

High school: what do young people say about a public school?¹

Ensino médio: o que falam os jovens de uma escola pública?

Educación Secundaria: ¿qué dicen los jóvenes sobre una escuela pública?

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Abstract: This text explores the significance of high school education for young students enrolled in a state school in Espírito Santo, Brazil. The data analyzed is part of a master's research conducted in 2016, using questionnaires, interviews, and discussion groups as methodological procedures. The study revisits the data collected in 2016; the same year a high school reform was enacted under Decree No. 746, which justified the reform by claiming that schools were not engaging students. However, the research revealed that for the participants, school is an attractive space and plays a crucial role in their lives by providing critical education and fostering social interaction among peers. The relationship between high school education and youth is complex and encompasses multiple aspects that require in-depth investigation.

Keywords: New High School Education; Youth; Reform; Educational Policies.

Resumo: Este texto busca perscrutar os sentidos do ensino médio para os jovens matriculados em uma escola na rede estadual de ensino do Espírito Santo. Na pesquisa, foram utilizados os seguintes procedimentos metodológicos: questionários, entrevistas e rodas de conversa. Intencionamos trazer os dados coletados no ano de 2016, porque neste mesmo ano ocorreu uma reforma no ensino médio, com a edição do Decreto nº 746, cujas principais justificativas para reformar essa etapa foi que a escola não era atrativa para os estudantes. A pesquisa identificou que, para os participantes, a escola é um espaço atrativo, sendo fundamental na vida deles, já que promove uma formação crítica, além da sociabilidade com os pares. Portanto, a relação entre Ensino Médio e Juventudes é complexa, sendo necessárias políticas educacionais mais consistentes, duradouras e, sobretudo, assentadas na realidade educacional das juventudes da escola pública.

Palavras-chave: Novo Ensino Médio; Juventudes; Reforma; Políticas Educacionais.

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Resumen: Este texto busca indagar los sentidos de la educación secundaria para los jóvenes matriculados en una escuela de la red pública de Espírito Santo. Los datos analizados son parte de la investigación de una maestría realizada en 2016. En la investigación fueron utilizados los siguientes procedimientos metodológicos: cuestionarios, entrevistas y grupos de conversación. Decidimos traer los datos recogidos en el año 2016, porque en este año ocurrió una reforma en la educación secundaria, con la edición del Decreto n. 746, en el que una de las principales justificaciones para reformar esta etapa escolar fue que la escuela no era atractiva para los estudiantes. La investigación identificó que, para los participantes, la escuela es un espacio atractivo, siendo fundamental en sus vidas puesto que promueve una formación crítica, además de la socialización con sus compañeros. Observamos que la relación entre la educación secundaria y las juventudes es compleja y presenta varios caminos que necesitan ser investigados con profundidad.

Palabras clave: Nueva Educación Secundaria; Juventudes; Reforma; Políticas Educativas.

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Introduction

This text explores the significance of high school education for young students enrolled in a state school in Espírito Santo, Brazil. The data analysed is part of a master's degree research conducted in 2016. The presentation of the collected data is justified by the high school reform in 2016, implemented by the Decree nº 746, by then-president Michel Temer, who assumed office after a parliamentary and mediatic-driven conspiracy that ended Dilma Rousseff's presidency. Among the arguments used to justify the high school reform was the idea that the school was not attractive for young people. However, our research, which was conducted before the enactment of the decree, reveals a different view among youth, who see the school as a vital space for their critical development and the promotion of diverse forms of sociability. Based on a case study, this research aims to reflect on the experiences of young high school students and the meanings the school holds for them.

Indeed, the last stage of basic education is complex and has increasingly drawn the attention of the private sector, not only for the public it serves (there are almost 6,76 million enrolled in public schools alone), but also due to its role as a gateway for technical education or universities. Thus, many reforms have taken place since 19th century, intensifying throughout the 20th century, under the discourse of improving the quality of the basic education's final stage. The current reform, according to some research (Frigotto e Motta,

2017; Ferreira, 2017, 2023; Silva, 2022), propose a significant change in the curriculum, endangering students access to scientific knowledge, and undermining teacher's careers.

This reform was and still is utterly criticized by different niches of society. During 2022's presidency electoral campaign, an open letter — which counted with around 650 signatures, all from scientific associations, research groups, unions, social and student movements — was made public, calling for the annulment of the Law nº13.415/2017. After President Lula da Silva election (2023), significant mobilization among students and faculty members led to the creation of a public consultation platform by Ministry of Education (MEC) throughout 2023, that resulted on Bill nº5.230/2023. Despite the progress that the bill represented, such as the proposal to reinstate the 2.400 hours of general education and to prohibit distance learning and “notorious knowledge” usage, the bill does not break apart from the fragmented and precarious logic of the current curriculum. In December 2023, organized with state secretaries of education, rapporteur of the bill and directly responsible for 2017 reform, Representative Mendonça Filho modified Bill nº 5.230/2023, proposing, in contrast with the 2.400 hours, 2.100 hours for general education and 900 hours for technical education. Under this scenario, yet in December 2023, the House of Representatives approved the urgent processing for the bill to be voted. However, due to widespread mobilization, the vote was postponed to March 2024.

Given this intentionally orchestrated tangle, the current scenario is what some researchers of the field call “the reform of the reform”. President Lula signed the Law nº 14.945, on July 31st, 2024, which vetoes part of the bill approved by the House of Representatives⁴. Board 1 bellow illustrates the changes in the number of hours for high school, from 2017 reform on.

⁴ The reform represents progress in increasing the minimum workload to 2.400 hours for general high school education. However, the workload for technical and professional education became only 2.100 hours, with up to 300 hours that can be destined to general education subject that are related to technical and professional education. The educational pathways in general education continue, decreasing the workload to 600 hours, in contrast to the previous 1.200 hours, which continued in technical and professional education.

Board 1. Changes in the High School program's number of hours

Legally Established Period	Current Number of Hours	General Education program	Educational Pathways	Notes
Before Law 13.415/2017	2.400 hours (3 years)	100% of the number of hours (2.400 horas)	There was not.	Rigid curriculum, featuring mandatory disciplines and lacking educational pathways.
With Law 13.415/2017 (New High School)	3.000 hours	Maximum durations: 1.800 hours (mandatory maximum time, 60%)	Minimum duration: 1.200 hours (40%)	Introduction of the Educational (focusing on technical areas).
Effective from Law 14.945/2024	3.000 hours	2.400 hours (mandatory minimum time, 80%)	Up to 600 hours (20%)	Decrease in the emphasis of educational pathways; reinforcement of BNCC mandatory subjects

Source: Made by the authors.

Given the current high school reform, established under the discourse of creating a more attractive education for students, this paper presents the students' perceptions, collected in the same year of the reform. Its aim is to reflect on a specific reality of the youth schooling, captured by our research, that reveals a view different from the common sense. However, before addressing this matter, this text presents a brief reflection on the issue of the youth as a background for our analysis. Additionally, it provides a concise analysis of the real intentionality of the New High School.

Methodology

The present research is a Case Study conducted in a school located in an underserved neighborhood, which serves students aged between 14 and 18 years old. Regarding the estimated household income of the students, 35% of their families earned up to 2 minimum salaries; 25%, up to 3 salaries; 21%, earned more than 3; 14% up to 1 salary; and 4% of them did not provide this information. This school was selected to be investigated primarily due to its status as a traditional institution in the state, well-known for its efficient management⁵. Other meaningful factors are the significant number of enrolled students in the regular high

⁵ The school has already received several awards that reinforce its reputations of having an efficient management. In 2002, was granted R\$20.000 by the Secretariat for Secondary and Technological Education (SEMTEM/MEC), through the national competition "From school to school", for the project "Educative Instrumental Radio CBM". In 2007, it received the "SEDU award for Good Practices in Education", for the projects Educative Instrumental Radio CBM", "Photographic Reinterpretation" and "Highlands Memories". In the same year, the school won in the first place, in all Espírito Santo, the "National Award for Excellence in Management" — an initiative by CONSED, UNDIME, UNESCO, and the Roberto Marinho Foundation (PROJETO PEDAGÓGICO, 2013).

school program and the school's reputation as one of the institutions with the highest university entrance exam pass rates at UFES, before ENEM became the standard admission exam through which students have access to universities.

It is important to emphasize that the adoption of Case Study as a methodological approach has its relevance, since it seeks to explore the complexity of the real-life situations more deeply, while also pointing out the difficulty of generalizing the application of its findings to other educational contexts, once the results generally reflect singular realities. However, it is possible to identify patterns related to results from other studies, allowing the observation of recurring data that reveal broader educational and social phenomena.

Our Case Study used the following methodological procedures: participant observation, questionnaire administration, semi-structured interview and discussion circles. In order to have a wide overview of a substantial number of students, we opted to use questionnaires. Accordingly, 189 of them were administered across six classes: two from the 1st year, two from the 2nd year and two from the 3rd year.

The questionnaire was composed of thirty-two closed-ended questions and three open-ended questions. The answers for the open-ended questions were organized and tabulated with Excel software. Regarding the data obtained from the closed-ended questions, they were grouped into analytical categories. The central categories which guided the research were: youth, high school education and school experience.

As for the Discussion Circles, they were conducted based on a script designed to enhance the comprehension of the data collected with the questionnaires. A total of 62 students⁶ took part, distributed across the six classes from high school program. Just as Melo and Cruz (2014) highlight, choosing Discussion Circles as a research technique is justified by its capacity of making it possible for participants to simultaneously express their impressions, ideas, conceits and opinions on the topics under discussion. The contact with the classes was direct and, based on expressed interest, the students were invited to write down their names and phone numbers on a list, so that the researcher could estimate the number of participants. In addition, the Informed Consent Term was given to the students to be signed by their parents or legal guardians, formally authorizing their participation in the meetings.

⁶ Initially, the invitations to participate in the Discussion Circles were addressed to the classes that had responded the questionnaire, considering that these students were already familiarized with the research's intentions. However, facing the lack of interest shown by some classes, the invitation was lately sent to the others, even the ones who hadn't participated in the previous stage of the research.

In order to establish a previous interaction between the researcher and the students, to clarify any doubts and to facilitate the communication, a What'sApp group was created for each participating class. The students themselves, with the researcher acting as mediator, determined the meetings' schedule, which happened outside regular school hours. The ideal number of participants for the discussion circles follows the parameters of the focus groups, which recommends that they include between 6 and 15 individuals (Gatti, 2005), however, not all of them were carried out with this ideal number, given certain unforeseen situation that are intrinsic to an investigative process⁷.

For the goals to be achieved, this study adopted as approach the theoretical framework of the sociology of experience, developed by the French sociologist François Dubet. Broadly speaking, this perspective places central emphasis on the autonomy and the subjectivity of individuals in social actions, both aspects that diverge from classical sociology, despite not entirely excluding it, as Latarri (2011) observes.

Dubet (1994) argues that there is a dissociation between the subjectivity of individuals and the objectivity of the social system, which implies a shift in the way the social movements are understood. These movements are no longer explained primarily by the laws of history or structural contradictions, but rather are analysed in terms of individuals' conscious strategies, instead of mere reproduction of fixed social roles. In this context, the author presents the concept of social experience, defined as "[...] the individual and collective behaviors shaped by the diversity of concepts and by these individuals' actions, who need to construct the meaning of their practices within this very heterogeneity" (Dubet, 1994, p. 15).

Notes on High School and Youth

According to Bourdieu (1983), youth is nothing but a word. The sociologist discusses the relevance of historical and social relativization of this moment of life, emphasizing that the concept must be understood in its relational aspect, within the context of different social groups, societies and age classes. In this sense, we understand youth as a sociological category — that is, as a historical, social, cultural and relational construct, that acquires diverse

⁷ Each Discussion Circles began with a brief welcoming message, thanking students for being there and repeating the objectives of the research. Some orientation was also given regarding the dynamics of the meetings, emphasizing that the importance of speaking one at a time, showing respect for, in order to ensure a fluid and polite conversation. We yet ask for the consent to record the discussions, ensuring confidentiality of the shared information, thus clarifying all about the ethical usage of the recordings.

meanings depending on the historical context, going beyond a merely biological and demographic framework. In addition, we support the idea of “youths”, in the plural, given its ethnic, gender, social, geographic dimensions that shape this stage of life (Abramo, 2005; Carrano, 2000; Frigotto, 2009).

We cannot lose sight of the idea that, beyond the diversity that composes this group, the youths are shaped by multiple forms of diversity. Margulis (2001) provides important thoughts about how social inequalities impact youth sociability. The researcher proposes that youth can be understood as a period of “social moratorium”, in which individuals can live with some freedom from concerns and exemption from responsibilities, once their needs are provided by their families. This period on youth life is socially validated as a moment dedicated to studies and capacitation, postponing their insertion on work life. However, in a substantially inequal scenario, like Brazil’s, where young individuals are forced to begin working sooner, it is not possible for youth of more popular social classes to have the privilege of living “social moratorium”.

Beyond the social and cultural aspects that shape juvenile lives, the construction of their identities and their experiences are intrinsically attached to the institutions that they are part of, such as the school, which is fundamentally important. Thus, it is essential to reflect on the schools’ role in the lives of youths, once it is through this institution that most of them gain access to systematized knowledge, as well as it is in a school that the socialization among both similar and diverse peers happens.

Secondary education is the most strategic school stage in the educational system and in the democratization and modernization of a country, as highlighted by Nosella (2015), as it has the possibility of contributing to social mobility by introducing young people from the popular classes into more favorable working conditions, potentially leading them to occupy the middle layers of the social structure. Ferreira (2011) argues that secondary education, as an effectively integral stage of basic education, is committed to composing a broad and complex training framework in accordance with the diversities, differences and inequalities that constitute the history of young people inserted in post-industrial society. Therefore, the relevance that the State offers to this stage of basic education is closely linked to the conception of national hegemony and the school system. Therefore, secondary education is the stage of basic education that has the greatest challenges to be faced, such as access and retention; disputes surrounding its identity and purpose; social quality, among others. Although there was a significant increase in secondary school enrollment from the 1990s onwards, since the beginning of the 21st century, there has been a growing drop in enrollment

when there are still many young people aged 15 to 17 out of school and people aged 18 to 24 who have not completed basic education (Ferreira, 2017).

According to Basic Education Census (2023), 7.7 million enrollments were registered in high school, showing a 2,4% decreased compared to the previous year. The School Census data reveals that, in 2023, the dropout rate in Brazil, was 5,9%, while the failure rate was 3,9%. Besides that, same year data shows that nearly 9 million young individuals aged 18 to 29 years old had not finished basic education. Focusing on Espírito Santo, it is estimated that 12.583 young individuals aged 15 to 17 years old were out of school in 2021, while 20.586 were both working and studying. This represents around 11,5% of all people at this age in Espírito Santo (PNAD-C).

Moreover, a total of 163.752 (18,7%) people aged 15 to 29 years old were neither working nor studying in the third semester of 2023, in Espírito Santo. Among people who weren't working or studying, but were looking for a job, 10.854 were aged 15 to 19 years old. As for those who were neither studying, nor working, nor looking for a job, 22.070 were aged 15 to 19 years. These information light up a problematic and challenging phenomena, both for the country and the state of Espírito Santo itself: the expressive number of young individuals who belong to the third group, the ones who do not study, work or even look for a job.

Several researchers (Ferreti e Silva, 2017; Motta e Frigotto, 2017; Silva, 2022; Ferreira, 2017, 2023) have focused their studies on educational policies concerning High School, and they have found that this stage is an arena of disputes regarding either the curriculum or the political-pedagogical project. These disputes reflect diverged, and many times, antagonistic views of society, which ultimately enhance the distance of youth of more popular social classes from its right to education.

The discourse that high school is a stage marked by numerous shortcomings and is not attractive for young students — primarily due to the overload of subjects and the rigid curriculum — led to various reforms throughout 20th century, and early 21st century (Krawczyk e Silva, 2023). These reforms, however, offered simplistic solutions to structural and complex problems, and thus do not effectively contribute to mitigating the challenges concerning the last stage of basic education.

Law nº13.415/2017 proposes a reform focused on curricular restructuring and does not present ideas for improving the teachers' working conditions or even the physical infrastructure of schools. Ferreira (2023) highlights that, historically, the Brazilian reforms targeting high school have shown this tendency to focus on the curriculum. On the researchers' analysis, the characteristic of the reform shows a policy of shifting responsibility onto teachers and students for success or failure, thereby revealing the superficial nature of the reforms.

The meanings of High School for the youth in the research sample

The school must be understood as a sociocultural space, composed by historical subjects, that is, men and women, workers, students and teachers, black people, adults and young ones, with different gender identities. In society as a whole, there is a biased tendency to reduce those who attend school to the category of “student” status, leading to a homogenization that does not consider extracurricular experiences and the life histories of young people, neglecting the full range of human dimension that constitute a subjectivity. From this perspective, Dayrell (2001, p. 139) points out that “the homogenization of subjects as students corresponds to the homogenization of the schooling institution, understood as universal”.

Such a perspective, in turn, contributes to making the school a place that lacks meaning and appeal for the subjects who attend it, which is one of the main arguments to justify the reform. In contrast with these arguments, the data of the research, analysed in this text, highlights that, although students criticize school, the institution is actually considered attractive by them. One of the main functions attributed to the school, according to the interviewed students, is the sociability, that is, the school as a place of diversity, where people meet, friendships are built, etc. So, we have noticed that the subjects do not establish a mere instrumental relationship with the school, as the following words express:

School is kind of everything to me, I like it so much, I adore it, what's the school's problem? It is so cool, you have friends, you got food, sometimes it's hot, sometimes it's cold, there are books [...] at school you learn to read, do you even realize what it means to be able to read? [...] (Young Girl Student, 2nd year).

Yeah, sometimes it really looks like we want to graduate to be able to work, to go to college, when we are actually here to socialize, people arrange barbecues, parties [...] (Young Girl Student, 2nd year).

What does school represent to my life? Well, diversity, I really like meeting people, you know, getting to know each one's way, discovering new stuff, learning more so I can bring it to myself. It is a new experience when you enter high school. You get to know a lot of people, new stuff [...] (Young Girl Student, 1st year).

The reports above reveal that the school is a fundamental place for youth socialization, and it contributes to the building process of their juvenile identity, besides it leads to the construction of individual and collective life projects. In fact, the youth is a meaningful phase

for the construction of identities, the sense of belonging and the elaboration of social and individual biographies. The following words from other students elucidate how high school is a meaningful moment in their lives:

I guess we could skip elementary school and go direct to high school, the elementary one isn't worth anything. There, I arrived shy and still left shy, different from here [...] and during elementary school, you don't have these cool disciplines, expect from war (laugh) [...] (Young Boy Student, 2nd year).

Well, for me, I think I had a bad experience in elementary school, it was in a bad school, there were lots of bullying, while in high school you get to discover that the school isn't that prison you imagined [...] you realize that you can have friends, not only the students, but also the teachers (Young Boy Student, 2nd year).

Our growth as a person and as a student. As the funniest teachers are used to say, we arrive here immature, playful, and we are not ready to aim something for real. Here we learn how to cope with it, through the works we develop, the exams and we even learn how to cope with other people (Young Boy Student, 3rd year).

The discussion circles revealed a consensus among student that the school contributes to their humanistic, critical, and civic education. For them, High School is a stage that allows living with a wide diversity of people and ideas. Furthermore, they say that dealing with diversity in the school space helps them learn how to respect different opinions and the differences between themselves.

One of the historical debates surrounding High Schools concerns its social function and the lack of consensus regarding its identity. This is due to the fact that, while the final stage of basic education aims to prepare students for the labor market, it's also expected to ensure their readiness for higher education, assuming both a general and vocational preparatory role. However, instead of following a merely utilitarian logic, that is, the idea of school as a way of acquiring diplomas or preparing for the labor market, most of the students in the research sample see High School as important due to the critical education this stage provides:

I guess, beyond preparing for a profession, high school teaches different thinking. If I hadn't attended to high school, with the very traditional family I have, I wouldn't have had the thought I have nowadays, I would be almost like them. High School changed me; it helped me learn things. Studying provides critical thinking, you don't become just another one, we differ from the commonsense society (Young Girl Student, 3rd year).

[...] I guess that's the problem. I actually think that the curriculum, in most parts, is not connected to students 'daily experiences. For example, I think, even if I'm more related to the exact sciences, we shouldn't have the number of math classes we have, because I believe it would be more worth it if we had sociology, philosophy and other human sciences

classes, since it would help us discuss society. I guess as citizens we would benefit more from certain areas. For instance, in some chemistry classes, we don't see any application in real life for what we learn. I think the curriculum should reflect so that education does not become just another expression of social monotony.

A person shouldn't study only for ensuring a secure financial future, but also for building up as a person, as a citizen (Young Boy Student, 3rd year).

I believe it contributes for the current stages of one's life development. Studying isn't only about going to school and learning, it also includes forming social bonds, and fitting into society, discovering yourself, and having a circle of friends (Young Girl Student, 2nd year).

Although most of the young participants presented a positive perspective of their school experiences, a few of them criticized the topics studied at school and emphasized that the ideal school would be the one where they can choose the subjects, as they say:

And the ideal school for me would be the one where people could study more about what they really want to do, about the subjects they truly want to study in college; a place where people could learn about it more deeply, with more dynamic classes, with the drama, music, literature. Just like "Escola Viva's" full-time model, I guess that is a good idea, except it should not be mandatory (Young Girl Student, 2nd year).

And I also agree with him about the student council and about being allowed to choose the subject you study, because there are some subject you are just not related to, but you are to do it (Young Girl Student, 1st year).

Some young students also criticized school due to the absence of attentive listening. by some of the school actors:

Sometimes we have problems with a teacher, or even many other things, but they listen and say: "ok, we are going to do something about it". Then, you leave their room, and it appears all those stuffs we said haven't happened, because they pretend nothing has happened (Young Girl Student, 3rd year).

I think that in this school we don't have a voice because we live like it's a dictatorship; everything we want to do, everything that happens, all of it must pass by the coordination, by the principal, it's a DIP^s censorship (Young Boy Student, 3rd year)

These reports reveal that the students have been through distinct experiences within that high school environment, reflecting both their individual constructions, and the collective process in which they are involved. As signed by Dubet (1994), although the social experiences are lived in a unique way by each individual, they are shaped by

^s The interviewed student refers to the Propaganda and Press Department (in Portuguese, Departamento de Imprensa e Propaganda/ "DIP"), which was an institution created in Vargas Era, particularly in 1939, during the New State scenario (1937-1945). Its main function was to control and censor the media, as well as to disseminate the ideology of Getúlio Vargas's Government.

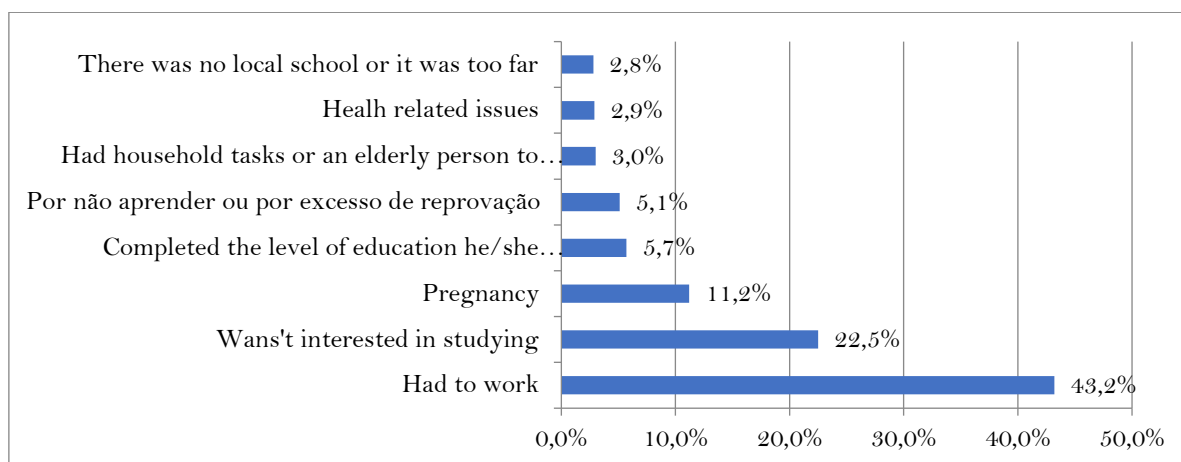
collective contexts, which establish common paths — such as the ones found in school life, factory works, and other collective environments. Thus, the social experiences result from the interaction between collective conditions of production and the individual interpretations of each person.

That is, the school is the space of the contradiction, where diverse actors have their own unique experiences, but this does not undermine the importance of this institutions for youth's education and socialization. What stands out it the value given to high school as a key to youth socialization and to the access to critical and systematized knowledge, which can lead to generational and familiar cultural heritage ruptures. This is an important dimension that our data present: the relevance of high school in the lives of this public school's youth, that can be considered just one case among many other across the educational reality of the country.

In this sense, when a reform affects high school assuming that its problem is that this stage does not attract young students, it needs to be critically assessed and interrogated about its real intentionality. There is evidence, such as the ones shown here, that this argument cannot be generalized, because different experiences happen in the school context, from person to person, and it is crucial to investigate if we really want to build educational policies that promote the status of an emancipated person to our students, in both cognitive and political aspects.

With that in mind, there are lots of reasons why young people drop out of school. The 2023 National School Census listed the reasons why young people aged 19 to 29 years old, who are out of school and did not conclude basic education, dropped out of a school (see Graph 1). Considering these factors, we noticed that the option “had to work”, followed by “was not interested in studying” are the ones with the highest percentage rates, which leads to two hypothesis: 1) the well-known precarious social condition of our youth compels them to prioritize work over school; 2) the precarious nature of available jobs, which limit social mobility, consequently, diminishes interest in having a high school diploma.

Graph 1- Reasons why students dropped out of school



Source: 2023 National School Census - Made by the authors

The New High School program and its real intentionality

The dominant discourse used by the advocates of the reform, whether by the media, government official or a certain part of academic community, is the idea that in the new reform students would be allowed to choose which subjects they want to take. The flexibilization logic has been “the keyword to this reform”, as noticed by Ferreti and Krawczyk (2017). However, many studies have shown the major misconception related to the ideas of being possible for the students to choose the educational pathways (Vianna, 2021; Ferreira, 2023; Krawczyk e Silva, 2023). These choices will always depend on whether each educational system has the capacity to offer these pathways. The legislation clarifies that the educational pathways will only be offered if the school have the necessary material and human resources of schools. Ferreti (2018, p. 29) elucidates: “The curricular arrangements are to be determined by each particular federative entity, not by the students”.

Moreover, there is an aggravation on the offering conditions of high school in the country’s educational system. Data published by Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics show that, in 2022, out of the 5.668 Brazilian municipalities, 2.661 had only one school offering High School programs. This way, it is even more evident that the students will not have much of a choice.

In the view of the subjects in the research sample, studying is, with no doubts, crucial to the future. Therefore, responses point out that studying is not only valued as a “promise to a better future”. In their perception, the acquired knowledge make sense in the current stage of their lives. Such is the school’s relevance. If we relate this future-oriented perspective with the proposal embedded in the reform (Law nº13.415/2017), particularly in the curricular

component “Life Project”, certain dissonances become obvious. The curricular component presents as its objective to promote students’ protagonism in the construction of their personal and professional life plans, something closed to the problematic notion of youth as a preparatory stage for adulthood, a “becoming”, while omitting or neglecting the objective conditions of social reality, on behalf of acquiring individual socioemotional resources, as a means of anchoring a successful future.

The curricular component “Life Project”, in contrast to the perception of the youth in our research, was created to reinforce an individualistic logic, emphasizing personal responsibility and a competitive spirit as a strategy for dealing with the uncertainties from contemporary society (Ferreira, 2022). We recognize that everyone should have a life project and that school plays an important role in this construction. However, it is essential that the school education be based on critical social and historical analysis, produced by scientific knowledge. Only then we can avoid a cruel and distorted usage of the meritocracy discourse. In addition, Silva (2023) points out a process of curricular impoverishment, for which Life Project is a direct responsible:

The majority speaks of a despise for the discipline or of its insignificance in the school education. This same majority resents for the reduction of the number of subjects, such as sociology, philosophy, arts, physical education, and are afraid of ENEM results [...] a minor group of youth in our research believe that the curricular component life project helps them better understand and plan their future (p. 82, 83).

This conception undermines the cultural function of school due to the fundament of the utilitarian ideology itself, which rejects any form of culture not justified by its utility, return or efficiency. Laval (2004, p. 295) argues that neoliberal school “[...] deeply denies the cultural function of school. [...] the imposition of the values of utility and efficiency destroys not only the old school model, but also its anthropological and historical function”.

We noticed that the principles postulated, either implicitly or explicitly, in the Life Project curricular component stand in contrast to statements of the young participants in our research, who demonstrate the importance of school as a place for sociability, peer interaction, and where collectiveness is promoted, instead of a utilitarian, instrumental and individualist perspective of school, based on market principles. When we understand “Life Project” in a broader sense, that is, considering life in its ontological dimension, not limited to employability or socioemotional training, it becomes possible to argue that the school, even before the inclusion of this subject under the New High School reform, already played an important role in shaping students’ life projects based on humanistic principles.

Another intention of the high school reform, as pointed out by other researchers (Ferreira, 2023; Sandri, 2017), is the dismantling of the teaching profession. With the reduction of the traditional subjects and the introduction of curricular components such as “Life Project” and electives, teachers are being required to work with contents that lie outside their area of training, while also facing an intensification of their workload, once they must take on a greater number of subjects, while, in turn, the time for lesson planning has been reduced. Furthermore, the law allows for the hiring of professionals recognized for their “notorious knowledge” to teach in the fifth educational pathways, the professional qualification. We understand all these measures as part of a medium-term strategy to strip the teaching profession of the knowledge acquired through higher education.

The given scenario contributes to the deprofessionalization of teaching career, and highlights the mismatch between educators’ qualification and the real conditions of the job, intensifying the precarization of the profession, that, as Nepomuceno (2022, p. 262) says, entails “new demands that will require new ways of managing the school work, stimulating a bureaucratic escalation of pressures, expectations and control over these workers, thereby increasing teacher’s burden”.

Finally, the reform reveals a clear intention to establish High School as a market niche, allowing the development of different partnerships with the private sector, or even the privatization of public schools, as has been observed in the states of Paraná and São Paulo (Barbora and Souza, 2019; Barbosa and Alves, 2023).

Final thoughts

We begin the final considerations of this texts with a lyric from a song by Brazilian band Charlie Brown Jr., that says “youth in Brazil are never taken seriously” to emphasize that truly listening to what young people think and aspire to is important to plan a qualified and socially referenced Brazilian High School. Listening and engaging in dialogue with the youth are valuable pathways towards the construction of a truly more meaningful High School.

In a context where the neoliberal logic of capital expands itself into all social relations and aspects of life (Dardot and Laval, 2016), what is ultimately at stake is “the form of our existence”, that is, the production of new forms of subjectivities. We argue that the school plays a privileged role in the construction of new ways and forms of existence, and of social relations that go “beyond-capital”, as taught by philosopher Mészáros (2005). Believing that the school plays a fundamental role in reducing educational inequalities, as a space for the

dissemination of knowledge, we consider it crucial to systematically debate and challenge education policies, given their significance in the wider contexts of social transformation.

Despite the limitations of a Case Study, the statement recorded in this text offer relevant reflections about the meaning of High School for the youth. The data analysed reveal that the school, in the students' perceptions, is considered a place that promotes critical, reflexive, humanist education, besides being a fundamental *locus* for sociability and for meeting with diversity. In contrast to this view, captured in 2016, the current High School reform implements curricular components such as Life Project, that prioritizes psychologizing aspects, like other components from the educational pathways, that reduce scientific knowledge to superficial, instrumental, and utilitarian content. Moreover, values such as individual competition and entrepreneurship are now considered foundational for the students' education. This pedagogical approach, if extended across the entire High School, will distance the school from its essential social role.

It is interesting that, predominantly, the conducted interviews affirm the opposite of one of the main discourses used to justify the reform necessity: the idea that High School is not attractive to young students. Such perspective evidence that the relation between youth and High School is complex, and it is fundamental to have a view that takes into consideration the broadness of this phenomenon, especially in a digital society, in which the school plays an increasingly less central, yet not less relevant, role in our students' lives.

In addition, a view generally associated with youth is one of apathy toward political participation, considering this segment of the population as alienated and uninterested (Spósito, 1997; Dayrell, 2003, 2007; Abad, 2004). What we have seen, however, is an intense mobilization of students demanding revocation of the New High School reform, not to mention the historic students' protests and school occupations that happened across the country in 2016, in response to the Executive Order that would later become Law nº 12.415. Since 2016, the students were already aware of the disaster the reform would be. In this sense, youth have never been mere "masses to be manipulated" as claimed by the business interests behind the reform, but rather thinking subjects who engaged in collective action driven by a clear diagnosis of the reform's harmful effects, as emphasized in a report by *Le Monde Diplomatique*⁹.

Finally, for the education policies aimed to High School to move forward, particularly with a perspective of reducing the educational and social inequalities, which are fundamental conditions for ensuring the right to education, it is crucial to acknowledge the young individuals as subject of rights, and not only subjects under

⁹ Available in: <https://diplomatie.org.br/em-2016-os-estudantes-ja-sabiam-o-desastre-que-seria/>. Access in June 2024.

formation. The political-pedagogical project of High School must recognize youth in all their diversity and in their social and cultural conditions, shaped by intersecting inequalities related to gender, race, social class, generation, among others. Above all, the pedagogical project for youth must be aligned with a broader political project of a sovereign nation committed to overcoming inequalities.

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