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The closure de of rural schools in Rondônia and the pandemic: impacts on local communities

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Abstract: In recent decades, Brazilian education has undergone major reforms to favor a market and privatist vision to the detriment of valuing public education with social quality. In this context, the mass closure of rural schools has affected historically excluded communities - such as indigenous, caboclo, riverine, extractivist and quilombola communities -, increasing educational and social inequalities. An example of this process is the state of Rondônia, in Western Amazon, which has been expanding the agribusiness at the same time as having a high number of schools closed, including during the pandemic period. Based on the analysis of documentary data collected from the Basic Education Census, from 2012 to 2023, with a bibliographic review and a historical-dialectical materialism approach, the aim of this work was to analyze the policy of closing schools in rural areas in the state of Rondônia and how local communities have being impacted. The results point to the existence of a consolidated trend of school closures with an increasing onslaught from the agribusiness, which has an impact on economic production and the social dynamics of rural, riverside and forest communities. Primary education has been the most affected, with the highest percentage of school closures.
Keywords: educational reforms in Rondônia; closure of rural schools; post-pandemic education.

1 Introduction

The transformations undergone by the territories where agribusiness[1] has advanced as a hallmark of capital's offensive in recent decades have led to new forms of existence and have impacted not only productive processes but also all the actions and policies resulting from this restructuring, especially for rural, riverine, and forest-dwelling populations. It is a system in which the state places itself at the service of creating the general conditions for the production and reproduction of agribusiness, based on the monoculture of export commodities. In a position of dependency, Brazil has inserted itself into the international division of labor through foreign trade, rooted

[1] The term “agribusiness” is linked to the idea of agribusiness and expresses “[...] the economic relations (mercantile, financial and technological) between the agricultural sector and those situated in the industrial sphere (both of products destined for agriculture and of processing of those originating in the sector), commercial and services” (Leite; Medeiros, 2012, p. 81).

in export-oriented latifundia that produce primary goods, with serious implications for the environment (Pochmann, 2021).

In the case of Amazon regions[2], still under the neoliberal perspective, from the 1990s onwards, their occupation acquires a new dynamic. According to Mesquita (2011), this movement constitutes a third cycle of occupation, dominated by agribusiness activities such as oil palm (dendê), eucalyptus plantations, charcoal production, and corporate livestock farming. The focus lies on large-scale, extensive enterprises that involve various segments of capital, which appropriate the surplus of production. This reconfiguration of capital in the Amazon leads to a deepening process of land expropriation from small-scale producers, favoring a minority to the detriment of the majority, composed of riverine communities, Indigenous people, and extractivists.

The state of Rondonia is part of this logic, with beef exports showing significant numbers and occupying a large amount of land for extensive livestock farming. Between 1970 and 1995, livestock farming expanded by 5.6% in the Amazon region. In Rondônia, the expansion was the largest in the region, at 171.2%. As a result of this expansion, which requires large areas of pasture, significant deforestation was also observed in the state, increasing from 30,000 kilometers in 1988 to 53,275 in 1998 (Toni *et al*., 2007).

Additionally, soybeans stand out in commodity production by linking agriculture and industry. Along with other cereals, such as corn, wheat, rice, and other grains, they are exported in primary form to meet the international market, often bypassing government incentives. In the 2024-2025 Harvest Plan, the federal government allocated 475 billion in credit to agribusiness, while only 74.98 billion was allocated to family farming (small farmers) (Fernandes, 2024). The remarkable growth in grain production in Rondônia is evident in the number of properties operating in this area, which increased from 252 in 2006 to 402 in 2017, reflecting a corresponding rise in production, which increased from 150,567 to 800,293 tons during the same period (Santos; Barros, 2022).

[2] The term Amazonas is used in the plural in this work, as the region is very diverse in many different aspects, so it cannot be characterized in a single way. Its population is equally diverse, composed of multiple indigenous communities, caboclos, riverside communities, extractivists, black people remaining from quilombos, urban populations, etc.

Given the difficulties faced and the lack of support from public policies on social rights and maintaining family farming production in rural areas, the peasant population leases or sells their land and leaves the countryside.

If, in the 1980s, at the same time that the rural population decreased, the number of exports of primary products also declined, from 2010 onwards, while the rural population represented only 10% of the total, primary products exceeded 2/3 of total exports (Pochmann, 2021).

This situation is favorable for the expansion of agribusiness, which, in Rondônia,

> [...] imposed ways of life, forms of work, and forced family farming out of the countryside, sometimes taking over their lands through below-market payments, sometimes expanding vacancies for salaried labor contracts or leasing, even without the prerogatives of labor rights (Santos; Barros, 2022, p. 707).

As a result of this reality – and the introduction of machines and advanced technology, which uses little labor –, rural workers are forced to leave the countryside, because, "[...] since the countryside no longer offers them the means necessary to support their families and educate their children, they are left with the option of selling their properties to large producers" (Santos Filho, 2024, p. 54). In Rondônia, this is a strategy to empty the countryside of the population in order to favor agribusiness activities (Santos; Souza, 2021).

Added to this exploratory policy – of exporting agrarian capital – in the region of the state of Rondônia is the existence of mineral exploration, such as cassiterite. In 1958, the first cassiterite alluviums were discovered, and, in the early 1970s, extraction by prospectors was prohibited, leading to the exploration of the mineral by large national and international economic groups (Santos; Souza, 2021).

Rural areas in the state are also areas of violence, due to disputes over territory. The state of Rondônia was the scene of one of the most violent moments in the history of the struggle for land in Brazil, when – on August 9, 1995, at the Santa Elina Farm, in the south of the state – a massacre of campers took place, which became known as the "Corumbiara Massacre". The result of the violent action by the Rondônia Military Police and gunmen was the death of 16 people – including a child –; and the balance of 55 seriously injured, 7 missing and more than 200 peasants, including men, women and children, with serious physical and psychological after-effects (Souza, 2014).

It is therefore understood, considering the reality presented, that it is not possible to separate the economic, political, and social situations from other public policies, including education and the process of closing schools in these territories. School structures in rural areas have been closing, and students have been transferred to so-called hub schools throughout the state, as is the case in the rest of the country.

However, it is important to consider that Rondônia has its specificities, resulting from a process of colonization and occupation that influenced the creation of schools in rural areas. The state is recent in the social and political organization of Brazil – it was created in 1982 and brought together many migrants from other parts of Brazil, who came to the region mainly intending to occupy the Amazon region. Currently, Rondônia has 52 municipalities, which occupy part of the Western Amazon. The migrant groups – coming from the Northeast or the South of the country – occupied the cities along the BR-364. According to Santos Filho (2024, p. 39), "[...] this policy was merely the expansion of areas destined for large-scale agricultural and livestock production, which only favors large landowners, not only Brazilians, but also foreigners".

The occupation of the territory of Rondônia is also part of the projects proposed by the military government to occupy the Amazon region to explore its productive potential and stimulate migration (Santos; Barros, 2022; Santos; Souza, 2021). It was a policy adopted and designed with the aim of "[...] strengthening agricultural projects to, from there, leverage economic development from a capitalist point of view" (Santos; Barros, 2022, p. 699). Thus, there was a substantial increase in the number of inhabitants, rising from 116,620 in 1970 to 1,562,409 in 2010. One fact that draws attention is the gradual decrease in the proportion of the rural population in relation to the total population of the state, which went from 52.4% in 1980 to 26.4% in 2010 (Santos; Barros, 2022). The data confirm the analysis that the rural environment is increasingly no longer an option for the life of the population of Rondônia, due to the lack of support for the permanence of migrant families on the land and of subsidies for the production of family farming (Santos; Barros, 2022).

Authors Santos and Barros (2022) emphasized that, during the process of occupying the countryside, actions aimed at education did not focus on social rights,

but on financial incentives to generate production for agribusiness. At the same time, public social financial investments were reduced (Santos; Barros, 2022).

In this context, the closure of rural schools can also be seen as a process of containing public spending and adhering to a political project in line with the hegemonic class, in this case, the agrarian elites. However, as Frutuoso (2024, p. 112-113) warns, it is also necessary to consider educational aspects in this closure process:

> [...] The school closure policy should not be considered solely from a political point of view, as some argue, or as a policy in the interests of specific groups such as school transport owners, but rather that closures ultimately were determined by a set of socioeconomic and educational factors.

One of the issues in educational policies that has been used to justify the closure of rural schools is the cost of maintaining them. The mainstream media, when publishing reports on the subject, has been an ally of those who defend the closure of these institutions. In 2015, in the newspaper O Globo, the vice-president of the National Union of Municipal Education Directors (Undime), Manuelina Martins, already used the argument of the cost of rural schools when she stated:

> The problem is that, in addition to maintaining the school, it is necessary to provide transportation for the children most of the time. So, rural education becomes much more expensive. And it is harder to bring investment to these places. If municipalities cannot handle it in urban areas, imagine in more remote places. (Reis; Moreno, 2015).

On the other hand, the Brazilian education system is with the current distribution of competencies increases the burden and responsibility of municipal systems. City governments, which according to article 211 of the Federal Constitution (Brazil, 1988) act primarily in Elementary Education and Early Childhood Education, would not be able to build schools in rural areas, because “[...] local authorities are guided by the logic that makes the most sense to them, according to which it is more rational to promote the transportation of underprivileged students from rural contexts” (Santos *et al*., 2020, p. 392).

A necessary counterpoint to this reductionist and economistic view of rural schools is the discussion of their specificities, since they can not have the same funding pattern as urban schools. For their existence and maintenance, differentiated funding mechanisms are necessary, in addition to the resources from the Fund for the Maintenance and Development of Basic Education and the Appreciation of

Professionals in Education (Fundeb), redistributed based on the number of enrollments or programs of the National Fund for the Development of Education (FNDE).

Along with the history of the expansion of large capital in the countryside and intense school closures, Rondônia is highlighted as a significant locus for analysis and studies that point out the economic, political, social, and educational dynamics involved in this process. In addition to this aspect is the need for a specific look at the period of the pandemic and verification of possible impacts on the reorganization of rural schools.

In this work, the perspective of historical-dialectical materialism offers possibilities for carrying out this analysis. The methodology is based on bibliographic and documentary analysis, based on data from the Basic Education Census for the period 2012 to 2023. This period was selected in order to update the data for Rondônia published in previous works up to the year 2011 (Santos Filho, 2024; Souza, 2019; Santos; Souza, 2021). Each year, the number of schools is detailed, considering as closed schools those that no longer appear in the totals of the following year. General data from Brazil, Rondônia, and each stage of basic education were selected.

The significant goal here is to present the process of closing rural schools in Rondônia in line with the possible impacts of the pandemic period, which are still being measured. This study is divided into five parts, including this introduction. The second section presents an overview of the pandemic and the impacts of this period on education in Brazil and Rondônia. The third section presents data on the closing of rural schools in the state. The fourth section discusses statistical data from each stage of basic education. At the end, some final considerations are presented.

2 The COVID-19 pandemic and education

One of the most important historical moments of the 21st century, the COVID-19 pandemic, a disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, has caused the deaths of millions of people around the world and created a situation of uncertainty and difficulties for survival in several countries. After a few years of resuming life without social isolation, studies are still being carried out to assess its consequences and revisit the way each country organized itself to meet the demands of public health and other policies, such as education.

This is not an attempt to assess government actions during the pandemic. However, it is important to mention that one of the main criticisms regarding government action in the educational field in Brazil was the lack of a national management coordination that would offer centralized guidelines to guide education systems. This criticism concerns the fact that the federal government did not develop or coordinate actions as a strategy for basic education (Santos; Correia, 2021).

The lack of coordination possibly influenced the way in which each state and municipality implemented education programs and remote learning plans, the main way to continue educational activities during the pandemic. After classes were canceled in the country in March 2020, many states were slow to adopt alternative measures to ensure the continuity of studies. State governments took an average of 34 days to adopt remote learning after schools closed – Amapá, an exception, took only 1 day. Nevertheless, Tocantins, Rio Grande do Sul, and Espírito Santo took more than 100 days to present a plan (Barberia; Cantarelli; Schmalz, 2021).

The speed and quality of programs varied across Brazil's five regions: North, Northeast, Central-West, Southeast, and South. Some governments adopted plans in conjunction with school closures, while others took months to present them. In some regions, students did not receive any kind of remote learning plan from the government, and most programs were implemented with little or no concern for access to classes and student supervision. Failing to provide students with strategies for interacting with teachers, supervision, and encouraging attendance, few programs sought to mitigate or reduce the impact of the pandemic and school closures on the most vulnerable groups (Barberia; Cantarelli; Schmalz, 2021).

In Rondonia, the state government decreed total isolation on March 18, 2020, suspending local work and all educational activities. The data on remote teaching in the state are impressive: of the 2.4% of schools in Brazil that did not adopt some remote teaching strategy in 2020, the highest percentage was recorded in Rondônia, with 13.2%, followed by Pará (8.4%), Acre (8.2%) and Amazonas (6.2%) (Barberia; Cantarelli; Schmalz, 2021). Therefore, as in the rest of the country, in the case of education, the impacts were strong, considering the large-scale use of remote means to continue teaching and learning activities.

One issue that stood out in the organization of work during the pandemic was the school calendar. Through Opinion CNE/CP No. 5/2020 (Brazil, 2020), the school calendar was reorganized, with distance learning classes counted as school days. For rural schools, this issue was problematic – it was discussed by the National Forum for Rural Education (Fonec), as the decision to have distance learning classes disregarded the conditions for this to happen qualitatively. In a note from June 2020, the Forum listed several proposals for that moment, including, among others, the need – on the part of states and municipalities – for broad, qualified and democratic listening of the school community, civil society and social movements; for non-face-to-face pedagogical activities not to be counted as school days and subject to evaluation; and to prioritize the allocation of the education budget to structuring schools and hiring educators – to adapt to the new health requirements of educators and students when in-person activities resume safely (Fonec, 2020a).

In this way, remote teaching has become naturalized, as Hage, Silva, and Freitas (2021) note. In the case of the Amazon region of Pará, a region that can be compared to the reality of other states in the North of Brazil, there is significant difficulty in accessing information technologies, and remote teaching

> [...] excludes workers and their children, the poor and local people from the countryside, waters, and forests due to difficulties in accessing technologies using the internet, which has increased social exclusion and inequalities among the most vulnerable groups in society (Hage; Silva; Freitas, 2021, p. 302).

In this context, the alternative of using remote means despite its importance in maintaining a connection between students and schools, considering the need for interaction in the teaching-learning process has caused harm to the school community in general, which has been even worse in rural areas, where, historically, there is less access to communication technologies and infrastructure. The use of remote means has exacerbated pre-existing inequalities. Almost all states have decided to use the technology to transmit classes over the internet, but only about 15% of states have distributed devices, and less than 10% have subsidized internet access. The states have prioritized the distribution of specific handouts for studying at home. (Barberia; Cantarelli; Schmalz, 2021).

For decades, there have been educational inequalities in rural schools compared to urban schools, and the pandemic has worsened them. If at first there was a paralyzing inertia about the adoption of effective measures to minimize the negative impacts on the school community, remote education as the main alternative adopted by educational systems did not solve the problem in that situation, considering the difficulties in accessing technology that existed even before the pandemic, a fact that generated major problems in schools and communities with technological gaps (Nascimento *et al*., 2020). According to Tondin *et al*. (2024, p. 2), several aspects of remote education were found harmful to the teaching-learning process:

> [...] Access to technological resources was limited or non-existent for students and their families; precarious work for professionals; violation of the education rights; educational commercialization; and drained the school's social function. Remote teaching was developed in a hasty and decontextualized manner, disregarding socioeconomic and racial markers, and promoted the intensification of teaching work and the recrudescence of educational inequalities, which proved to be political and technical strategies of the government.

Some data from Nascimento *et al*. (2020) confirm the reality described by the authors. In 2018, in Brazil, all of the 27.2 million enrollments in Elementary School (initial and final years), between 4.3 and 4.4 million students did not have home access to broadband internet or 3G or 4G technologies for remote teaching-learning activities (Nascimento *et al*., 2020). When preparing the data for all basic education, it was found that just over half of these students without broadband at home were in the countryside. Thus, even with the presence of equipment, such as cell phones, tablets, or microcomputers, education is compromised when there is no internet access, and the provision of these technological devices is ineffective in meeting the needs of the moment. In summary, the research data indicate that,

> [...] a considerable group of Brazilian students in public educational institutions do not have the necessary conditions to follow the remote learning activities proposed during the period of social isolation that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of these students cannot participate in the activities because they do not have access to the equipment necessary for data transmission. Others do not have access to transmission mechanisms, such as the internet and a digital TV signal (Nascimento *et al*., 2020, p. 15).

When examining the returnment after the period of school closures, Kubota (2020b, p. 7) highlights that education professionals offered “[...] classes on TV or

radio, printed materials were distributed to students without internet access, and content was organized (for students, parents, and teachers) to be accessed via the web". However, in another work, the author draws attention to the historical social and educational inequality in Brazil, which would be deepened based on the structural conditions of schools and families. He cites, for example, students who, under certain conditions, have more restricted access to the internet and devices and whose guardians have less education and/or less availability to follow remote teaching activities; or even younger students with less autonomy (Kubota, 2020a).

Kubota's study (2020a) presents remarkably significant data on Brazilian schools from the 2019 School Census: a quarter of Brazilian schools were not served by a public water network, with a higher degree in the North and Northeast; 44% of Brazilian schools were not served by a public sewage network. Regarding the internet, 27% of elementary and high schools reported not having access to the network, with a large regional disparity. The lowest percentage was recorded in Acre, with 27% of schools with internet, followed by Amazonas, with 31% of schools with internet; Maranhão, with 36%; and Pará, with 38%.

In this regard, Rondônia has a good result, with 77% of schools having internet access. The highest percentage of schools with internet access was found in the Federal District and Mato Grosso do Sul, both with 98%. Concerning computer materials – computers, printers, scanners, digital whiteboards, multimedia equipment, desktops, and tablets for students and laptops – the author found that almost 25% of schools did not have any of the computer equipment surveyed; around 10% have only one of the types; 15% have both types.

Therefore, it must be concluded that – although the pandemic generally has had a significant impact on learning, especially for the poorest – the conditions of access to learning, technology, and educational structures were determinant in increasing exclusion and inequality. Even though there was a decline in overall learning, schools that made extensive use of digital resources, monitored their students' access to the platforms, trained teaching staff, and provided support to families saw a reduction in learning loss (Senkevics; Alcantara, 2024).

Accordingly, research by Senkevics and Alcantara (2024) indicates a reduction in learning levels and difficulties in continuing classes, even with differentiated

proposals for the use of technologies. It is also necessary to consider that some schools did not offer any form of pedagogical monitoring – neither in person nor remotely – given the precarious conditions that characterize most schools, especially rural ones.

Carmo's research (2024, p. 122), analyzed the municipality of Porto Velho, the capital of the state of Rondônia, and found that during the period of social isolation, a virtual environment was established to continue classes, but overlooked "[...] students from working-class families and students from rural schools in riverside communities and others". As a result of this reality,

> Students who were unable to access digital platforms received printed activities and could contact the teacher for explanations through videos on a messaging app. However, many lacked this facility because they did not have internet or a cell phone available. (Carmo, 2024, p. 123).

In this context, when the challenges and impacts of the pandemic are combined with the ongoing process of closing rural schools, the consequences could be even more severe than those currently being observed in general. This situation compromises the access to education of the populations living in rural areas of Brazil, their continued participation in the education system, and their quality of life.

3 Rural schools in Rondonia

Regarding schools located in rural areas, it is important to distinguish between rural schools and country schools. According to Ribeiro (2012), the fundamental premise of rural schools is to definitely who they are intended for, in this case, peasants who live and work in rural areas and receive the lowest income for their work. Another fact pointed out by the author is the lack of adaptation of these rural schools to the characteristics of that population the characteristics of urban schools are maintained, because the understanding is that in rural schools "[...] they only study, and this study has nothing to do with the work that the peasant develops with the land". (Ribeiro, 2012, p. 296).

Rural Education schools with different pluralities, such as quilombola communities, indigenous communities, in settlements, etc, have another structure, as they are built by popular movements fighting for land organized in peasant movements

and “[...] articulate productive work with school education based on cooperation” (Ribeiro, 2012, p. 300). A fundamental concept of Rural Education structurally links it

> [...] to the movement of contradictions within the scope of the Agrarian Question of agricultural or rural production projects, of technological matrix, of work organization in the countryside and the city [...]. Rural education is led by rural workers and their organizations, which aim to influence education policy from the social interests of peasant communities (Caldart, 2012, p. 259-263).

The rural population consists of diverse cultural groups that cannot be understood “[...] solely under the condition of a non-urban geographic limit” (Santos; Barros, 2022, p. 696). Considering this reality and the differences between the conceptions of rural schools and schools in/from the countryside, as well as Santos and Barros (2022), this work uses – to present and discuss data on school closures, even considering the conceptual confrontation between the two perspectives – the definition of rural education and, consequently, the name “rural schools”. This perspective also accompanies the data used in this study, which comes from the School Census of the National Institute of Studies and Educational Research Anísio Teixeira (INEP) on rural schools.

Based on this definition and the discussions in the introduction, it returns to the reality of Rondônia to discuss education in the state's rural areas. Understanding the migratory movements needs, several rural schools were created on the so-called roads, which are generally unpaved secondary roads that connect rural areas to cities. For those who arrive in Rondonia, knowing how the lines that cut through the forest work means understanding the process of occupation of the territory and how the population in rural areas is organized. However, it is important to highlight that the creation of schools in rural areas occurred more as a result of the actions of families and communities to ensure the schooling of children and young people than due to the commitment and investment of the government (Santos; Barros, 2022; Santos Filho, 2024).

The condition of rural schools reflects the neglect by public authorities. Hage, Silva, and Freitas (2021, p. 301) report that

> [...] The dramatic scenery of poverty and abandonment that schools find themselves in, this action reflects the neglect with which compulsory schooling has been offered to rural populations, while also highlighting the possibilities created by educators, administrators, and rural individuals in their daily

> educational practices. It emphasizes creative and innovative efforts that challenge the adverse conditions shaping their existential reality.

In the state of Rondônia, the closure of rural schools is being based solely on quantitative data, mainly on costs (Santos, 2019), justifying that children will not be left without an education because public transportation is available to take them to schools in the cities. However, in the region, the distances that children have to travel to reach urban schools vary from 10 to 40 km (Santos Filho, 2024). Especially for young children in Early Childhood Education, the challenge is even greater.

According to Santos and Barros (2022, p. 696), the process of closing rural schools in Rondônia intensified from the 1980s onwards, with the following characteristics:

> The change of a single-room rural school, next to the community, even though multi-grade, to a polarized or nucleated school required an educational institution with many classrooms, many teachers, but far from the communities and without an effective set of equipment to meet the peculiarities of rural communities. In Rondonia, the processes of polarization or nucleation of rural schools intensified and, consequently, the closing of schools for the rural population.

As previously mentioned, two of the main justifications for closing schools would be the high cost and a supposed improvement in quality. Under these arguments, “Rondonia led the ranking of states that closed the most rural schools between 2000 and 2011, precisely a period in which the policy of nucleation/polarization of schools was developed in the state” (Santos, 2019, p. 92). In the ranking of states with the highest percentage of closed schools, Rondonia occupied first place in this period, with 70.14%, followed by Goiás with 66.01% and Tocantins with 57.64% (Santos Filho, 2024).

However, it is important to consider that, in addition to possible financing issues, production relations were decisive in the closure of multi-grade schools, based on the transformations that rural areas have undergone in the country in recent years. This is proven by the study by Santos Filho (2024), in Vale do Jamari, in Rondonia. The author found in five municipalities – Rio Crespo, Alto Paraíso, Cujubim, Machadinho D’Oeste, and Ariquemes – that, with the sale of small properties to large producers, “[...] the soybean agribusiness expands in direct proportion to the closure of multi-grade

schools in the countryside, just as some small properties are transformed into large farms destined for monoculture" (Santos Filho, 2024, p. 137).

Furthermore, Rondônia also follows the trend of national education policy, as the closure of rural schools is present throughout the country, to a greater or lesser extent. Table 1 below presents data for Brazil and the Northern Region from 2012 to 2023.

Table 1 – Total number of basic education schools by location – Brazil and the Northern Region

	Brasil		Northern Region	
Year	**Urbans**	**Rurals**	**Urbans**	**Rurals**
2012	118.564	74.112	7.899	15.952
2013	119.890	70.816	8.047	15.504
2014	121.132	67.541	8.196	15.092
2015	121.737	64.704	8.245	14.752
2016	123.032	63.049	8.353	14.468
2017	123.451	60.694	8.381	14.265
2018	124.330	57.609	8.461	13.879
2019	125.265	55.345	8.525	13.655
2020	125.130	54.403	8.547	13.554
2021	124.813	53.557	8.561	13.474
2022	125.589	52.757	8.559	13.467
2023	126.620	51.856	8.638	13.440

Source: own elaboration based on school census (Inep, 2024b).

According to Inep (2024b), in Brazil, from 2012 to 2023, the closure of rural schools was 30% – in the North Region, it was 15.7%. In the case of Rondônia, the decline in rural schools continued at an accelerated pace and in the same period there was a decrease of 41.1%, higher than the percentage for Brazil and the North Region – in contrast, urban schools grew only 8.9% in the state, as shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2 – Total number of schools in Rondônia by location

Year	Urbans	Rurals
2012	767	630
2013	771	605
2014	775	561
2015	777	539
2016	791	515
2017	795	492
2018	802	462

2019	821	420
2020	826	410
2021	827	399
2022	827	384
2023	835	371

Source: own elaboration based on school census (Inep, 2024b).

The data reaffirm the policy of Rondônia's public authorities to opt for the creation of urban hubs. This situation did not change even during the pandemic, as there was a 9.5% decrease in the number of schools between 2020 and 2023. At the height of the pandemic, between 2020 and 2022, 26 rural schools were closed – the same did not happen with urban schools, which remained stable, with 826 schools in 2020 and 827 in 2021 and 2022 (INEP, 2021; 2024b). Therefore, the trend of an intense process of closing rural schools is consolidated, which does not seem to have been completed yet.

Thus, differences exist between regions and states, and data on school closures also vary across the stages of basic education. These differences are noticeable, and depending on the age characteristics and the curriculum proposal, the impacts are greater or lesser. To facilitate the analysis of this data, they have been organized here in tables – presented in the following section – according to the stage of education: Early Childhood Education, Elementary Education, and High School.

4 The stages of basic education in the context of school closures

Brazilian education is divided into three stages: Early Childhood Education (daycare and preschool), Elementary Education, and High School, which together form the Basic Education, offered mandatorily from ages 4 to 17. Each stage of basic education has its specificities, and, to deepen the analysis, it is also important to check the number of urban and rural schools. It begins with Table 3, which presents the data for Early Childhood Education in Brazil.

Table 3 – Number of Early Childhood Education schools in Brazil by location

	Urbans		**Rurals**	
Year	**Daycare**	**Preschool**	**Daycare**	**Preschool**
2012	42.684	60.530	10.865	48.474
2023	55.242	61.185	21.406	38.611

Source: own elaboration based on school census (Inep, 2024b).

The gap in early childhood education provision in Brazil has decreased in recent decades, with improvements in overall access data, especially in urban areas, where, between 2012 and 2023, the number of daycare centers increased by 29.4%, and the number of preschools increased by 1.0%. In rural areas, the number of daycare centers also increased, from 10,865 to 21,406 – an increase of 97%. However, preschools in rural areas present an alarming situation, with a decrease of 25.5% (INEP, 2024b).

This reduction is serious, considering the large number of children still outside of Early Childhood Education institutions and the failure to meet the demands of families and children, which need to be addressed. Even with changes in educational policies, Early Childhood Education, especially daycare centers in rural areas, suffers from a lack of vacancies. During the decade-long period of Fundeb, daycare centers had an attendance rate of almost half the percentage of those in urban areas, and in preschool, the rate in rural areas was still 4% below that of urban areas (Pinto; Correa, 2020). Therefore, a large investment is needed to create new vacancies and maintain existing facilities with quality, contrary to the closures indicated by the data.

Table 4 presents Rondonia's data for Early Childhood Education by localization.

	Urbans		Rurals	
Year	**Daycare**	**Preschool**	**Daycare**	**Preschool**
2012	202	299	4	152
2013	208	300	6	165
2014	213	307	6	161
2015	207	300	6	170
2016	205	314	5	195
2017	204	311	5	204
2018	203	316	6	207
2019	216	324	3	207
2020	215	319	5	213
2021	207	312	5	203
2022	216	317	7	197
2023	228	329	8	195

Source: own elaboration based on school census (Inep, 2024b).

According to the data from Rondonia, there was an increase in the total number of urban and rural schools – the increase in urban daycare centers, by 12.9%, and the increase in daycare centers in rural areas, by 100%. However, the number of only 8 daycare centers in 2023 in rural areas throughout the state points to a large gap.

Preschools in urban areas, on the other hand, showed a growth of 10%, and in rural areas, of 28.3%. However, despite the growth of preschool in rural areas, a downward trend was observed between 2020 and 2023, going from 213 schools to 195, that is, a reduction of 9% (INEP, 2024b). This is a warning that the data should continue to be monitored, as it may be following the national downward trend, combined with some specific process involving the provision of preschool places. On the other hand, despite the growth, Rondônia is below the level of meeting the demand for places, when compared to the results for Brazil, as shown in Table 5 below.

Table 5 – Percentage of the population aged zero to five years old who attend daycare centers and preschools in Rondônia and Brazil

	Rondonia			Brazil		
	2019	**2022**	**Variation**	**2019**	**2022**	**Variatio**
Daycare	15,6	18,3%	2,7%	37,0%	37,3%	0,3%
Preschool	86,2%	86,8%	0,6%	94,0%	93,0%	-1,0%

Source: own elaboration based on school census (Inep, 2024b). Early Childhood Education – Indicators 1 A and 1 B (PNE) – Percentage of children aged zero to five who attended daycare and preschool.

In 2022, the daycare service was 18.3%, the state is far from the Brazilian percentage of 37.3%. It is also behind in preschool service, at 86.8%, when the national percentage was 93%. Despite the 2.7% increase in daycare, when the data is disaggregated by location, a large portion of young children enrolled are in urban areas (22.3%), while 5.1% are in rural areas (INEP, 2024a). And, even with the increase in attendance in rural areas, which went from 1.6% to 5.1%, the fact is that children up to 3 years of age are largely out of daycare in Rondônia. Regarding preschool, the disparity is not as great, but shows a slight decrease of 1.3% in urban areas and an increase of 0.4% in rural areas (INEP, 2024a).

The situation of school closures may be more complex in Early Childhood Education, considering the difficulties of very young children traveling to remote rural areas and the need for Early Childhood Education that favors interactions and play, which are often considered unnecessary. This view may lead to schools being emptied and changes in the role of Early Childhood Education in children's education. This is yet another policy that will need to be monitored and monitored in the coming years.

Below, in Table 6, we will present the data for Elementary Education, the stage in which the number of schools has decreased the most in Rondonia.

Table 6 – Total number of elementary schools in Rondonia according to location

Year	Urbans	Rurals
2012	552	616
2013	543	587
2014	560	544
2015	553	522
2016	547	498
2017	551	476
2018	553	445
2019	573	406
2020	573	395
2021	570	384
2022	569	369
2023	567	356

Source: own elaboration based on school census (Inep, 2024b).

Elementary Education presents a dramatic scenario of rural school closures between 2012 and 2023 – the number of these institutions fell from 616 to 356, a reduction of 260 schools (42.2%). Urban schools saw a small increase of 2.7%, from 552 to 567 (INEP, 2024b). As can be seen, the decrease in rural schools has not kept pace with the increase in urban schools.

During the pandemic years (2020-2022), rural schools were also closed to the number of institutions fell from 395 in 2020 to 369 in 2022, a reduction of 26 schools (6.5%). Considering the importance of elementary education for the literacy process, it is possible to infer the strong impacts that the closure of these institutions had on children during the pandemic. Some data already show the extent of these impacts: until 2020, the percentage of children living in rural areas who were unable to read and write had been decreasing, falling from 29.1% in 2012 to 21.6% in 2020. However, this percentage rose again to 29.2% in 2021 and 39.9% in 2022. Data from urban areas also showed an increase from 2021 to 2022, although to a lesser extent, rising from 19.7% to 24.4% (Bof; Basso; Santos, 2022). The results of the Basic Education Assessment System (Saeb) also show inequality: the percentage of 2nd grade elementary school students whose proficiency is located in the three lowest levels increased in urban areas – from around 15% in 2019 to 33% in 2021 –, while in rural

areas it went from approximately 23% to 45% (Bof; Basso; Santos, 2022). Based on these data, the idea that, during and after the pandemic, with the resumption of in-person activities and the need to reorganize structures and didactic pedagogical issues, such as active search and recovery and acceleration of learning, the process of school closures continued in the state of Rondônia seems frightening.

The data seem to indicate that school closures are structural to the Brazilian education system and, in the case of elementary education, can have drastic impacts not only on the overall framework of structural quality conditions, but also on the learning of each child who attended school during the pandemic and who continues to attend largely nucleated schools. To advance discussions on these issues, more qualitative studies are needed that point out the impacts of the closure of rural schools and the current reality in which children, families, and education professionals live. The last stage of basic education, high school, presents an interesting picture to be analyzed, as shown in the data in Table 7.

Table 7 – Total number of high schools in Rondônia by location

Year	Urbans	Rurals
2012	192	34
2013	190	37
2014	188	45
2015	190	48
2016	187	51
2017	186	55
2018	188	56
2019	199	46
2020	199	47
2021	200	49
2022	197	51
2023	203	54

Source: own elaboration based on school census (Inep, 2024b).

High school follows a trend that is contrary to the other two stages and has seen a robust increase in rural schools (59%), rising from 34 to 54 schools. Urban schools have seen a smaller increase, rising from 192 to 203 schools. These numbers have also increased during the pandemic, rising from 47 rural high schools in 2020 to 51 in 2022. In urban areas, the numbers have fluctuated, falling from 199 in 2020 to 107 in 2022, and rising again to 203 in 2023. Given this growth and the situation that is

opposite to those described above, it is also important to check the enrollment data, which are shown in Table 8.

Table 8 – Total number of high school enrollments in Rondônia by location

Year	Urbans	Rurals
2012	61.100	4.662
2013	60.199	4.816
2014	59.988	5.235
2015	59.262	5.565
2016	55.708	5.208
2017	55.023	5.514
2018	54.668	4.905
2019	57.917	3.664
2020	59.035	3.629
2021	65.053	4.064
2022	63.033	3.900
2023	67.108	4.288

Source: own elaboration based on school census (Inep, 2024b).

There was a fluctuation in the number of enrollments in rural areas, which fell in 2020 but grew again in 2023. This fluctuation also occurred in urban areas, which resumed enrollment growth in 2020. Therefore, the trend of growth in schools and enrollments can be confirmed and is in line with the profile of the North Region and Brazil, which also showed growth in the number of high schools, with positive percentages of 35% and 12.6%, respectively (INEP, 2024b).

One of the hypotheses for the increase in the number of rural high schools in Rondonia could be the significant growth of indigenous units, which went from 226 in 2012 to 257 in 2023, representing an increase of 13.71% (INEP, 2024b). There has also been growth in secondary education integrated with professional education, with a 17.2% increase between 2017 and 2021 (INEP, 2022). Another possibility is the implementation of comprehensive education, which may have boosted enrollments during this period.

Some Brazilian studies have reported some characteristics of High School. When analyzing enrollment rates at this stage of education, Farenzena (2020) concluded that, from 1996 to 2006, enrollments grew by 55%, as a result of the expansion of Elementary School coverage. This was because, with the duty to prioritize High School, the states “[...] increased the offer, many of them with greater capacity to

do so given the municipalization of elementary school and preschool" (Farenzena, 2020, p. 11). However, from 2006 to 2018, there was a large drop, which according to the author is due to the demographic transition; non-completion of Elementary School; dropout rates; and insufficient supply conditions to meet specific needs, such as location, school hours, and the balance between work and study, among others.

According to Oliveira and Gomes (2011), in recent decades, there has been a considerable increase in the number of enrollments and the number of teachers and institutions. However, there is a need to increase the number of schools in rural areas to serve the entire demanding population; and there is a need for financial movements to meet the demand for structure, working conditions, etc., which impact improving educational quality.

One warning is that expanding access without the corresponding quality is not always favorable to educational policies. In the growth of secondary education in recent years in Brazil, there have also been movements of expansion and precariousness at the same time. For Krawczyk (2013), the process of expansion of secondary education presents the continuation of the reproduction of regional inequalities, racial inequalities, and gender inequalities. It is also important to evaluate which sectors have been showing growth. Table 9 below shows that there has been a slight growth in the private sector, which increased its participation by 5.5%.

Table 9 – Total number of secondary schools in Brazil according to administrative dependency

Dependency	2012	2023
Estadual	25.876	21.120
Municipal	97.139	75.323
Privada	23.558	24.858
Federal	48	49

Source: own elaboration based on school census (Inep, 2024b).

It is always important to consider that the latest reform of High School Education, through Law 13.415/2017 (Brazil, 2017), was sponsored by private education institutions that see education as yet another business opportunity. One aspect to be verified and analyzed in the future is to what extent the growth of the private sector is a result of the implementation of a High School that disseminates the

need for investment in human capital as a driver of economic and social development. An education that is thus aligned with a market perspective, since "[...] cuts in the education budget and the transfer of public resources to private sectors to offer simplified courses with low added technological value are in line with the ideology of human capital" (Motta; Frigotto, 2017, p. 361). Could this be yet another sign of privatization? It is possible because, as defined by Adrião (2018), the privatization of education does not only happen with the transfer of assets to the private sector; it can happen in management, in the educational offering, and in the curriculum.

Travitzki's research (2024) points to some changes brought about by the New High School (NEM). Even with favorable evidence of the association of full-time education with a reduction in school dropout rates, there is greater evidence of unfavorable evidence, such as the lack of professionalization in the teaching profession. Distance learning (EAD), also promoted by NEM, has been shown to be associated with an increase in school dropout rates in São Paulo, where 56% of schools offer EAD.

Based on these data, this research points to the need for further studies, which are of fundamental importance to gain a deeper understanding of the conditions for the increase in high school education in Brazil and Rondônia after 2017. It is necessary to understand whether the increase in the number of schools is related to a late arrival at the normal flow of Elementary Education, or whether there are other interests, or even greater investment by the state government, or the transfer of responsibilities to the private sector.

Finally, statistical data are important to understand the dynamics that affect educational processes. But these data must be related to the concrete reality of the subjects who live in the territories of the Brazilian countryside, inserted in educational institutions that present several problems, such as those reported by Fonec (2020b) when it states that

> [...] inadequate infrastructure, the progressive closure of rural schools, the lack of public competitions for education workers, the absence of teacher training policies, make it difficult to implement a political pedagogical project that guarantees curricular content and methodologies appropriate to the real needs of students, as well as flexibility in school organization and the adaptation of the school calendar to the phases of the agricultural cycle and the climatic conditions of the countryside.

These data show a panorama that needs to be explored in more depth by other studies, which can not only identify trends in educational and economic policies, but also assess the real conditions of children and adolescents in the main schools and in schools that still remain in rural areas. This is a fundamental step to understanding the complexity of this process and to identifying problems and possible directions for government action.

5 Final considerations

In the current context of Brazilian education, the closure of rural schools has become not only an educational problem, but also a political and social one, given the impact this process has on the lives of rural communities. Thus, the consolidation of a trend, especially in elementary education, of school closures points to a strong municipalization and urbanization of education in Rondônia.

Therefore, it is important to have research that verifies the process of school closures, which affects access to education and the implementation of the right to denounce the situation and evaluate the nucleation policy. However, to take a step forward in the fight for quality social education, research and new questions are also needed, which go beyond the scope of this article, that point out other possible problems, and that listen to the voices of rural, water, and forest communities.

The construction of an alternative to the proposal based solely on cost or the valorization of the urban environment necessarily involves the participation of the affected communities and their ability to intervene in reality and transform it into an Education of and in the Countryside. The closure of schools in rural areas not only threatens the population's right to education but also restricts this right to conditions that hinder learning and creates the possibility of increasing school dropouts and affecting their identities.

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