

Articles

Knowledge and evaluative perception of high school students about the Quota Law

Conhecimento e percepção valorativa de estudantes do ensino médio sobre a Lei de Cotas

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Abstract

This article examines the level of knowledge and value perceptions of public high school students regarding Brazil's Affirmative Action Law (Law nº 12.711/2012, amended by Law nº 14.723/2023). The study draws on original survey data collected from 333 third-year high school students in three schools located in the eastern zone of São Paulo. The instrument included true/false items to measure respondents' knowledge, as well as four-point Likert scale statements to capture their evaluative perceptions of the policy. Results show a high degree of misinformation on key questions related to eligibility criteria, alongside better performance on more general aspects of the law. In terms of perceptions, Black and Brown students exhibit stronger endorsement of the law's normative-justificatory dimension, while White students are more likely to associate it with potential negative effects. The study contributes to debates on policy implementation by highlighting how informational asymmetries and value biases shape users' recognition and engagement.

Keywords: Affirmative action law; Affirmative action; High school; Public policy; Knowledge; Value perceptions.

Resumo

Este artigo analisa o grau de conhecimento e as percepções valorativas de estudantes do ensino médio público sobre a Lei de Cotas brasileira (Lei nº 12.711/2012, alterada pela Lei nº 14.723/2023). A pesquisa mobiliza dados originais de *survey* com 333 alunos da 3ª série do ensino médio em três escolas da zona leste de São Paulo. O instrumento incluiu itens de verdadeiro/falso, destinados a mensurar o nível de informação dos respondentes, e sentenças em escala Likert de quatro pontos, voltadas à análise de suas percepções valorativas. Os resultados revelam alto desconhecimento em questões centrais sobre critérios de elegibilidade, mas melhor desempenho em itens de caráter geral. No plano das percepções, pretos e pardos demonstram maior adesão à dimensão normativa-justificatória da política, enquanto brancos tendem a associá-la mais fortemente a potenciais efeitos negativos. O estudo contribui ao debate sobre implementação, ressaltando os impactos da assimetria informacional e do viés valorativo na adesão dos usuários.

Palavras-chave: Lei de Cotas; Ações afirmativas; Ensino médio; Políticas públicas; Conhecimento; Percepções valorativas.

INTRODUCTION

Law No. 12.711/2012, also known as the *Quota Law*, is a public policy designed to promote affirmative action. It emerged from a long and conflictive process of political mobilization, mainly led by Black movements and other social groups seeking equity in access to higher education in Brazil. In 2023, the law underwent revision and updating with the enactment of Law No. 14.723/2023.

Affirmative action policies with an ethnic-racial focus have been implemented worldwide since the 1960s, with substantial expansion from the 1990s onward. During this period, various

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studies sought to understand the diversity of models adopted, the critical elements of their implementation processes, and the impacts of such programs across different socioeconomic and cultural contexts (Arcidiacono; Lovenheim, 2016; Heringer, 2024).

Regarding models adopted in different countries and their implementation processes, research indicates that the combination of socioeconomic and ethnic-racial criteria is more equitable than the use of exclusively ethnic-racial criteria (Bleemer, 2023). Studies also highlight challenges related to aligning the democratization potential of higher education access for quota students with the limited availability of slots in high-demand and prestigious programs such as engineering, medicine, and law (Cooper et al., 2022; Black; Denning; Rothstein, 2020; Arcidiacono; Lovenheim, 2016). Furthermore, additional barriers arise after students enter higher education, which must be considered as critical factors for program success, such as student retention support, academic leveling strategies, and measures to recover learning gaps among quota students (Bagde; Epple; Taylor, 2016).

Research also shows that the effects of affirmative action policies go beyond access, influencing academic trajectories and professional prospects. Studies conducted in Brazil indicate that quota students achieve equivalent or even higher retention rates compared to their non-quota peers, including in highly selective programs such as medicine (Valente et al., 2022). In addition, long-term analyses suggest that participation in affirmative action programs can yield significant gains in social mobility, reflected in better salaries and greater access to prestigious occupations, as evidenced in both Brazilian and U.S. cases (Francis; Tannuri-Pianto, 2012; Bleemer, 2023).

Despite these advances, the literature also identifies potential limits and adverse effects that deserve attention. Some studies document strategic self-declaration of racial identity in response to eligibility criteria (Francis & Tannuri-Pianto, 2012), as well as possible spillover effects on non-quota peers in highly competitive contexts (Menezes-Filho; Monte; Vaz, 2023). In parallel, analyses of Latin American experiences, such as Chile's PACE program, show that democratizing access only translates into retention and academic success when combined with complementary pedagogical and financial support policies (Cooper et al., 2022). Thus, the accumulated evidence reinforces the importance of understanding the design and implementation of affirmative action programs in articulation with institutional support conditions, avoiding both uncritical idealization and the disregard of their proven positive impacts.

The literature on public policy implementation frequently highlights the central relevance of bureaucratic discretion, especially at street-level and middle management, as a key factor shaping effective outcomes. In a seminal study, Lipsky (1980) demonstrated how front-line public servants, through their technical knowledge and personal values, interpret policy norms and organize their behavior in daily interactions with users, thereby producing consistent effects on the success or failure of public policies.

In the Brazilian context, studies such as Gomide, Machado and Lins (2022) reveal that variations in bureaucratic capacity (perceptions of autonomy, organizational culture, and adherence to Weberian standards) are associated with levels of institutional innovation and effectiveness. Increasingly, research has also explored how the knowledge, values, and beliefs of public servants influence policy implementation. For example, Santos and Pereira (2022) and Santos (2022) demonstrated that school principals' levels of knowledge and evaluative perceptions decisively shape their decisions regarding the implementation of the National Policy on Special Education from an inclusive education perspective.

However, when it comes to understanding how the level of knowledge and evaluative perceptions of users (or beneficiaries) shape policy implementation and outcomes, research remains scarce. Nevertheless, a small (but growing) body of studies within the field of Behavioral Public Administration has shown that cognitive biases and the subjective evaluation of policy beneficiaries affect their willingness to participate and engage in public programs designed for them (Jilke; Van Ryzin, 2016; Blake; Moynihan, 2020, among others).

In dialogue with this field of study, and with the goal of contributing to the expansion of the research agenda on race-based affirmative action, this article presents findings from an investigation conducted with high school students. The study examines their level of

knowledge and evaluative perceptions regarding the affirmative action policy established by Brazil's *Quota Law*.

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Building a fair provision of higher education involves dealing with deep normative tensions between different conceptions of justice. The meritocratic logic holds that access should be regulated by academic performance, understood as an expression of individual talent and effort. However, as Rawls (1997) observes, justice as fairness requires that social inequalities be corrected in ways that benefit the least privileged, so that merit does not become a privilege masked by unequal opportunities. Thus, corrective policies such as affirmative action can be seen not as deviations from meritocracy, but as instruments that make it socially legitimate and compatible with principles of distributive justice.

Contemporary reflection has expanded this debate by introducing other normative dimensions. Nancy Fraser (2003) argues that justice simultaneously requires redistribution and recognition: in higher education, this means both expanding access for socioeconomically vulnerable groups and valuing historically marginalized identities. Axel Honneth (2009) reinforces the centrality of the struggle for recognition as a condition for self-respect and social integration, reminding us that access to university is not only a path to economic mobility but also a process of symbolic dignification. Dubet (2008, 2015), in turn, warns that the educational system operates under contradictory logics, merit, equality, and equity, which, in higher education, enter into explicit tension, as the selectivity and prestige hierarchy of institutions coexist with the promise of democratization.

Recent empirical research confirms that belief in meritocracy can both legitimize and reproduce inequalities. Batruch, Autin and Butera (2023) show that individuals who strongly believe in school meritocracy tend to perceive social inequalities as less unjust and to support redistributive policies to a lesser extent. Similarly, Mijs (2023) demonstrates that young people, when socialized in homogeneous school environments, develop distorted perceptions of inequality, which weakens the acceptance of equity measures. Moriguchi, Narita and Tanaka (2024), analyzing educational reforms in Japan, reveal a structural trade-off: the centrality of meritocracy expanded elite formation but restricted access for students from rural backgrounds.

Other studies draw attention to the need to critically reassess the foundations of merit. Dzimbiri (2023) argues that meritocracy, when proclaimed as a response to social injustice, often fails to produce equitable outcomes in higher education. Taylor and Shallish (2019) proposes the notion of "bio-meritocracy" to problematize how categories such as race and physical ability shape conceptions of merit and end up reproducing historical exclusions. Alon (2015), in a comparative perspective, shows that meritocratic admission criteria have been transformed by diversity and inclusion pressures, so that the very notion of merit has become a subject of political and academic dispute.

Brazil has structured legislation and a set of public policy instruments to establish affirmative action in higher education admissions systems and complementary programs focused on vulnerable populations, designed to support the academic persistence and success of beneficiary students. Within the scope of this article, the aim is not to analyze the specific design, implementation process, or possible results of this institutional arrangement. Rather, the proposal is an epistemological investment of a different nature: to analyze what beneficiaries of these affirmative actions (public high school students) know and how they subjectively evaluate this public policy.

Investigating the level of knowledge and the evaluative perception of the beneficiaries of the quota policy is relevant because studies in behavioral public policy analysis have shown that citizens' willingness to adhere to and participate in governmental programs and actions initially designed to secure their rights varies significantly. Such variation is associated with cognitive biases, systems of social representation, and the values and beliefs these citizens hold regarding the ethical foundations, procedures, or prerequisites required for policy eligibility (Herd; Moynihan, 2018; Jilke; Van Ryzin, 2016, 2016).

To achieve this objective, a literature review was first conducted using the Brazilian Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations (BDTD) and the Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO). By mobilizing different pairs of search terms to identify articles, dissertations, or theses addressing high school students' level of knowledge or evaluative perception regarding the quota policy, no results were found. Only one study, conducted in 2003, showed proximity to the topic of this investigation; however, the population analyzed consisted of students enrolled in a university preparatory course, and the research period preceded the enactment of the Quota Law.

In the second stage of the investigation, a structured, self-administered questionnaire was developed. The target population was defined as students enrolled in the third year of high school, as they must make two key decisions: (1) whether or not to participate in the selection processes for higher education admission, and (2) whether or not to use the benefits provided by the Quota Law as strategies for equalizing opportunities through affirmative action (reserved seats).

After validation of the instrument, the research was conducted in three high schools located in the eastern region of São Paulo, in the districts of Guaianases and Cidade Tiradentes, under the jurisdiction of the State Department of Education. The schools were selected and contacted for being located in areas of social vulnerability. To protect the anonymity of schools and students, the participating schools will be referred to as School A, School B, and School C. Since the research focused on a sample of third-year high school students, 117 young people were reached at School A (90.7% of those enrolled), 95 at School B (83.33%), and 121 at School C (88.97%). Overall, 333 young people were reached out of a total of 379 enrolled students (87.86%).

It is important to note that all enrolled students were invited to complete the questionnaire that structured the survey. The final response rates varied only due to students' absence on the day of data collection.

The process of constructing the questionnaire followed the recommendations indicated by Babbie (1999) and Fowler Junior (2011). First, it was necessary to explore the research themes and guiding questions with a sample of individuals from the target population. Based on school recommendations, virtual interviews were conducted with 13 third-year high school students between June and July 2023. The goal was to gather perceptions and knowledge about the Quota Law and to develop the preliminary version of the questionnaire. In August 2023, the same students were invited to participate in a pretest of the instrument, and 11 of them took part, who identified difficulties in some questions. Based on their feedback, the questionnaire was refined.

The survey was administered in October 2023, and data collection was completed in November. In the first quarter of 2024, responses were tabulated in electronic spreadsheets for analysis, according to the defined question blocks. The questionnaire was organized into four sections: (a) respondents' sociodemographic profiles; (b) students' evaluative perceptions of the provisions of the Quota Law; (c) students' knowledge of the provisions of the Quota Law; and (d) ways of accessing information about the Quota Law.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic profile of respondents

To collect the students' sociodemographic profile, eight questions were established. Five of them are described in the Table 1. The other three questions addressed the mother's educational level, the father's educational level, and the student's living arrangement (lives alone; lives only with parents and siblings; lives with extended family; lives with spouse/partner).

It is worth noting that the use of a per capita income scale different from the standards established by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) or similar research was a decision made after the pre-test phase. During this stage, it became evident that the students provided qualitative information about household income patterns. We assessed that using the IBGE's

Table 1. First Block of Questions.

QUESTION	ANSWER CHOICES			
1. What is the name of your school?	A		B	C
2. How old are you? (age range)	15	16	17	18+
3. You are:	Male	Trans man	Female	Trans Women
	Other		Mulher Trans	
4. How do you define your skin color or racial identity?	White	Brown	Black	Yellow
	Indigenous		Other/Prefer not to answer	
5. Considering the total number of people who receive any type of income in your household, and dividing that total by the number of people living there, what would be the per capita income in your family?	Up to R\$ 150		R\$ 151 – R\$ 300	
	R\$ 301 – R\$ 450		R\$ 451 – R\$ 600	
	R\$ 601 – R\$ 750		R\$ 751 – R\$ 900	
	R\$ 901 – R\$ 1,050		Above R\$ 1,050	

Note: In this study, the term *Pardo* (Brown) follows the racial classification adopted by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), referring to individuals of mixed racial background (typically of African, European, and/or Indigenous descent). For simplicity, subsequent mentions use the term *Brown*.

Source: Authors' elaboration.

standardized scale would reduce the ability to describe the socioeconomic distribution of the community studied. Therefore, we proposed this specific scale. Although this choice may limit comparability with other studies, we consider it justified given the particular context of this research.

During data systematization, it was identified that all students' answers regarding per capita income fell within the first six income brackets (up to R\$900). In terms of race, 94.9% of responses were concentrated in the categories white, Black, and Pardo (Brown); the remaining 5.1% were distributed among Indigenous (1.2% = 4 students), Yellow (2.4% = 8 students), and other/prefer not to answer (1.5% = 5 students). Regarding gender identity, cisgender men represented 47.1% of the sample (157 individuals), and cisgender women accounted for 48.6% (162 individuals). Self-declared trans men and trans women corresponded to 1.5% (5 individuals) and 2.7% (9 individuals), respectively.

To deepen the analysis of the sociodemographic profile, the characteristics of race/skin color, gender, and age range were compared with data from the 2023 School Census, considering national, state (São Paulo), and municipal levels (Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais Anísio Teixeira, 2023). For statistical representativeness, and due to the absence of data distinguishing cisgender and transgender identities in the census, the variables race/skin color and gender were simplified to binary categories (Table 2).

When comparing results, the main difference emerged in the race/skin color variable. This is explained by the fact that the research was conducted in a peripheral area of São Paulo, characterized by higher vulnerability levels, which are reflected in the city's socioeconomic and urban segregation patterns. According to the 2022 IBGE Census (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, 2023), in the districts of Cidade Tiradentes, 56.1% of the population identifies as Black or Brown, while in Guaianases this figure reaches 51.5%. In contrast, in wealthier districts such as Jardim Paulista and Moema, the presence of this population is significantly lower (only 8.5% and 5.8%, respectively).

Finally, regarding parental education levels, 61% of students reported that their mothers had completed high school, 12% were attending or had attended higher education without completion, and 9% had completed higher education. Fathers' education levels differed: only 48% had completed high school, while 8% were attending or had attended higher education without completion, and 6% had completed higher education.

Evaluative perception of the Quota Policy

To collect data on respondents' evaluative perceptions regarding the affirmative actions established by the Quota Law, the second section of the questionnaire consisted of ten

Table 2. Comparison between 2023 Census data and research sample.

	Brazil	State of São Paulo	Municipality of São Paulo	3rd Year – Municipality of São Paulo	Sample: three schools in the East Zone
Total enrollments	6,690,396	1,564,118	365,137	87,616	333
Female	50.7%	49.4%	49.9%	48.6%	48.6%
Male	49.3%	50.6%	50.1%	51.4%	47.1%
White	41.1%	66.4%	57.1%	60.4%	28.2%
Black/Brown	57.3%	33.0%	42.1%	38.7%	66.7%
Other/Not declared	21.4%	17.7%	23.6%	22.5%	5.1%
Ages 15-17	83.5%	90.1%	87.3%	71.6%	61.8%
18 or older	14.6%	9%	12.4%	28.4%	38.1%

Source: Authors' elaboration, based on collected data.

statements. For each statement, students were asked to indicate their level of agreement using a four-point Likert-type scale: (1) strongly disagree; (2) somewhat disagree; (3) somewhat agree; (4) strongly agree. The students' responses were systematized considering the overall distribution (without sociodemographic stratification), distribution by race/skin color group, distribution by gender, distribution by age range, and distribution by per capita income cluster. Inferential analysis of the stratified data was performed using association tests (chi-square and independence tests). The results indicated that only the race/skin color variable showed statistically significant differences ($p < 0.05$), whereas gender, race, and income did not reveal robust associations with perceptions of the policy. The results of both the overall distribution and the racial group distribution are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Frequency of Responses to the First Block of Questions.

Evaluative perceptions of the Quota Law	Total frequency distribution	Race/Skin Color (n=333)			
		White	Brown	Black	Other
	N=333 (%)	n=94 (%)	n=153 (%)	n=69 (%)	n=17 (%)
Q1. I know a lot about the quotas for admission to higher education					
Strongly disagree	103 (30.9)	32 (34.0)	46 (30.1)	20 (29.0)	5 (29.4)
Somewhat disagree	125 (37.5)	37 (39.4)	56 (36.6)	26 (37.7)	6 (35.3)
Somewhat agree	68 (20.4)	15 (16.0)	38 (24.8)	11 (15.9)	4 (23.5)
Strongly Agree	37 (11.1)	10 (10.6)	13 (8.5)	12 (17.4)	2 (11.8)
Q2. Quotas for admission to higher education are important because they are fair					
Strongly disagree	60 (18.0)	41 (43.6)	13 (8.5)	2 (2.9)	4 (23.5)
Somewhat disagree	63 (18.9)	28 (29.8)	30 (19.6)	2 (2.9)	3 (17.6)
Somewhat agree	80 (24.0)	15 (16.0)	54 (35.3)	8 (11.6)	3 (17.6)
Strongly Agree	130 (39.0)	10 (10.6)	56 (36.6)	57 (82.6)	7 (41.2)

Source: Authors' elaboration, based on collected data.

Table 3. Continued...

Evaluative perceptions of the Quota Law	Total frequency distribution	Race/Skin Color (n=333)			
		White	Brown	Black	Other
	N=333 (%)	n=94 (%)	n=153 (%)	n=69 (%)	n=17 (%)
Q3. Quotas for admission to higher education create a racial division that does not exist					
Strongly disagree	182 (54.7)	38 (40.4)	91 (59.5)	43 (62.3)	10 (58.8)
Somewhat disagree	56 (16.8)	7 (7.4)	34 (22.2)	11 (15.9)	4 (23.5)
Somewhat agree	45 (13.5)	22 (23.4)	10 (6.5)	11 (15.9)	2 (11.8)
Strongly Agree	50 (15.0)	27 (28.7)	18 (11.8)	4 (5.8)	1 (5.9)
Q4. Quotas for admission to higher education help fight racism					
Strongly disagree	41 (12.3)	26 (27.7)	11 (7.2)	1 (1.4)	3 (17.6)
Somewhat disagree	62 (18.6)	25 (26.6)	22 (14.4)	11 (15.9)	4 (23.5)
Somewhat agree	63 (18.9)	18 (19.1)	33 (21.6)	10 (14.5)	2 (11.8)
Strongly Agree	167 (50.2)	25 (26.6)	87 (56.9)	47 (68.1)	8 (47.1)
Q5. Quotas for admission to higher education harm white people					
Strongly disagree	175 (52.6)	24 (25.5)	89 (58.2)	52 (75.4)	10 (58.8)
Somewhat disagree	40 (12.0)	13 (13.8)	18 (11.8)	8 (11.6)	1 (5.9)
Somewhat agree	42 (12.6)	18 (19.1)	19 (12.4)	3 (4.3)	2 (11.8)
Strongly Agree	76 (22.8)	39 (41.5)	27 (17.6)	6 (8.7)	4 (23.5)
Q6. Quotas for admission to higher education harm poor people who are not Black					
Strongly disagree	117 (35.1)	16 (17.0)	60 (39.2)	34 (49.3)	7 (41.2)
Somewhat disagree	88 (26.4)	21 (22.3)	43 (28.1)	21 (30.4)	3 (17.6)
Somewhat agree	33 (9.9)	10 (10.6)	15 (9.8)	6 (8.7)	2 (11.8)
Strongly Agree	95 (28.5)	47 (50.0)	35 (22.9)	8 (11.6)	5 (29.4)
Q7. Quotas may allow students with lower preparation to enter university					
Strongly disagree	165 (49.5)	28 (29.8)	78 (51.0)	49 (71.0)	10 (58.8)
Somewhat disagree	59 (17.7)	16 (17.0)	32 (20.9)	11 (15.9)	3 (17.6)
Somewhat agree	58 (17.4)	29 (30.9)	24 (15.7)	2 (2.9)	4 (23.5)
Strongly Agree	51 (15.3)	21 (22.3)	19 (12.4)	7 (10.1)	0 (0.0)
Q8. Quotas should not consider the student's race or skin color					
Strongly disagree	149 (44.7)	21 (22.3)	75 (49.0)	45 (65.2)	8 (47.1)
Somewhat disagree	66 (19.8)	19 (20.2)	32 (20.9)	12 (17.4)	3 (17.6)
Somewhat agree	54 (16.2)	23 (24.5)	19 (12.4)	10 (14.5)	2 (11.8)

Source: Authors' elaboration, based on collected data.

Table 3. Continued...

Evaluative perceptions of the Quota Law	Total frequency distribution N=333 (%)	Race/Skin Color (n=333)			
		White n=94 (%)	Brown n=153 (%)	Black n=69 (%)	Other n=17 (%)
Strongly Agree	64 (19.2)	31 (33.0)	27 (17.6)	2 (2.9)	4 (23.5)
Q9. Quotas interfere with the fairness of ENEM (<i>National High School Exam – Brazil</i>) and other university entrance exams					
Strongly disagree	139 (41.7)	21 (22.3)	68 (44.4)	41 (59.4)	9 (52.9)
Somewhat disagree	69 (20.7)	16 (17.0)	37 (24.2)	15 (21.7)	1 (5.9)
Somewhat agree	30 (9.0)	11 (11.7)	12 (7.8)	5 (7.2)	2 (11.8)
Strongly Agree	95 (28.5)	46 (48.9)	36 (23.5)	8 (11.6)	5 (29.4)
Q10. Quotas for admission to higher education should not exist					
Strongly disagree	181 (54.4)	31 (33.0)	91 (59.5)	50 (72.5)	9 (52.9)
Somewhat disagree	45 (13.5)	11 (11.7)	23 (15.0)	8 (11.6)	3 (17.6)
Somewhat agree	36 (10.8)	15 (16.0)	15 (9.8)	5 (7.2)	1 (5.9)
Strongly Agree	71 (21.3)	37 (39.4)	24 (15.7)	6 (8.7)	4 (23.5)

Source: Authors' elaboration, based on collected data.

When detailing the analysis of the ten items, it is worth noting that the statistical significance test showed that the frequency of responses to the first question had a *p*-value of 0.6243. This evidence indicates that the response distributions should not be considered inferential with respect to the selected sample.

Questions 2 and 4, which address the normative-justificatory dimension of the policy, reveal a general pattern of support for the idea that quotas are important because they are fair (Q2) and help combat racism (Q4). Among Black students, 82.6% totally agreed that quotas are important because they are fair, compared to only 10.6% among white students. Similarly, 68.1% of Black students totally agreed that quotas help combat racism, versus 26.6% among white students. In both cases, Brown students occupied an intermediate position (36.6% and 59.6%, respectively). These results suggest a clear cleavage: Black students exhibit markedly higher levels of endorsement of the corrective function of quotas.

Questions 5, 6, and 7 explore perceptions of potential negative effects on certain individuals or groups. Among White students, 41.5% totally agreed that quotas harm White students (Q5), compared to only 17.6% of Brown students and 8.7% of Black students. Additionally, 50% of White students totally agreed that quotas harm poor people who are not Black, compared to 22.9% of Brown students and 11.6% of Black students. Likewise, 22.3% of White students totally agreed that quotas may allow "less prepared" students into the university (Q7), compared to 12.4% of Brown students and 10.1% of Black students.

The feeling of harm may be associated with belonging to a racial group that, under the operational criteria of affirmative action policies, faces relative disadvantage in the allocation of reserved seats. In this sense, it is relevant to consider the intersectional effects of race and income on the evaluative perceptions of poor white students. However, responses to Question 8 do not suggest a strong or generalized rejection of race-based criteria in affirmative action: only 33% of white students totally agreed that "quotas should not consider the student's race or skin color," while 22.3% totally disagreed.

Regarding perceived negative effects of the policy on social or procedural justice in higher education admissions, questions 3, 9, and 10 show that white students are more likely to view quotas as unfair or undesirable. Among them, 28.7% agreed that "quotas create a racial division that does

not exist” (compared to 11.8% of Brown students and 5.8% of Black students). Additionally, 48.9% of white students totally agreed that “quotas interfere with the fairness of ENEM and university entrance exams,” compared to 23.5% of Brown students and only 11.6% of Black students. Finally, 39.4% of white students totally agreed that “quotas for admission to higher education should not exist,” compared to 15.7% of Brown students and 8.7% of Black students.

In summary, the analysis shows that while there is a general pattern of support for affirmative action across the sample, the differences among racial groups are substantial and statistically significant. Black students and, to a lesser extent, Brown students, express stronger adherence to the normative dimension of quotas, recognizing their role in correcting inequalities and combating racism. White students, meanwhile, are more likely to express perceptions of individual or group disadvantage and to question the legitimacy of the policy, though not to the extent of forming a consensus of rejection. These findings suggest that the social experience of racial inequality strongly structures evaluative perceptions of quotas, revealing the coexistence of competing narratives: on one hand, the affirmation of the policy as a mechanism of justice and equity; on the other, the persistence of representations linking it to loss of merit, racial division, and undesirability.

Knowledge of the Quota Law provisions

To collect data on students’ knowledge of the provisions established by the Quota Law, the research instrument included a block with ten statements about eligibility criteria, verification procedures, the relationship between the right to quotas and the diversity of higher education courses, and possible restrictions related to income or the type of high school attended. Unlike the block on value perceptions, this section aimed to determine whether students were able to judge each statement and identify whether its content was correct or incorrect according to the provisions established by the law. For each statement, students could indicate whether it was ‘true’ or ‘false’ in light of the Quota Law rules, or select ‘I don’t know’. The statements included in this block are shown in Table 4 below.

Table 4. Questions about knowledge of the Quota Law criteria.

Q	Third Block of Questions: Statements included in the questionnaire
Q1	Quotas reserve half of the seats for students who attended public high schools.
Q2	Only Black, Brown, and Indigenous people can apply for quota-reserved seats.
Q3	White students from public schools can apply for quota-reserved seats.
Q4	Students with disabilities from public schools can apply for quota-reserved seats.
Q5	The only way to verify a student’s race/skin color for quota eligibility is through their birth certificate.
Q6	White students can only apply for quota-reserved seats if their family is enrolled in the <i>Bolsa Família</i> program.
Q7	Highly competitive courses in the ENEM, such as Medicine or Law, do not have quota-reserved seats.
Q8	Students who have failed any high school year cannot apply for quota-reserved seats.
Q9	Students who completed high school through Youth and Adult Education (<i>EJA</i>) cannot apply for quota-reserved seats.
Q10	Black students who attended private high schools can apply for quota-reserved seats.

Source: Authors’ elaboration.

In organizing the data, the absolute frequency and percentage of students who answered each question correctly were calculated. Absolute frequency and percentage were also calculated according to gender/sex, race/skin color, age group, and per capita income variables, to assess potential statistical significance in patterns of correct and incorrect responses.

For the variables gender/sex and per capita income, the chi-square test revealed no statistically significant differences in the distribution of correct and incorrect answers. However, for the variables race/skin color and age group, the pattern of correct responses showed statistical

Table 5. Frequency of Responses from the 2nd Block of Questions¹.

	Sample	Gender/Sex			Race/Skin Color			
	n=333 (%)	Men n=157 (%)	Women n=162 (%)	Other n=14 (%)	White n=94 (%)	Brown n=153 (%)	Black n=69 (%)	Other n=17 (%)
Q1. Quotas reserve at least half of the seats for students attending public high schools.								
True [*]	70 (21.0)	30 (19.1)	38 (23.5)	2 (14.3)	14 (14.9)	38 (24.8)	14 (20.3)	4 (23.5)
False	60 (18.0)	27 (17.2)	32 (19.8)	1 (7.1)	18 (19.1)	30 (19.6)	10 (14.5)	2 (11.8)
I don't know	203 (61)	100 (63.7)	92 (56.8)	11 (78.6)	62 (66.0)	85 (55.6)	45 (65.2)	11 (64.7)
Q2. Only Black, Brown, and Indigenous people can compete for the quota-reserved seats.								
True	44 (13.2)	20 (12.7)	24 (14.8)	0 (0.0)	13 (13.8)	21 (13.7)	7 (10.1)	3 (17.6)
False [*]	51 (15.3)	30 (19.1)	20 (12.3)	1 (7.1)	13 (13.8)	27 (17.6)	9 (13.0)	2 (11.8)
I don't know	238 (71.5)	107 (68.2)	118 (72.8)	13 (92.9)	68 (72.3)	105 (68.6)	53 (76.8)	12 (70.6)
Q3. White students from public schools can compete for the quota-reserved seats.								
True [*]	73 (21.9)	38 (24.2)	32 (19.8)	3 (21.4)	21 (22.3)	39 (25.5)	12 (17.4)	1 (5.9)
False	40 (12.0)	19 (12.1)	19 (11.7)	2 (14.3)	15 (16.0)	15 (9.8)	9 (13.0)	1 (5.9)
I don't know	220 (66.1)	100 (63.7)	111 (68.5)	9 (64.3)	58 (61.7)	99 (64.7)	48 (69.6)	15 (88.2)
Q4. Public school students with disabilities can compete for the quota-reserved seats.								
True [*]	63 (18.9)	28 (17.8)	30 (18.5)	5 (35.7)	21 (22.3)	27 (17.6)	13 (18.8)	2 (11.8)
False	54 (16.2)	22 (14.0)	29 (17.9)	3 (24.4)	13 (13.8)	24 (15.7)	13 (18.8)	4 (23.5)
I don't know	216 (64.9)	107 (68.2)	103 (63.6)	6 (42.9)	60 (63.8)	102 (66.7)	43 (62.3)	11 (64.7)
Q5. The only way to prove a student's race or skin color to compete for quota-reserved seats is the birth certificate								
True	137 (41.1)	61 (38.9)	70 (43.2)	6 (42.9)	40 (42.6)	67 (43.8)	23 (33.3)	7 (41.2)
False [*]	54 (16.2)	31 (19.7)	22 (13.6)	1 (7.1)	13 (13.8)	25 (16.3)	13 (18.8)	3 (17.6)
I don't know	142 (42.6)	65 (41.4)	70 (43.2)	7 (50.0)	41 (43.6)	61 (39.9)	33 (47.8)	7 (41.2)
Q6. White students can only compete for quota-reserved seats if their family is enrolled in the Bolsa Família Program.								
True	56 (16.8)	31 (19.7)	23 (14.2)	2 (14.3)	15 (16.0)	23 (15.0)	14 (20.3)	4 (23.5)
False [*]	52 (15.6)	16 (10.2)	33 (20.4)	3 (21.4)	17 (18.1)	26 (17.0)	8 (11.6)	1 (5.9)
I don't know	225 (67.6)	110 (70.1)	106 (65.4)	9 (64.3)	62 (66.0)	104 (68.0)	47 (68.1)	12 (70.6)
Q7. Quotas that reserve seats in higher education are not applied to highly competitive courses such as Law and Medicine.								
True	18 (5.4)	10 (6.4)	8 (4.9)	0 (0.0)	1 (1.1)	13 (8.5)	2 (2.9)	2 (11.8)
False [*]	245 (73.6)	119 (75.8)	118 (72.8)	8 (57.1)	76 (80.9)	108 (70.6)	53 (76.8)	8 (47.1)
I don't know	70 (21.0)	28 (17.8)	36 (22.2)	6 (42.9)	17 (18.1)	32 (20.9)	14 (20.3)	7 (41.2)

¹In each question, the correct answer is marked with an asterisk (*).**Source:** Authors' elaboration, based on collected data.

Table 5. Continued...

	Sample		Gender/Sex			Race/Skin Color			
	n=333 (%)	Men	Women	Other	White	Brown	Black	Other	
		n=157 (%)	n=162 (%)	n=14 (%)	n=94 (%)	n=153 (%)	n=69 (%)	n=17 (%)	
Q8. Students who fail any year of high school cannot compete for quota-reserved seats.									
True	53 (15.9)	27 (17.2)	22 (13.6)	4 (28.6)	15 (16.0)	20 (13.1)	13 (18.8)	5 (29.4)	
False [*]	47 (14.1)	19 (12.1)	24 (14.8)	4 (28.6)	14 (14.9)	26 (17.0)	7 (10.1)	0 (0.0)	
I don't know	233 (70.0)	111 (70.7)	116 (71.6)	6 (42.9)	65 (69.1)	107 (69.9)	49 (71.0)	12 (70.6)	
Q9. Students attending Youth and Adult Education (EJA) cannot compete for quota-reserved seats.									
True	35 (10.5)	17 (10.8)	17 (10.5)	1 (7.1)	11 (11.7)	17 (11.1)	4 (5.8)	3 (17.6)	
False [*]	30 (9.0)	12 (7.6)	16 (9.9)	2 (14.3)	11 (11.7)	8 (5.2)	9 (13.0)	2 (11.8)	
I don't know	268 (80.5)	128 (85.1)	129 (79.6)	11 (78.6)	72 (76.6)	128 (83.7)	56 (81.2)	12 (70.6)	
Q10. Black students attending private schools throughout high school can compete for quota-reserved seats.									
True	27 (8.1)	11 (7.0)	16 (9.9)	0 (0.0)	9 (9.6)	12 (7.8)	3 (4.3)	3 (17.6)	
False [*]	109 (32.7)	58 (36.9)	47 (29.9)	4 (28.6)	34 (36.2)	46 (30.1)	27 (39.1)	2 (11.8)	
I don't know	197 (59.2)	88 (56.1)	99 (61.1)	10 (71.4)	51 (54.3)	95 (62.1)	39 (56.5)	12 (70.6)	

¹In each question, the correct answer is marked with an asterisk (*).

Source: Authors' elaboration, based on collected data.

significance. Table 5 presents the data, with an asterisk (*) indicating the correct answer (true or false) for each question.

Analysis of students' "I don't know" responses shows that their level of knowledge about the main provisions of the Quota Law selected for this investigation is, overall, quite low. Only in two statements (Q5 and Q7) was the percentage of "I don't know" responses below 50%. In Q5 (*"The only way to verify a student's race/skin color for quota eligibility is through their birth certificate"*), 42.6% of students selected this option. In Q7 (*"Quotas for higher education admissions are not applied to highly competitive courses such as Law and Medicine"*), the percentage dropped to 21.0%.

The highest rate of "I don't know" responses was found in Q9 (*"Students who completed high school through the EJA program cannot apply for quota-reserved seats"*), with 80.5%, followed by Q2 (*"Only Black, Brown, and Indigenous people can apply for quota-reserved seats"*), with 71.5%.

The analysis indicates that, although lack of knowledge is a general trend, it is especially concentrated in questions dealing with more specific and technical access criteria, such as who can apply, under what conditions, and which documents are accepted, rather than in more general statements.

Across the ten items, correct-answer patterns show only minor variation, within a range not exceeding 32.7% for the overall sample. Although small differences can be observed between male and female groups, these are not statistically significant, as shown in Table 6.

Women showed slightly higher accuracy in Q1 (*"Quotas reserve at least half of the seats for students who attended public high schools"*), Q4 (*"Students with disabilities from public schools can apply for quota-reserved seats"*), Q8 (*"Students who failed a year in high school cannot apply for quota-reserved seats"*), and Q9 (*"Students who completed high school through the EJA program cannot apply for quota-reserved seats"*). However, in Q6, the difference was notable:

Table 6. Percentage of correct answers in the second block by gender/sex.

PERCENTAGE OF CORRECT ANSWERS PER PERSON										
GROUP	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10
Overall (n=333)	21%	15.3%	21.9%	18.8%	16.2%	15.6%	73.6%	14.1%	9%	32.7%
Men (n=157)	19.1%	19.1%	24.2%	17.8%	19.7%	10.2%	75.8%	12,1%	7.6%	36.9%
Women (n=162)	23.5%	12.3%	19.8%	18.5%	13.6%	20.4%	72.8%	14.8%	9.9%	29.9%
Others N=14	14.3%	7.1%	21.4%	35.7%	7.1%	21.4%	57.1%	28.6%	14.3%	28.6%

Source: Authors' elaboration, based on collected data.

women scored twice as high as men (20.4% vs. 10.2%). In the remaining five questions, men had slightly higher rates of correct answers. Overall, the statistical distribution reveals a relatively similar level of knowledge between men and women. The small number of respondents identifying as "other" (trans men/trans women) limits the statistical extrapolation of these data and highlights the need for further research to assess the relevance of this variable. The same analysis was carried out considering the racial groups identified in the study (Table 7). Among the items addressing general eligibility criteria (Q1–Q4), notable differences were observed between racial groups. In Q1, Brown students had the highest percentage of correct answers (24.8%), followed by Black students (20.3%) and White students (14.9%), showing that Black and Brown students demonstrated greater knowledge of the legal provision guaranteeing half of the seats for public-school graduates. In Q3, the same pattern appears: Brown students lead (25.5%), White students follow (22.3%), and Black students show the lowest rate (17.4%). In Q4, concerning students with disabilities, White students (22.3%) performed better than Brown students (17.6%) and Black students (18.8%). These results suggest that there is no group with consistently higher performance, but rather variations related to specific aspects of the law. In the questions on verification mechanisms and complementary criteria (Q5 and Q6), the results also reveal contrasts. In Q5, Brown (16.3%) and Black (18.8%) students had slightly higher accuracy rates than white students (13.8%), which may indicate greater attention from these groups to the forms of verification of racial self-identification. In Q6, however, white students (18.1%) outperformed Brown students (17%) and Black students (11.6%) in recognizing that participation in the *Bolsa Família* program is not a criterion for accessing quotas. This variation indicates that perceptions of the law's mechanisms differ according to

Table 7. Percentage of correct answers in the second block by race/skin color group.

PERCENTAGE OF CORRECT ANSWERS PER QUESTION										
GROUP	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10
Overall (n=333)	21%	15.3%	21.9%	18.8%	16.2%	15.6%	73.6%	14.1%	9%	32.7%
White (n=94)	14.9%	13.8%	22.3%	22.3%	13.8%	18.1%	80.9%	14.9%	11.7%	36.2%
Brown (n=153)	24.8%	17.6%	25.5%	17.6%	16.3%	17%	70.6%	17.0%	5.2%	30.1%
Black (n=69)	20.3%	13%	17.4%	18.8%	18.8%	11.6%	76.8%	10.1%	13.0%	39.1%
Others (n=17)	23.5%	11.8%	5.9%	11.8%	17.6%	5.9%	47.1%	0.0%	11.8%	11.8%

Source: Authors' elaboration, based on collected data.

the intersection between race and social experience, with no single group showing a systematic advantage across all items.

The greatest consensus appears in Q7, regarding the law's coverage of the most competitive university courses: white students (80.9%) and Black students (76.8%) stand out, while Brown students show lower accuracy (70.6%). Regarding questions about non-existent restrictions (Q8 and Q9), all groups show low accuracy rates, though the differences are noteworthy: in Q8, Brown students (17%) outperform white students (14.9%) and Black students (10.1%); in Q9, Black students (13%) outperform white students (11.7%) and Brown students (5.2%). These results suggest that misinformation about access limitations (such as disqualifications or attendance through adult education programs, EJA) affects all groups but to varying degrees, impacting Brown students more strongly in the case of EJA.

Finally, Q10, which addresses the admission of Black students from private schools, reveals a significant finding: Black students (39.1%) achieved the highest accuracy rate, followed by White students (36.2%) and Brown students (30.1%). This seems to indicate that the group directly benefiting from the rule (Black students) demonstrates greater knowledge about this specific aspect of the law. This trend contrasts with other questions in which Black students lag behind Brown or white students. Overall, the analysis shows that the distribution of correct answers varies according to the topic, but Black students tend to stand out in the questions most directly related to the recognition of their access rights, while Brown and white students fluctuate depending on the dimensions of the law's implementation.

The results of this block, showing highly insufficient levels of knowledge regarding the basic rules of the Quota Law, reinforce the importance of recent research in public policy studies that focuses on the effects of knowledge levels and perceptions of policy beneficiaries on their objective and subjective ability to exercise the rights granted to them. As demonstrated by Jilke and Van Ryzin (2016) and Blake and Moynihan (2020), cognitive biases and informational asymmetries decisively affect users' willingness to engage with public policies. In this sense, the finding that most students have an insufficient understanding of the quota policy's mechanisms suggests that informational asymmetry may constitute a concrete barrier to the exercise of rights. In other words, the low ability to clearly recognize eligibility criteria and access conditions not only limits the policy's effectiveness but also deepens participation inequalities, aligning with what recent literature in behavioral public administration has shown.

Access to information about the Quota Law

The final section of the survey instrument aimed to determine whether the participating students understood themselves as beneficiaries of the affirmative action policy established by the Quota Law, and to identify: (1) whether they had been exposed to or participated in any school activities aimed at guiding them about the law's provisions during high school; and (2) whom they would turn to first for help understanding the Quota Law.

Regarding the first question, 166 students (49.8% of the sample) answered "yes," indicating that they consider themselves eligible for the Quota Law. A total of 77 students (23.1%) answered "no," and 90 students (27.0%) said they did not know. When broken down by gender/sex, women more frequently recognized themselves as beneficiaries of the policy (57.1% compared to 43.7% of men). When disaggregated by race/skin color, 89.9% of Black students and 66.4% of Brown students reported recognizing themselves as beneficiaries, compared to only 38.6% of white students. As for participation in activities explaining the Quota Law during high school, 86.2% of students said this never occurred, 9.6% said it happened once, and only 4.3% said it happened a few times. The patterns were similar across gender groups (87.6% of men and 87.0% of women said they had not taken part in such activities) and across racial groups (84.7% among White, 86.8% among Brown students, and 90.1% among Black students).

Finally, when asked whom they would turn to in order to better understand the Quota Law, the answers show a clear preference for teachers, followed by the internet and family members, particularly parents (Table 8).

The data reveal a significant divide in the recognition of eligibility for the Quota Law. While nearly half of the sample (49.8%) identified themselves as potential beneficiaries, a considerable

Table 8. Whom would young people turn to for information about the Quota Law?

Sample	A teacher	Would search online	My father or mother	Religious leader	Other responses
General	42.1%	19.7%	18.7%	6.4%	13.1%
Men	37.9%	21.4%	19.1%	5.6%	16.0%
Women	44.6%	16.30%	20.40%	7.30%	11.40%
White	36.80%	20.10%	18.40%	6.20%	18.50%
Brown	44.10%	18.60%	18.10%	4.70%	14.50%
Black	46.10%	17.20%	16.40%	5.90%	14.40%
Other	36.40%	24.10%	19.30%	3.10%	17.10%

Source: Authors' elaboration, based on collected data.

proportion (27.0%) said they did not know, suggesting high levels of uncertainty about the policy's criteria. This lack of knowledge is particularly pronounced among white students, only 38.6% of whom saw themselves as beneficiaries, compared to 66.4% of Brown students and 89.9% of Black students. The disparity in perceptions indicates that racial belonging strongly shapes self-identification with the policy: Black students tend to view quotas as a legitimate pathway to access higher education, while white students, even those from public schools, are less likely to see themselves as eligible.

The absence of systematic guidance activities throughout high school appears to exacerbate this information gap: 86.2% of the sample reported not having participated in any school action on the topic. Together with the strong preference for teachers (42.1%) and the internet (19.7%) as main sources of information, this shows that schools play a crucial, yet underutilized, role in disseminating knowledge about the Quota Law. Moreover, while family members (18.7%) also serve as a source, they play a secondary role compared to teachers, suggesting an unmet expectation of pedagogical mediation. In this sense, the lack of institutional exposure to explanatory activities seems to contribute both to persistent misunderstandings and to the reproduction of unequal perceptions across racial groups.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study sought to investigate the extent to which students from public high schools are familiar with the legal provisions that structure Brazil's Quota Law, as well as how they perceive, from a value-based standpoint, the legitimacy and effects of this public policy. To that end, a survey was administered to 333 students enrolled in the third year of high school at three schools located in the eastern zone of São Paulo. The questionnaire included true/false items to assess knowledge and four-point Likert scale statements to capture value-based perceptions. The results revealed, on one hand, a broad lack of knowledge regarding key aspects of policy eligibility, particularly concerning the right of white public-school students to compete for reserved seats and the ineligibility of private-school students to access the quota system. On the other hand, students performed better on more general items about the law. At the level of perceptions, the analysis showed statistically significant differences by race/skin color: Black and Brown students expressed stronger adherence to the normative and justificatory dimensions of the policy, whereas white students were more likely to associate it with potential negative effects, such as harm to others or risks to fairness in admission exams.

These findings reinforce the importance of understanding public policy implementation from the perspective of its beneficiaries, emphasizing that informational gaps and value biases can affect users' adherence and engagement. From a practical standpoint, the results point to the need for more systematic school-based guidance strategies regarding the Quota Law, especially in the final stages of high school. For future research, three paths are suggested: (i) expanding the empirical scope to different regional and socioeconomic contexts to assess

territorial variations; (ii) adopting analytical strategies that allow for the exploration of causal relationships between information, value-based perceptions, and intentions to use the policy; and (iii) investigating the role of school agents in mediating information about affirmative action, thereby deepening the dialogue with the literature on street-level bureaucracy and behavioral public administration.

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VEFN: Conceptualization; Methodology; Data collection; Data management; Statistical analysis; Data analysis; Visualization; Writing – original draft. ANS: Conceptualization; Methodology; Data collection; Project administration (supervision and guidance); Validation; Writing – review.

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