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Opinion – Sou Ciência: Who is interested in preventing access to Inep's microdata?

The collection of reliable information for the production of diagnoses and the elaboration of indicators is a strategic measure to guide planning and decision-making and, therefore, has been a constant concern of administrators and scientists, and even by part of the population in general. In contemporary society, in any activity, it is practically impossible to plan and make good and correct decisions without access to relevant, accurate, up-to-date information that allows the historical understanding of a phenomenon that one wants to know and/or intervene.

Hardly comparing, believing that it is possible to plan an action or policy and make a decision without having previous information or diagnoses is the same as expecting a successful trip from an airline pilot, without having a flight plan and that the air controllers are informed.

When we think about the elaboration of public policies, the collection and dissemination of information also serve to democratize knowledge about the social reality on which we want to act, in addition to enabling dialogue between governments and society, benefiting and stimulating popular participation in processes for formulating, monitoring and evaluating public policies.

In the area of ??Education, since the 1990s, the Ministry of Education (MEC) has been dedicated to the production of highly relevant educational data, through the work of the National Institute of Educational Studies and Research Anísio Teixeira (Inep). These data have allowed society and the government to monitor, among other factors, student enrollment and their trajectories, the working conditions of education professionals and their training, the infrastructure conditions of educational institutions and their funding, the results of external assessments of students, institutions and educational networks at all educational levels.

These are indicators that make it possible to measure some important dimensions of educational quality, in the public and private sectors, and allow the regulation, proposal and collection, when necessary, of new measures that correct directions in order to face the existing inequalities in our population and guarantee the right to education for all Brazilians.

However, earlier this week, we were surprised by the decision of MEC and Inep to withdraw access to the historical series of the various educational microdata in addition to the partial publication of information collected for the 2021 School Census and for the 2020 ENEM. The justification for this decision centered on the argument that the information present in the microdata, if subjected to various statistical treatments, would bring a risk of identification of students from different levels of education – with chances of successful identification of the student that could vary between 29.64% and 75.51%, depending on the combination of information present in the banks, such as month, year of birth, code of the institution of enrollment, etc. According to the municipality, this risk is contrary to the General Law for the Protection of Personal Data (LGPD – Law No. 13,709, of 08/14/2018).

However, according to the Forum on the Right of Access to Public Information, the justification for removing the data (LGPD) is "misguided and compromises the transparency of public education policies". If the law determines that the processing of personal data must respect the public interest, then it is necessary to consider that the benefits generated with Inep's databases are infinitely greater than the risks mentioned by the body, and therefore should not gain primacy. about the general interest. SoU_Ciência has publicly expressed itself on the matter.

In view of this, the questions that arise are the need and the time that Inep will take to guarantee the anonymization of personal data and the privacy of Brazilian citizens in the microdata, and, with that, continue to ensure transparency and access to information, without the data losing relevance, precision and comparability.

We hope, at the very least, that the removal of microdata from the MEC and Inep website will be temporary and brief so that federal agencies do not go against good public management practices, but continue to guarantee the ability of municipal and state governments to make use of of these managerial tools, as well as the possibility of inspection, control and monitoring of the public management of Brazilian education at all levels of education by society and researchers interested in offering quality education to all people.

The concern arises when we know that the government has already lost data after a hacker attack, in the case of vaccination, or has done it voluntarily, as in the case of the National Institute for Space Research (Inpe) when, influenced by agribusiness, it transferred environmental monitoring data on fires and deforestation by the Ministry of Science and Technology for Agriculture. Now, we are experiencing a partial blockage of education data.

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As indicated by the former Minister of Health, Arthur Chioro, the consequence of the attack on the Ministry of Health's national information system was that "all the necessary prior actions to face the new wave of Covid-19 – expansion of beds, hiring of professionals and purchase of extra inputs – were hampered by the lack of data".

Who cares about all these blackouts? In the case of the MEC, is it a matter of zeal to meet the LGPD or part of the stated project of "deconstruction" of institutions by the president? We are facing a weakening of data management and analysis in education that can hamper the performance of institutions in the present and in the future.

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