

# Denaturalizing failure in Higher Education: debating about the activity of professionalizing study<sup>1</sup>

Desnaturalizando o fracasso no Ensino Superior:  
debatendo acerca da atividade de estudo profissionalizante

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## ABSTRACT

By discussing the formation of academics' professional study activity, this manuscript aims to contribute to the development of understandings and practices that seek to denaturalize the so-called school failure in Higher Education. To this end, the relevance of the learning and human development unit for the training of young adults, especially academics, is discussed. From this, the importance of unveiling the structuring of professional study activity in higher education is highlighted, especially its possibilities and limits. Finally, the importance of understanding the question of the so-called school failure in higher education from a historical perspective is emphasized. This movement points to the historical need to build understandings and interventions in the contradictions that are emerging in Brazilian higher education, beyond the commonplace of naturalization or biologization of academics.

**Keywords:** Higher Education; Academics; School Failure; Historical-Cultural Psychology.

## RESUMO

Ao discutir sobre a formação da atividade de estudo profissionalizante de acadêmicos, este manuscrito almeja contribuir com o desenvolvimento de compreensões e práticas que buscam desnaturalizar o dito fracasso escolar no ensino superior. Para tanto, discute-se a relevância da unidade aprendizagem e desenvolvimento humano para a formação dos jovens adultos, especialmente dos acadêmicos. A partir disso, destaca-se a importância do desvelamento da estruturação da atividade de estudo profissionalizante no ensino superior, sobretudo suas possibilidades e limites. Por fim, enfatiza-se a importância de compreender a questão do dito fracasso escolar no ensino superior a partir de uma perspectiva histórica. Esse movimento aponta para a necessidade histórica da construção de compreensões e intervenções nas contradições que estão surgindo no ensino superior brasileiro para além do lugar comum da naturalização ou biologização dos acadêmicos.

**Palavras-chave:** Ensino Superior. Acadêmicos; Fracasso Escolar; Psicologia Histórico-Cultural.

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## 1 Introduction

Historically, the institution of the capitalist mode of production represented a significant transformation of reality and, therefore, of human relations, towards the constitution of human exploitation in the work process and, consequently, the production of surplus value, that is, of capitalist logic. Over the last twenty years, capitalism has been taking on “new” contours, which alter its apparent processes without losing sight of the perpetuation of its structural logic. In this context, Chauí (2001) highlights the rise in unemployment, the expansion of the financial capital proposal and the outsourcing of services, in addition to the intensification of science and technology production in accordance with capitalist logic.

The promotion of these mechanisms does not only unfold in the production process, in other words, in labor relations; on the contrary, it extends to all aspects that make up reality, from educational processes to human relationships themselves. Regarding this, Leontiev (2021/1975) already highlighted how much reality determines the conditions of possibility for human development and how much the social division of capitalist labor leads to the human constitution fragmentation, that is, to the alienation of the human being by the human being. Pasqualini and Martins (2015, p. 370), in turn, consider that “the possibility of developing as an increasingly universal generic being is not given to all individuals”, including because capitalist relations prevent a significant portion of individuals to appropriate the knowledge historically produced by humanity.

As a product of these relations, Chauí (2001, p. 22) reveals the emergence of postmodern logic, that is, “the passion for the ephemeral, for fast images, for fashion and the disposable”. In view of this, especially in the educational context, in the explanation of reality, as well as in itself, immediate results are increasingly required instead of the construction of processes and/or human relationships that can elevate subjects beyond the limits of alienation.

In order to overcome these conditions and understandings of reality, there is a need to build practices and analyzes based on the understanding of multiple determinations, on historicity, on the dialectical analysis that constitutes the lives of human beings, that is, on the singular-particular-universal dialectic, as pointed out by Pasqualini and Martins (2015). Building this movement means calling into question conceptions that denote individual blame for broad social processes; it is to question the naturalization, including its biological aspects of social contradictions; it is, therefore, to conceive that human beings are constituted and develop within the framework of certain social relations.

This movement construction is fundamental, especially when we talk about formal educational contexts, as these spaces enable (or should enable) human beings to appropriate the knowledge historically produced by humanity (SAVIANI, 2003). However, in general, the history of Brazilian education, as Patto (2022) points out, is constituted by a scenario marked by precariousness, racism, hygiene, etc., in relation to students and family members of classes understood as subordinate.

By recovering this historicity, the author emphasizes that the issue of school failure, especially the issue of learning difficulties, has a history that must be identified and understood. In the course of building this movement, Patto (2022) analyzes the social historical process of producing school failure in Brazilian Basic Education, highlighting its historical roots based, for example, on racist theories and cultural deprivation. The author also mentions the need to define the nature of school failure, especially “the analysis of his speech in terms of what he says, what he does not say and what he contradicts himself” (PATTO, 2022, p. 36).

From this important and significant work and the consequent understanding of school failure as a process that is historically and socially produced, much progress has been made in understanding and intervening the educational contradictions observed in Brazilian Basic Education. Especially, the

area of School Psychology began to question many of its knowledge and practices in this field, expanding its possibilities for critical action in reality.

When we look at the Brazilian educational context, in addition to Basic Education, we identify a significant expansion of Higher Education, especially since the 2000s. This expansion, according to Barros (2015), is also the result of the articulation of government proposals aimed at, for example, the expansion of the number of institutions and the implementation of different educational policies. In view of this, School Psychology is also required for analysis and interventions in the educational processes that occur at this level of education and especially its contradictions.

When analyzing Brazilian Higher Education, Mancebo, Vale and Martins (2015, p. 33) highlight the relevance of its expansion process, but also draw attention to its possible “perverse effects”. In other words, a careful analysis of the possibilities and limits that arise from the articulation of educational processes in Higher Education is necessary, as these are fostered within the logic of capitalist relations.

Thus, among other processes, learning difficulties in Higher Education, academic performance and dropout rates at this level of education are increasingly being discussed. Obviously, one of the reasons for this is the fact that these processes are increasingly present in the educational reality of Brazilian Higher Education and, in principle, require both the construction of explanatory models and interventions to overcome them.

Considering the area of Critical School Psychology, based on Trindade (2021), we understand that discussions about the set of expressions that can characterize the so-called academic failure in Higher Education must be based on the questions already elaborated on this topic in relation to basic education. Therefore, according to the author, discussing and intervening in the issue of academic failure in Higher Education requires us to start from the understanding that this process is not something natural, therefore, inherent to a group of academics, but it is a process that conforms as an expression of capitalist education itself.

With this, we emphasize the need to understand and overcome the aforementioned process without losing sight of the defense of public Higher Education, more precisely “opposing ourselves to measures aimed at its disappearance” (CHAUÍ, 2001, p. 9). This movement involves identifying the roots of the current educational contradictions that emerge in Higher Education under the expression “school failure” so that we can act in relation to them without disregarding the importance of the educational process for human development.

From this perspective, Pasqualini and Martins (2015, p. 370) emphasize that “it is necessary to see beyond the immediate singularity, capturing the particular and universal determinations that impair the particular condition of the individual, analyzing how their singularity is constructed in the relation with their genericity”. In the construction of this path, Historical-Cultural Psychology, especially Activity Theory, developed by Alexis Leontiev, contributes to an analysis of the multiple determinations that articulate the issue of so-called academic failure in Higher Education.

Thus, from this perspective, by discussing the possibilities and limits that involve the formation of the professionalizing study activity of academics, this study seeks to contribute to the development of new understandings and practices that aim to denaturalize the expressions of supposed academic failure in Higher Education.

## **2 Learning and Human Development in Higher Education: from particularity to universality**

According to Pasqualini and Martins (2015), unveiling reality requires overcoming its apparent immediacy towards the procedural understanding of its concrete totality. It is based on this assumption of historical-dialectical materialism and, therefore, of Historical-Cultural Psychology that it becomes possible to understand the relation between learning and human development of Higher Education students. In other words, discussing these processes presupposes, for example, overcoming the idea, socially shared,

that Higher Education students were already fully developed subjects, and learning, from that period onwards, would have as its sole and exclusive purpose the appropriation of knowledge related to a given profession.

Furthermore, the premise that human constitution and development are driven by the multiple determinations that give shape and content to human existence, that is, by social, historical, cultural and also biological determinations, contributes to overcoming these conceptions. In this sense, Leontiev (2004/1975) postulates the centrality of social relations, built on the singular-particular-universal articulation, as an essential process for human formation. Thus, understanding being a Higher education student necessarily requires us to understand the unity formed by learning and human development in its multiple determinations, which obviously acquire specific form and content in the current capitalist particularity.

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Regarding this particular concreteness of education, Saviani (2010, p. 11) already considered a tendency to direct Brazilian Higher Education to market demands, including international ones, making it directly and essentially another commodity in current society. Based on these particularities, there is an increasing need to identify the limits that the unity of learning and development assumes in capitalist higher Education, with the aim of overcoming them towards the constitution of new educational relations and, consequently, of new subjects.

This understanding is developed here based on the understanding that the movement to overcome current capitalist conditions must start from these conditions, that is, it is not because the teaching and learning processes are mostly based on an alienated logic that we should discard the relevance from professional training to the human community. Thus, there is a historical need to think from another logic about the appropriation of specific knowledge – learning – of certain social functions, as well as human development itself as a unit of this movement.

This argument is based on the historical-cultural proposition that states the importance of learning – that is, the systematic appropriation of scientific knowledge – to human training and development, as “understanding the nature of education involves understanding human nature” (SAVIANI, 2003, p. 11). Thus, even under current alienated conditions, the articulation of learning and human development still enables human formation, even if in a fragmented way.

Thus, having glimpsed the universality that makes up the respective unit, Vigotski (2009/1934) contributes by unveiling the specificities and potentialities that involve each of these processes. According to the author,

[...] learning and development do not coincide immediately, but are two processes that are in complex interrelations. Learning is only good when it is ahead of development. In this case, it motivates and triggers for life a series of functions that were in the maturing phase and in the immediate development zone. This is what the main role of learning in development consists of (VIGOTSKI, 2009/1934, p. 334).

From this perspective, the more appropriate learning conditions are created, the greater are the possibilities for articulating full human development. Initially, in theory, this foundation was postulated in relation to the initial periods of life, more precisely up to adolescence. However, by becoming a general principle of human formation, we understand that it can be extended to the understanding of other periods that constitute human existence, such as youth and adulthood.



Dealing with some of these specificities, when we conceive the context of Brazilian Higher Education today, we assume that the academic has already experienced an educational path in Basic Education. Therefore, at the same time that he has already acquired certain knowledge from different areas, he also already has the improved development of some constituent processes of his psyche, such as abstract thinking, memory, attention, among others. In view of this, the subject's inclusion in Higher Education would also have the aim of offering the learning of scientific knowledge specific to a given profession and, with this, the expansion and improvement of their developmental possibilities. This movement is possible because, according to Martins (2013), as we have new acquisitions in formal educational processes, new articulations of higher psychological functions occur that enable the restructuring and complexification of the human psyche.

To this end, the educational institutions have a central role, because, according to Saviani (2003), it is school education, more precisely the systematized and intentional teaching process, that will enable individuals to overcome the appropriation of spontaneous knowledge towards appropriation of knowledge historically elaborated by humanity, driving the improvement of human training. Therefore, it is important to highlight, as Saviani (2003, p. 13) points out, that:

Educational work is the act of producing, directly and intentionally, in each unique individual, the humanity that is historically and collectively produced by all men. Thus, the object of education concerns, on the one hand, the identification of the cultural elements that need to be assimilated by individuals of the human species so that they become human and, on the other hand and concomitantly, the discovery of the most appropriate ways to achieve this goal.

Thus, in this movement – of learning – lies the possibility of the emergence of new formations that will support the constitution and subjects' development, in this case of academics. In the context of Higher Education, we see the need for this articulation even more, as it will enable, for example,



the appropriation of scientific knowledge related to professional activity, in addition to philosophical and artistic knowledge. It should be added that, despite the countless contradictions identified in capitalist particularity, according to Saviani (2010, p. 15), the essential function of Higher Education still “is the development of higher culture and the training of high-level intellectuals”, that is, university improvement.

Therefore, the movement of appropriation of scientific knowledge related to a given profession also enables the development of individuals, more precisely their complexification. This is because, as Vigotski (2009, p. 304) indicates, “learning can produce more in development than what it contains in its immediate results”. From this perspective, the author considers, regarding development in childhood, that “every teaching subject always demands more from the child than he or she can give today, that is, at school the child develops an activity that forces him to place himself above others” (VIGOTSKI, 2009/1934, p. 336).

Although this movement occurs with young people and/or adults in a way that is qualitatively different from how it occurs with children, one can start from this premise to understand the relation between development and learning in Higher Education. According to Pasqualini (2016, p. 67), there is no linear and uniform pattern of psychic development, on the contrary “the psyche goes through successive changes throughout life, and in this process it is possible to identify different states with their own characteristics”.

This conception reveals that human development is not based on a stepwise and cumulative notion, but rather is created in a procedural and, therefore, dialectical movement of articulation of different activities. In the words of Pasqualini (2016, p. 67), “the chronological or age criterion is not the determination that explains the changes in the psyche in the course of development in its most decisive aspects”, as “the key category for explaining the problem of periods of development is activity” (PASQUALINI, 2016, p. 68). Thus, in the context of higher education, the activity, more precisely the dialectical unit formed by the professionalizing study activity and the

productive activity, is the category that will enable the constitution of learning and development of academics.

With this, it is universally understood that, in the articulation of professional study activity, the appropriation of scientific knowledge associated with a given profession will enable a qualitative leap in the development of academics. It is worth emphasizing that the absence of the emergence of this movement in the current reality is not related to the unfeasibility of the process, but to the fact that Higher Education is established in the logic of capital – that is, in the production of surplus value – and, thus, not be aimed at building student autonomy. Regarding this, when studying the process of expansion of Brazilian Higher Education, Saviani (2010, p. 11) considers that in fact there began to be a “greater strengthening of the university’s ties with market demands” and, therefore, with the capitalist logic.

In this dynamic, we agree with Abrantes and Bulhões (2016 p. 242, authors' emphasis) when they discuss the human development periodization and state that the dominant activity in the early period of adult life is the “*contradictory unity between the professionalizing study activity and the productive activity*”, and “the predominance of one of them occurs by determining the position that the young person occupies in relation to the means of production” (ABRANTES; BULHÕES, 2016, p. 242).

Thus, from the perspective of Historical-Cultural Psychology, the unity of learning and development of Higher Education students is forged in the dialectic of professional study activity and productive activity. In other words, revealing the form and content of academics' human development involves understanding the constitution of the unit in focus. This movement occurs even when we carry out an analysis, such as the professional study activity, as this is directly linked to the academics' actions in the “struggle for autonomy and the possibility of carrying out a socially productive activity” (ABRANTES; BULHÕES, 2016, p. 242).

When discussing the educational process in childhood, Vigotski (2009/1934, p. 334) draws attention to the fact that just the development of technical skills in

itself will not promote the full development of subjects, that is, “they do not reveal any substantial influence on development”. According to the author, creating the conditions for possibilities in order to get full development requires the articulation of a systematized and intentional teaching that enables, among other results, the overcoming of spontaneous concepts towards the development of scientific concepts.

Based on these considerations, we defend the importance and need for full training in professional study activities in higher education. If, at this level of education, only professional technical skills are reproduced in themselves, we will be repeating the same limits questioned by Vigotski (2009/1934) in relation to the process of schooling in childhood.

This highlight becomes especially relevant, given that historically Brazilian Higher Education has focused on the production and reproduction of specialized labor for the current particularity (SAVIANI, 2010; CHAÚÍ, 2001), as well as because different educational policies do not are synonymous with equal opportunities (BARROS, 2015). In this context, the full articulation of learning and human development is marginalized and, consequently, the decisive transformations of psychic complexification are limited, resulting in the emergence of a fragmented human constitution.

In summary, throughout this item, we seek to weave some reflections to understand the articulation of learning and human development of Higher Education students. In this movement, we understand the importance of the process of learning historically elaborated knowledge related to a given profession in the complexification of the human development of academics. This qualitative leap in development gains support in the full emergence of the formation of the dialectical unity of professional study activity and productive activity.

Based on these assumptions of the Historical-Cultural Psychology approach, when understanding the current particularity, we identify different contradictions that often result in limits to the integral articulation of the mentioned processes. Regarding this, Pasqualini and Martins (2015) consider that particularity is a mediation and not the end that expresses universality. In

this sense, with all its possible limitations and contradictions that culminate in the fragmentation of the human being, the current particularity that denotes form and content for academics' learning and human development is still the starting point for its own overcoming.

Therefore, discussing the paths that learning and human development of Higher Education students take in the current particularity is fundamental to building strategies to overcome them. From this perspective, the challenge arises of thinking about Brazilian Higher Education beyond the limits of the massification of learning and also of human development itself.

### **3 Professional study activity of academics: overcoming its particular contours towards its full constitution**

From the perspective of Historical-Cultural Psychology, when established in reality, the activity is determined and structured also according to the concrete conditions placed in a given historical-social particularity. In other words, human activity is not natural and ahistorical, but it is the process by which human beings transform nature and also construct the different elements that make up reality. In the words of Pasqualini (2016, p. 68),

[...] activity is mediation in the individual-society dialectical relation, a relation that develops and becomes complex precisely as the mediating activity itself develops and becomes complex (that is, mediation transforms the two poles of unity and is transformed as the relationship itself develops).

By mediating the exchange between the different processes of reality, the set of activities that human beings develop enable both their constitution and their development. In this movement, according to Leontiev (2004/1975), certain activities acquire a driving function in the articulation and complexification of psychic processes, which are called dominant activities. These are characterized by enabling qualitative leaps in development, that is, “the dominant activity is the one in which particular psychic processes are formed or reorganized” (LEONTIEV, 2004/1975, p. 311).

From the discussions previously held on learning and human development, we understand that the dialectical unity of professional study activity and productive activity is the dominant activity (ABRANTES; BULHÕES, 2016) that will boost the development of Higher Education students. In view of this, we specifically chose the issue of professional study activity at this level of education as the analysis section of this item.

To understand this activity in Higher Education, we return to the assumption defended by Vigotski (2009/1934, p. 337) that the learning process takes on qualitatively different characteristics in each period of human development, that is, “in each age group it [ learning] has not only specific forms, but a totally original relation with development”. In view of this, there is a need to understand the specific forms that the learning process takes in Higher Education in order to also reveal what new mediations are provided for the development of students in this period of education.

Specifically, in relation to the educational process, it is worth remembering, according to Martins (2013, p. 272), that the function of school education is “to provide opportunities for the appropriation of historically systematized knowledge – the enrichment of the universe of meanings –, with a view to elevating beyond the more immediate and apparent meanings made available by the merely empirical dimensions of the phenomena”. In this sense, keeping in mind its specificities, we also understand Higher Education as an educational process that enables students to acquire scientific knowledge related to a given profession. Abrantes and Bulhões (2016) contribute to this understanding, stating that such appropriation by students who make up the working class must “play a fundamental role in achieving an understanding of the essential contradictions of society” (ABRANTES; BULHÕES, 2016, p. 243).

Therefore, within the scope of this level of education, the appropriation of scientific knowledge relating to a given profession must be articulated with mediations that enable an analysis of the limits of productive activity generated within capitalist particularities, that is, an analysis of the current

relations of produce. The path of construction of these understandings of reality by academics must also be undertaken in articulating the form and content of the professional study activity developed in Higher Education. With this, we understand that it is not enough to simply implement the conditions for the possibility of appropriating the technical knowledge of a certain profession, but it is necessary to develop dialectical thinking to understand the limits and possibilities that particularly involve such a profession and also reality in general.

Thus, if, on the one hand, for the current capitalist order, based on the production of surplus value, to be maintained, an educational process is necessary that “naturalizes this submission logic” (ABRANTES; BULHÕES, 2016, p. 256) on the other, it becomes yet another historical need for the working class to think and build other contours for the formation of professional study activity in Higher Education.

This movement of changing the form and content of the study activity is possible precisely because it is not a naturally given process. On the contrary, “it consists of the activity in which subjects appropriate the different forms of social consciousness historically constituted by humanity, as well as the mental actions on which this knowledge is based” (ASBAHR; MENDONÇA, 2022, p. 209). Therefore, it is capable of overcoming its current fragmented form.

From this perspective, regarding the formation of the academic psyche, Pessoa, Trindade and Leonardo (2022, p. 5) consider that subjects are not born pre-determined biologically, but it is “the activity developed in the concrete, historical, political, economic and socially determined, which will guide the paths of each individual’s human formation”. Thus, according to the authors, the activity of professional study in Higher Education acquires form and content also based on the conditions of possibilities posed at this educational level, more precisely also as an expression, for example, of pedagogical work, curricula and evaluation processes.

In a study carried out with academics who experience learning difficulties in higher education, Trindade (2021) identified that, in the development of their professional study activities, students perform different actions – such as copying, reading and memorizing content – beyond the grade level curriculum guided by the stimulus-motivation for completing a given subject. With this, the author observed that the process of appropriation of school knowledge – scientific knowledge – from Higher Education, is not constituted as a final purpose of academics' activities.

This configuration identified by the author reveals that the aforementioned processes are in opposition to the proposition of the effective articulation of the professionalizing study activity, since, according to Leontiev (2004/1975), when driven by a need, the activity puts itself in movement based on intentionality, that is, actions constitute activity, but they are not its immediate end. In this sense, Asbahr and Mendonça (2022, p. 211) remember that “the content of the study activity is the theoretical concepts”; therefore, the actions carried out by students must have as their purpose the appropriation of certain content and not, as in the case of the study mentioned above, the completion of a certain discipline itself.

Trindade (2021) states that the professionalizing the academics' study activity in question embodies these contours due to the fact that it is constituted and based on the logic of the capitalist mode of production. This, in general, seems to increasingly take on the shape of the individuals' formation who will merely compose and be subject to the capitalist labor market (CHAUÍ, 2001). In general terms, the capitalist higher educational process directs a fragmented articulation of the professionalizing study activity, in which, by developing actions in themselves directed by stimulus motives, academics place in opposition the main processes that make up their psychic reflection of reality: the social meanings and personal meanings<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> In order to deepen the understanding of the respective concepts, we recommend consulting Leontiev's contributions



Leontiev (2004/1975) emphasizes that the study of the relation between social meaning and personal meaning is especially important for psychology, since these processes make up human consciousness. It is worth remembering that, according to the author, such processes constitute the development of human activity. Therefore, we consider that the investigation of the activity carried out by academics also makes it possible to understand the movement of the formation of their consciousness.

As mentioned previously, the current capitalist particularity institutes the professional study activity of Higher Education students in a fragmented way (TRINDADE, 2021). With this, we can infer that the human development of academics in light of these conditions also falls far short of their full possibilities, given that learning and human development are processes that develop in conjunction.

From this perspective, for Historical-Cultural Psychology, the way to understand the current possibilities and limits placed on the complexification of the human development of Higher Education students lies in identifying and understanding the contours that their needs, motives, actions and study operations assume towards the construction of their professional teaching activities. According to Leontiev (2021/1975), when starting from a motive, personal meaning is always directed to a process. Thus, identifying the personal meaning that the subject attributes to a given activity involves revealing the reasons that drive their actions.

Based on these foundations, Trindade (2021) identified that both academics who exclusively carry out study actions and those who combine them with work actions do not understand the full formation of their respective activities, especially because their actions are substantially linked to stimulus reasons, such as the completion of a certain subject. It is worth remembering, according to Leontiev (2021/1975), that it is the appropriate correlation between stimulus motives and meaning-generating motives that drives the effective construction of the activity, given that the former direct the immediate actions of the subjects and the latter enable the construction of meanings personal.

In the case of the investigation carried out by Trindade (2021), the emergence and predominance of stimulus motives strictly articulated with the actions of copying content and attending classes can be observed. When this movement occurs, little progress is made both in the actual articulation of the reasons for the activity and in the professionalizing study activity itself. With this, the author infers that there is no effective training in the professional study activity of academics who experience learning difficulties.

In view of the present discussions, it is important to emphasize that the contradictions highlighted in the formation of the professional study activity of higher education students are not due to a biological condition of the academics, much less to the absence of “willpower” for studies, but to the historical and social conditions that enable the emergence of the activity. Thus, understanding the professional study activity of academics presupposes understanding who these subjects are, that is, what are the needs and motivations that emerge in given particular life conditions.

Abrantes and Bulhões (2016, p. 256) contribute in this sense by stating that “the question of class fully encompasses the discussion about the process of psychic development in adulthood”. The reflections made by Trindade (2021) also point to the need for this perspective of understanding, since they reveal the fragmented condition that involves the activity of professional study and consequently the lives of Higher Education students.

With this, we defend the need to restructure the form and content that embodies the activity of professional study in its current particularity. Such restructuring, as already pointed out by the authors of Historical-Cultural Psychology, must direct the movement of all processes that constitute human activity, that is, motives, actions and operations, from the perspective of full human development and not, for example, in its split and construction itself. Furthermore, the construction of a true professionalizing study activity also involves overcoming the current particularity, which, by imputing form and content to the current educational process in Higher Education, also offers precarious and alienating mediations for the emergence of the subjects’ productive activity.

#### **4 About the historical need to historicize the issue of school failure in Higher Education**

The Higher Education Census, carried out in 2020, indicated that, among academics who entered higher education in 2011, “40% completed their entry course at the end of 10 years of monitoring their trajectory” (BRASIL, 2022, p. 35), and, in 2020, there was an accumulated dropout rate of approximately 59%. These and other data relating to the Higher Education scenario over the last few years do not appear to be optimistic from the perspective of the subjects who make up the Brazilian working class, but they can prove to be quite fruitful when analyzed from the perspective of the current capitalist particularity.

Among entering, staying and completing a Higher Education course there is a long (and often arduous) path of multiple determinations that permeate all these moments. This is because the educational process at this level of education, more precisely the university, “is a social institution” (CHAUÍ, 2001, p. 35) and, as such, is not constituted apart from the problems posed in current social relations; on the contrary, it often crystallizes them in their structures and subjects.

In this area, Pessoa, Trindade and Leonardo (2022) reiterate how the university, as it is based on the demands of capitalist logic, often does not constitute itself as a space-time that offers conditions for the full development of academics. Mancebo, Vale and Martins (2015) reflect on the fact that the expansion of places in Higher Education in itself is not synonymous with the provision of quality education, on the contrary, they have been characterized much more as a mere mass certification based on the precariousness and flexibility of teaching.

Therefore, we understand that, to discuss the so-called academic failure in Brazilian Higher Education, it is essential to start from the analysis and understanding of the current Brazilian social and educational context. This is the first step to avoid naturalizing this process in given

institutions and/or subjects. In other words, it is assumed that the way we know the issue of school failure, even in its specificity in Higher Education, is a historical- typical social expression of this capitalist educational sociability (TRINDADE, 2021). From this perspective, there is an increasing need to map the possible expressions of failure in Higher Education. This movement, according to Trindade (2021), must be constructed both in order not to reproduce what has already been refuted about school failure in Basic Education and to understand the specificities that this process takes on in Higher Education.

Making use of this movement means not losing sight of the fact that education, more precisely educational institutions, do not present themselves in their unique and final form in the current capitalist particularity, on the contrary “it is therefore necessary to rescue the importance of school and reorganize work educational, taking into account the problem of systematized knowledge, from which the specificity of school education is defined” (SAVIANI, 2003, p. 98).

Thus, rescuing this importance also involves not losing sight of the universal aspects that make up the psychic development of human beings, but also “capturing and unveiling the determinations and mediations of the world of work and the processes of alienation inherent to it in the midst of capitalist society” (PASQUALINI, 2016, p. 87). This is what we must currently undertake to understand in a historicized way the issue of the contours that the so-called academic failure is taking on in Higher Education.

In general terms, according to Trindade (2021), school failure has been socially and scientifically conceived as school contradictions – mainly failure and/or dropout – that arise in the formal educational process, which prevent and/or hinder its achievement within the socially stipulated time. Given this, different explanations and actions emerge to intervene in the so-called school failure. However, according to the author, it is essential that we look at the bases that support these processes, that is, the conditions of social and educational possibilities that generate and maintain them.

From this perspective, university failure or dropout, understood as expressions of said failure, would be the apparent contradictions that present themselves immediately, and not the whole that would explain the failure in Higher Education. The explanation for failure in Higher Education, according to Trindade (2021), consists of analyzing social and educational relations and their conditions of impossibility placed to students. Thus, along with the need to conceive the issue of academic failure in Higher Education beyond something naturally established, there is a need to identify its historical, social and cultural determinations that lead a portion of students to “fail” within a capitalist educational proposal that, in essence, it presents itself as a failure in relation to full human development (TRINDADE, 2021).

Given this, according to the author, it would also be appropriate to reflect on what *success* would be in the capitalist educational process, that is, in the current particularity. It is observed that *success* refers mainly to the grades themselves, produced in contradictory evaluation processes in higher education, which has been a parameter to identify whether or not students appropriate the content. In this dynamic, the grade constitutes a motivation-stimulus for the activity, directing the actions of academics towards the completion of certain subjects and not necessarily towards the appropriation of a given piece of knowledge.

With this movement, an educational logic is established that feeds back on itself, that is, it determines a fragmented and alienated form and content of the teaching and learning processes in Higher Education, as well as justifying its contradictions not in its own gears, but in the students. In this sense, Mancebo, Vale and Martins (2015) highlight the importance of understanding the implications of the current commercialized structure of Higher Education in the different spheres of the human beings' existence.

Pessoa, Trindade and Leonardo (2022), in turn, consider that one of the tasks of School and Educational Psychology in Higher Education consists of identifying and acting on these contradictions, without losing sight of the fact that the educational process is an essential mediation to training and human

development. This challenge arises in an especially complex way when we deal with Higher Education students, as it is also at this level of education that what we understand as the individualistic and, therefore, bourgeois construction of life projects are paved and crystallized.

Abrantes and Bulhões (2016, p. 249) characterize this movement by mentioning that young people can be directed to seek “ascension in the social hierarchy, organizing themselves through competition and the liberal ideas of the selfish individual”. In other words, ideologically, social meanings are increasingly guided by how much and how young adults must succeed in order to achieve and strictly construct individual goals, leaving collective perspectives aside.

In this context, of the “race” to build individual life projects, the so-called academic failure seems to constitute an impediment, because how will individuals be able to have a “successful” scientific profession if they encounter obstacles in the educational process in higher education? With this, the so-called academic failure in higher education would denote its “selection” functionality: success for the most capable, failure for the least capable. In this way, said failure can also be understood as a process of social control and, therefore, maintainer of the current order.

Academics who experience academic difficulties, according to Trindade (2021), in a way understand that they are not inherent to them, but relate to the didactics of teachers, the forms of evaluation procedures, the overload arising from productive activity, etc. However, according to the author, when these immediate understandings are overcome, it is revealed how much academics are responsible for “failure”. This occurs, for example, when they claim that they could have tried harder and studied more. Thus, here again we observe individuals taking responsibility and naturalizing a process that is the result of capitalist educational relations. From this perspective, we agree with Trindade (2021, p. 305) when the author states that the

[...] current society, by establishing and organizing formal education – therefore, not focusing on the real interests and needs of students – is responsible for what it itself produces and understands as school failure. In other words, the so-called school failure, in its form and content, is yet another product of the success of capitalist education.

In view of this, it becomes a historical task of psychological science, which aims to overcome the limits of capitalist social and educational relations, unveil and act in the face of these contradictions that are expressed in higher Education. As an area, we already have a theoretical and practical accumulation to think about the issue of failure in Basic Education and, initially, we must start from this so as not to reproduce prejudiced and naturalizing conceptions within the scope of Higher Education.

## **5 Final considerations**

In order to understand the issue of so-called academic failure in Higher Education, this manuscript argues about the need to discuss the possibilities and limits that involve the formation of academics' professional study activity. As argued, this movement is based on the assumption that human activity is historically situated, therefore, it takes shape and content also according to the conditions of possibility of existence constructed and maintained by social subjects.

Therefore, recognizing the fragmentation that, in general, permeates the activity of professional study in higher education and prevents its full constitution in unity with productive activity is also an essential movement, since this dynamic has directed the conditions of possibility for development human to academics. Abrantes and Bulhões (2016, p. 261), in turn, consider the need to think and build dialogues with young people about “life projects, having as themes the professional training project, the search for autonomy at work and other spheres of human activity.”

Therefore, questioning academic failure in Higher Education requires identifying its expressions and conceiving them beyond something biological



and/or given in a certain portion of students. On the contrary, it requires looking at the various determinations that make up the educational process and thinking about ways to overcome them so that in fact and in its entirety it focuses on the full human development of all academics. Above all, this movement demands to question our current capitalist social relations, since it is necessary to always consider the singular-particular-universal articulation in understanding reality. With this, we have the possibility of building new understandings and practices that aim to denaturalize the expressions of supposed school failure in Higher Education.

### Desnaturalizar el fracaso en la enseñanza superior: debatir sobre la actividad de estudio profesional

#### RESUMEN

Al discutir la formación de la actividad de estudio profesionalizante de los académicos, este manuscrito pretende contribuir con el desarrollo de comprensiones y prácticas que busquen desnaturalizar el llamado fracaso escolar en la Educación Superior. Para ello se discute la relevancia de la unidad aprendizaje y desarrollo humano para la formación de jóvenes adultos, especialmente académicos. A partir de esto se destaca la importancia de develar la estructuración de la actividad de estudio profesionalizante en la educación superior, especialmente sus posibilidades y límites. Por último, se destaca la importancia de comprender la cuestión del llamado fracaso escolar en la enseñanza superior desde una perspectiva histórica. Este movimiento apunta a la necesidad histórica de construir comprensiones e intervenciones en las contradicciones que están surgiendo en la educación superior brasileña más allá del lugar común de la naturalización o biologización de los académicos.

**Palabras clave:** Educación superior; Académicos; Fracaso escolar; Psicología Histórico-Cultural.

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