social and educational contestation. Based on the literature review and empirical data from our research, we present our proposed framework and draw on the cases of Brazil and the United States to demonstrate its use. We start by paying attention to the contested meanings of “gender ideology,” and then systematize the components of the discourse, the alliances formed between political agents, and the components and strategies used to act directly in the field of education.

An Analytic Framework for Theorizing the Anti-Gender Agenda in Education

In this section, we present a framework for thinking about how the anti-gender agenda materializes in the field of educational policy and practice. The components of this framework are presented below.

Contested Meanings of “Gender Ideology”

Over the decades, the terms “gender” and “gender ideology” have incorporated a significant level of polysemy within academia. Although “gender” is a disputed concept, conservative and far-right movements have appropriated the term. In their campaigns, they successfully popularized the term used by the Vatican in the 1990s as a common enemy to be fought, having “[...] ‘gender’ as the emblem, the metonymy, and the keystone of theories that affirm that masculinity and femininity are social constructions [...]” (Garbagnoli, 2016, p. 189). They promoted the fear that this would cause the “self-destruction of humankind” (Benedict XVI 2009b, as cited in Garbagnoli, 2016, p. 189). It does not matter that “gender ideology” or “gender theory” do not constitute the annihilation of the traditional heterosexual family or the sexualization of children in schools. This meaning acquired the status of truth regardless of its veracity, and thus circulates as common sense (Gramsci, 2011).

As Judith Butler (2023) notes, the dispute with actors invested in this agenda about the meanings of the so-called “gender ideology” is often unproductive. In addition to the acceptance of meaning that inhabits common sense, there is often proud resistance to argumentation and theory by these actors. As Butler (2019) explains, “Indeed, the position against gender seems to be a position against reading more generally” (p. 3). It is important to understand, however, the ways in which the term remains in dispute.

In this section, we identify the meanings through which “gender ideology” circulates (Barzotto, 2021; Hamlin, 2021; Junqueira, 2018; 2022; Rezende & Sol, 2021; Silva, 2018). The first focuses on gender ideology as an object of investigation, principally within the fields of feminist and gender studies and the social sciences, more broadly. In this use, gender ideology is understood as a scientific concept that defines ways of thinking, behaving, and forming bodies, according to the social construction of gender. In this sense, it is a way to identify more traditional and/or progressive gender ideologies in different phenomena. For example, sexist and queerphobic ways of thinking are considered gender ideologies, as is the association of girls wearing pink and boys wearing blue. The second is the conservative and religious use of the concept to signify anything feminist, gay, or trans that threatens the traditional religious, patriarchal family and society. The third, based on the acknowledgement of the latter understanding, is the conceptualization from within feminist and gender studies and the social sciences that “gender ideology” is a conservative narrative created by right-wing actors to oppose progressive social agendas based on feminist, queer,

and trans politics (Holvikivi et. al, 2024). This latter meaning is the one we will be referring to throughout this essay.

Components of the Anti-gender Discourse

To understand how the anti-gender agenda is mobilized, we identify the elements that constitute the discourse (i.e., how do you know the discourse when you see it?), even though they may not all manifest simultaneously (Butler, 2019; Holvikivi et. al, 2024; Juan-Torres, 2023). These include the following: 1) the biological binary understanding of sex; 2) the centrality of the nuclear, cis-heteronormative traditional family as the foundation of society and the nation; 3) the belief that women are responsible for reproductive labor inside and outside of the household; 4) the fear of the Other, specifically anyone who challenges these binary and cis-heteronormative identities (feminists, trans, and LGBTQIA+); 5) the ontological threat that these Others represent to one's own being and the security and innocence of children and young people (specifically regarding pedophilia, the sexualization of children and adolescents, and identity); 6) the discourse of religious persecution against Christians (including the threat to family values and the alleged imposition of other religious or spiritual beliefs, such as African and Afro-Brazilian religious traditions); 7) distrust and persecution of teachers, professors, and administrators (as indoctrinators, aggressors, and/or pedophiles); 8) the frequent articulation with white supremacist, nationalist, anti-immigrant, and anti-Black agendas; and 9) fears of Marxist, Socialist, and Communist ways of thinking.

Anti-gender Alliances

Education is a terrain of contestation where diverse socio-political groups struggle over control of ideas, resources, and power in socio-cultural and political economic realms. It is a site where different ways of seeing society are reproduced, created, and fought over, configuring a complex and contradictory field of socialization, formation of citizenship, and consolidation of national identity. Thus, there are high stakes when discussing which perspectives should be represented (or not) in classrooms, curricula, assessments, and the governance of education. As a result, socio-political groups fight for influence over education on multiple spatial scales, including school councils, school district or municipal school boards, state level administration, and national level governance.

When discussing the U.S. educational reality, Apple (2001) identified the formation of a conservative alliance, a hegemonic bloc interested in reforms and transformations of both neoconservative and neoliberal natures (Gramsci, 2011). As an agenda, the bloc defends what Apple identifies as the "conservative modernization" of education policies, which, already in its name, carries the contradiction of its interests. It combines neoliberal notions of modernization in education, emphasizing efficiency and productivity, and at the same time a conservative desire to revive the myth of an idyllic past. This past is often one that is patriarchal and racially homogenous or segregated, when women, people of color, immigrants, and LGBTQIA+ people did not have full rights in society and access to equitable education. The desires by former Presidents Trump and Bolsonaro and their followers to make the US and Brazil "great again" echo these sentiments.

In different national contexts, we see the emergence of strategic coalitions of socio-political actors, including configurations of fundamentalist religious groups, such as the conservative wing of the Catholic Church and Evangelical Christians; neoconservative groups, including business alliances, military groups, and conservative think tanks; and white supremacist and nationalist groups. These are strategic alliances, often open to compromising on ideals to ensure broader hegemony.

Components of Anti-gender Agenda in Curriculum, Pedagogy, the Social Relations of Schooling, and Education Policy

These alliances have been shown to focus on a set of core areas in the field of educational policy and practices to secure their influence. First, there is a narrative around the threat of sexualization and brainwashing of students (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017) through comprehensive sex education, in particular. In different country contexts, the inclusion of sex education within the curriculum and/or the content of that curriculum is highly contested (Crescer Online, 2021; McEwen, 2024). Second, there are other fights for particular value systems within the curriculum, such as the inclusion of creationism or the exclusion of representations of non-heteronormative family formations and queer people. These debates have manifested in book bans and fights over national curriculum. Third, this policing of content has resulted in the persecution, censorship, and dismissals of teachers for teaching allegedly “threatening” content, digital violence, and unauthorized filming and exposition. Fourth, there are attempts to control non-cisgender conforming bodies through dress code, bathroom access, and the restriction of behavior and expressions, such as dating or holding hands. This makes children and young people conform their own existences due to fears of political repercussions rather than challenging hateful speech and actions.

Political Background and Manifestations of the Anti-Gender Agenda in Brazil and the United States

Drawing on our systematic literature review, as well as insights from our empirical studies, in this section, we examine the constitution of the anti-gender agenda and its manifestations in policies, politics, and practices in education within the different political and historical geographies of Brazil and the US.

Manifestations in Brazil

In Brazil, this anti-gender discourse gained traction in the 2010s, principally at the federal level in the field of education, considering the way in which education policy is primarily governed at this level (Dalmaso-Junqueira, 2024; Moeller, 2021). Literature on the topic identifies this phenomenon happening in reaction to the many progressive advances taking place in the Workers’ Party federal administration of President of the Republic Luís Inácio Lula da Silva (Biroli et al., 2020; Corrêa, 2022; Junqueira, 2018, 2022; Lacerda, 2019; Silva, 2018). During the past decade, many welfare policies were implemented, such as racial quotas in federal universities, the criminalization of violence against women, the creation of a special secretariat for women, the criminalization of homophobia, civil unions for LGBTQIA+ couples, and the regulation of rights for domestic workers. In this broader context, a conservative alliance disseminated the notion of a threat of a “gender ideology” takeover in Brazil. The 2014-2024 National Education Plan (PNE) was one of the trigger points for the spreading of this discourse (Corrêa, 2022; Moeller, 2021). Conservative actors alleged that education was becoming a breeding ground for leftist, communist, and predatory ideologies connected to this “threat.” The PNE, which in its original wording referred to gender inequalities and diversity, served as a catalyst for the articulation of these different actors. This articulation coalesced, in part, through the group, *Escola Sem Partido* (School without Party), a “non-partisan” conservative group founded by Miguel Nagib, that supposedly seeks to rid schools of politics, with a focus on left-leaning liberal and progressive politics (Moeller, 2021).

After thousands of amendments were added by members of the Congress, the PNE was addressed to then-president of the Republic, Dilma Rousseff, and sanctioned on June 25, 2014, without any vetoes, defining the guidelines and goals for education in the upcoming decade

(Moeller, 2021; Rosado-Nunes, 2015). In its final version, the original text, which focused on “[...] overcoming educational inequalities, with emphasis on promoting racial, regional, gender and sexual orientation equality” was replaced by an emphasis on “[...] promoting citizenship and eradicating all forms of discrimination [...]” without specific commitments (Alessandra, 2014, online).

The political struggle over PNE was highly polarized in the National Congress. In addition to progressive parliamentarians, there were many civil agents, including educators, intellectuals, journalists, and feminist and LGBTQIA+ social movements, who defended maintaining the original text of the plan (Alessandra, 2014; Ribeiro, 2016; Rosado-Nunes, 2015). At the same time, conservative Evangelical and Catholic parliamentarians were promoting the anti-gender agenda. These were “[...] enthusiasts of the military dictatorship, defenders of the death penalty and the ‘gay cure’, ideologues of liberalism and privatization” (Ribeiro, 2016, p. 5). The conservative ideas of these groups proved to be convincing, and their achievements were not restricted to writing the PNE. These efforts continued at the level of federal educational policy with many bills proposed—and some approved—based on the School without Party’s principles. As Moeller (2020) discussed, the erasures of these specific forms of difference laid out the foundation for conservative groups to contest their inclusion in later policies like the *Base Nacional Comum Curricular* (BNCC), the national learning standards that became federal policy in 2017. Municipal education plans were also affected by this coalition’s agenda (Aquino & Moura, 2022).

This anti-gender agenda continued to gather support across many political and social spheres over the years and contributed to the ideological context leading to the political overthrow, commonly described as a coup d’état, of then President Dilma, the first woman president of Brazil who had continued the Workers Party’s legacy in her first term. It also subsequently contributed to the election of former ultra-conservative, far right president Jair Bolsonaro’s election in 2018 (Dalmaso-Junqueira, 2022; Willis, 2023). Fears of “gender ideology” sparked Bolsonaro’s insistence during his campaign against candidate Fernando Haddad, former Minister of Education, claiming that Haddad had promoted a so-called “gay kit” during his time as Minister—which, in reality, were the curricular materials the Ministry of Education developed to combat homophobia that were never actually distributed (Feitosa, 2021).

The agenda has also encouraged family members to denounce teachers who were “indoctrinating” students with discussions about gender and sexuality. More than that, teachers began to be persecuted and often fired for daring to discuss these topics in the classroom (Dalmaso-Junqueira, 2024). Although the endeavor to formalize these claims as educational policies was finally declared unconstitutional by the Federal Supreme Court in 2020, the idea acquired the status of common sense (Gramsci, 2011). Despite resistance from grassroots organizations, such as the association *Mães e Pais pela Democracia* (Mothers and Fathers for Democracy), which has been fighting to defend the freedom of teaching in private and public schools, many teachers who used to discuss gender and sexuality in the classroom are now fearful and, consequently, self-censoring (Human Rights Watch, 2022). More broadly, this agenda has been successfully linked to campaigns for homeschooling (Moura & Aquino, 2022) and the militarization of public education, principally through military administration of schools (Dalmaso-Junqueira & Lima, forthcoming).

Manifestations in the United States

The US experienced a similar set of progressive changes regarding the politics of gender, sexuality, race, and class in the past two decades, particularly with the presidency of Barack Obama beginning in 2009. Several policies targeted transformations for people of color, LGBTQIA+ people, and women in the areas of education, healthcare, marriage, and employment. As in Brazil, we have witnessed how people who were threatened by these changes, including white supremacists,

sexist men, conservative Christians, and economically conservative portions of the middle and upper-class, reacted by engaging in a conservative backlash.

While such reactions have occurred in multiple realms, we identify same-sex marriage as one of the primary trigger points (Human Rights Campaign, n.d.). The legalization of same-sex marriage occurred at the state level in the early 2000s in Massachusetts and California. Its final full legal recognition, which was seen as a threat to traditional heterosexual families, occurred at a national level in 2015. The Obama administration also passed other important legislation to improve the lives, well-being, and rights of the LGBTQIA+ community, including the prevention of hate crimes based on perceived sexual orientation and gender identity through the Hate Crimes Prevention Act, and the repeal of the military's Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy, enabling queer people to be open about themselves while serving. Women's rights were also extended, including the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, which lengthened the period in which women sought to "to recover wages lost to discrimination by extending the time period in which an employee can file a claim" (The White House President Barack Obama, n.d.). Moreover, the administration passed comprehensive health care reform through the Affordable Care Act to ensure subsidies in the private healthcare market. This act became a lightning rod for the conservative alliance seeking to reduce the expansion of the state.

Furthermore, President Obama himself, as a Black man, embodied a threat to white supremacist visions for the nation, and his administration represented an affront with its focus on passing progressive legislation targeting discrimination, inequality, and injustice. While the election of President Trump in 2016 represented the manifestation of a white, conservative backlash to his presidency, this popular "white backlash narrative" has also been deeply criticized for "obscuring neoliberalism's own racialised regimes of oppression in the Obama era" (Allen, 2020, abstract).

The field of education has become a principal fault line for contesting progressive policy agendas, with anti-feminist, anti-queer, and anti-Black discourses circulating and often magnifying one another. Conservative fears have focused on the supposed indoctrination through LGBTQIA+ friendly curriculum and comprehensive sex education, which has been a longstanding concern for the conservative movement (Irvine, 2004).

The conservative alliance has also mobilized against policies advocating for gender-neutral bathrooms in general, and this fight has extended to schools. Increased visibility of transgender demands and legal rulings guaranteeing their rights in general became a trigger for a transphobic backlash. As of March 2023, multiple states, including North Carolina, Idaho, Iowa, and Arkansas, have bans against trans access to toilets that correspond with their gender identity with some states adopting similar policies for schools, including Oklahoma, Alabama, and Tennessee (Barrón-López et al., 2023). This agenda has also extended to a rapid proliferation of states banning gender-affirming care for young people and transgender youth participation in sports (Woodward, 2023).

These politics have also resulted in book and curriculum bans, particularly around LGBTQIA+ and anti-racist and African American studies curriculum, popularly misconceived as "critical race theory." Florida's HB 7, popularly known as the "Stop Woke Act," is an example of state efforts to regulate how racial issues can be discussed in K-12 and higher education (Russell-Brown, 2023). Book bans in public schools and libraries increased by 65% in 2023 compared to 2022 (American Library Association, 2024).

Like the Non-partisan School Movement in Brazil, conservative parent groups, like Moms for Liberty, actively protest at school board meetings and in election politics, creating a hostile climate for school board members, teachers, and administrators caught between supporting children, protecting teacher autonomy, and appeasing vocal opponents (Abdellatif, 2023). Within this landscape, classrooms have become sites for policing what teachers can teach and students can say

in the classroom. This includes legislation in states like Florida where the Parental Rights in Education bill, popularly known by critics as the “Don’t Say Gay” bill, bans the teaching on sexual orientation and gender identity (Woodward, 2022). As in the case of Brazil, teachers and school administrators have been persecuted and threatened by this kind of legislation, leading to self-vigilance and censorship.

Feminist and Queer Resistance to the Anti-gender Agenda as a Reactionary Movement

In the last decade, conservatives, white supremacists, misogynists, and homophobic people have been responding to the sense that their privileges are being progressively put to the test in Brazil and the U.S., notably with the national feminist movements *#EleNão* (“Not Him,” referring to Bolsonaro) in Brazil, the *#MeToo* movement, which originated in the US and spread throughout the world, and the racial uprisings in 2020 that began in the US with the murder of George Floyd and spread around the world in reaction to white supremacy and anti-Blackness. Due to these forms of resistance, the conservative alliance on both national and global scales has been constantly looking for ways to secure its hegemonic formation and radicalize policies, particularly the educational ones. If, as Michael Goldman (2005) explains, the moment of hegemony is when the dominant historical bloc “poses the questions around which the struggle rages,” then the conservative alliance has successfully asserted their agenda as a legitimate part of the educational debate in both countries (p. 7). They did so by asserting their influence across political levels, including local, state, and federal politics. Faced with these contemporary conservative mobilizations, forms of resistance have developed in the fields of research, policy, and educational practice.

Feminist Teaching Work in Conservative Times

To document progressive, feminist, and anti-racist initiatives and forms of resistance in primary and secondary education, Dalmaso-Junqueira’s research across 17 states in Brazil demonstrates the creative practices developed by teachers who have been courageously opposing these persecutory conservative movements. Survey results and interviews elucidate that teachers have faced an aggressive and persecutory anti-gender and anti-feminist agenda, with cases of teacher silencing and even gender-based violence. Despite these threats against them, Dalmaso-Junqueira’s research shows that many teachers across the country are actively engaged in broader social movements and committed to incorporating feminist, LGBTQIA+, and anti-racist curriculum in their classes and schools, including creating Black feminist empowerment collectives. The research shows that to avoid reprisals and/or rejection by students and families, these teachers have developed alternative ways of connecting with their students and/or addressing these topics. In some cases, they report using “guerrilla” strategies, or covert, non-conventional actions, to introduce such topics in an approach that is familiar to the realities and affective experiences of students.

For example, one teacher in the state of Mato Grosso do Sul created an innovative set of Black feminist lessons *within* the existing formal curriculum of the Human and Applied Social Sciences, which had space for teachers to create courses to achieve the broader curricular goals, even though feminism isn’t formally included in the curriculum (Interview with Miriam, 2022, pseudonym). Another teacher explained how she intentionally approached the issues of gender and feminism without using the terms:

I proposed an activity in which students classified actions or emotions as feminine, masculine characteristics or both. We jointly analyze the classifications of each group, and I encouraged them to reflect on some of their previous analyses, such as

considering that ‘educating’ is a feminine characteristic. [...] It was a practice in which I did not use the term ‘feminist’, and I believe that I did not use [...] the term ‘gender’ in class. These are terms that are currently surrounded by controversy, and often repulsion, indignation. My practice allowed me to deal with issues related to gender without generating an initial barrier that the use of certain terms, unfortunately, can generate (Interview with Maria Fernanda, 2022, pseudonym).

There is a long history of this within the context of women’s movements and struggles. As the 2020 Pernambuco Women’s Forum report recounts:

We, women, have built, for a long time, different ways of communicating, we have created strategies to talk about difficult subjects, and also when we cannot express ourselves openly. Whether in the kitchen as a place to welcome relatives and partners in situations of violence, whether by our gaze, by the expression on our face, by clapping our hands or drumming. We have always created innovative and revolutionary strategies to communicate. (Fórum de Mulheres de Pernambuco, 2020)

This ability to communicate what is necessary, even in very adverse contexts, has been built over centuries.

These teacher initiatives can be understood under the umbrella of “revolutions from the inside,” in which we recognize teaching work as a potent space for the development of resistance and the importance of individual or small collective action to transform everyday realities in schools (Freire, 1987; hooks, 2019; Ladson-Billings, 2008).

Feminist Research on Contradictions and Resistance

As feminist theory has historically argued, there is also revolutionary potential in sharing experiences in circles of solidarity and trust (Collins, 2002). We conceive of research and publishing as sharing experiences, enabling the documentation and distribution of successful practices carried out by teachers in schools (Ladson-Billings, 2008). Furthermore, we realize the importance of comparative and transnational analyses to produce in depth understandings of the contradictory discourses and actions of the conservative alliance. An example of this exercise is pointing out that there is an alleged preoccupation with children’s and young people’s safety and innocence, even as this often plays out in a way that is not about their well-being.

This is evident in U.S.-based conservative, right-wing attacks on Drag Queen Story Hour, a drag storytelling event for children and families that first started in San Francisco and expanded to chapters in the US and around the world. In the language of Harper Keenan and Lil Miss Hot Mess (2021), it “provides a performative approach to queer pedagogy that is not simply about LGBT lives, but *living queerly*” (p. 440, emphasis in original). The documented attacks against this story hour in the US, UK, New Zealand, France, Germany, and Finland demonstrates the successful transnational coordination of attacks on queer content for children and on queer educators, who are often portrayed as potential predators and aggressors (Grimshaw, 2024; Kaleem, 2023). Research shows that most sexual abuse of young people is perpetrated by someone they know, including family, friends of the family, and religious leaders of institutions propagating this very narrative, such as the Catholic and Evangelical churches (Raine & Kent, 2019).

We also recognize that the condition of children and young people as rights-bearing subjects is under threat in two senses. First, because marginalized social groups, including LGBTQIA+, Black, Indigenous, queer, immigrant peoples, and other people of color, have engaged in ongoing struggles to be recognized as rights-bearing subjects whose rights are not only acknowledged but effectively enacted, this conservative agenda is placing children from these groups in increasingly

vulnerable positions vis-a-vis the law, policies, and everyday educational practices. Educators and administrators who support them, some of whom may also identify as feminist, anti-racist, and/or queer, are also the target of these conservative threats. Second, in denying students access to an education on gender and sexuality, the anti-gender movements have been depriving them from learning about themselves and the multiple ways of being in the world that exist outside of heteronormative norms; social, affective, and kinship relations; their bodies, sexual consent, and ways to protect themselves, as well as ways to learn about and respect others. Schools and teachers have been progressively recognized as a valuable resource in protecting children and youth from abuse, being a frequent source of reports in cases referred to and investigated by child protective services (Crosson-Tower, 2003; Oliveira et al., 2020). The very significant consequences of these conservative attacks on children, young people, families, and educators should not be minimized as they threaten people's lives and well-being and our individual and collective futures. Making these consequences visible through academic and public forums is also a fundamental part of the work of resistance.

Conclusion

In this article, we present an analytic framework for examining the influence of the conservative, anti-gender agenda on educational policy and practice around the world. The framework outlines the contested meanings of gender ideology; the elements of the anti-gender discourse; the political, religious, and social agents that constitute this conservative coalition; and its effects on curriculum, pedagogy, the social relations of schooling, and education policy. Using this framework, we then present the background and the effects of this agenda on educational policy and practice in Brazil and the US. We situate our focus of these specific national spheres within an analysis of the transnational discursive and socio-political linkages that have been created by these actors, in particular the Catholic Church, Evangelical denominations, social movements, the media, politicians, and other influential figures, to transform education and other societal spheres beyond these country contexts.

The framework seeks to support future research that examines how conservative discourses and movements, not only those related to the anti-gender movement, influence the education field. We do this for the purpose of not only supporting educational research, but supporting educator, family, student, and social movement activism to resist these agendas that are detrimental to young people and our societies. The conservative agenda denies the right to full humanity of those it perceives as a threat to the established heteronormative, white supremacist, and patriarchal hegemonic order. In the language of James Baldwin (1984), educational spaces should enable us to “disagree and still love each other unless your disagreement is rooted in my oppression and denial of my humanity and right to exist” (p. 20). In this way, empirical research can provide evidence of the ways in which seemingly localized, anti-democratic practices and policies that deny the rights of people to freely exist are articulated, amplified, and/or reworked in national and transnational contexts. Our hope is that these efforts ultimately support robust, organized defenses of democratic education and futures.

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