

YOUTHS AND HIGH SCHOOL: FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

AS JUVENTUDES E O ENSINO MÉDIO: PERSPECTIVAS DE FUTURO

LAS JUVENTUDES Y LA EDUCACIÓN SECUNDARIA: PERSPECTIVAS DE FUTURO



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ABSTRACT: Brazil has historically faced crises in high school education, and various reforms have aimed to overcome the challenges at this educational level. Currently, there is a new wave of policy reformulation in this area, as the current legislation presents weaknesses in its implementation. This qualitative research, of a bibliographic and documentary nature, intends to analyze youth culture and the significance of high school for young people so that they can recognize themselves in the curricula and daily school life. The high dropout and abandonment rates in high school should be a focal point for public policies, as education is the starting point for other professional, social, and cultural achievements. Considering the transformations in youth trajectories throughout history is fundamental for thinking about high school reforms, viewing education as a process of collective knowledge construction, and seeking the wholeness of the human being.

KEYWORDS: High School. Youth. Youth Trajectories.

RESUMO: O Brasil convive com históricas crises no Ensino Médio e diversas reformas têm buscado superar os desafios neste nível de ensino. Atualmente, vive-se um novo momento de reformulação das políticas públicas neste âmbito, já que a legislação atual apresenta fragilidades em sua implementação. A presente pesquisa qualitativa, de cunho bibliográfico e documental, pretende analisar a cultura juvenil e o sentido da escola de ensino médio para os jovens, a fim de que os mesmos possam se reconhecer nos currículos e no cotidiano escolar. Os altos índices de evasão e abandono no Ensino Médio devem ser ponto de atenção das políticas públicas, já que a escolarização é o ponto de partida para outras conquistas de ordem profissional, social e cultural. Considerar as transformações da trajetória juvenil ao longo da história é condição basilar para pensar as reformas do Ensino Médio, concebendo a educação como um processo de construção coletiva do saber, buscando a integralidade do ser humano.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Ensino Médio. Juventudes. Trajetórias juvenis.

RESUMEN: Brasil convive con históricas crisis en la Educación Secundaria y diversas reformas han buscado superar los desafíos en este nivel de enseñanza. Actualmente, se vive un nuevo momento de reformulación de las políticas públicas en este ámbito, ya que la legislación actual presenta fragilidades en su implementación. La presente investigación cualitativa, de carácter bibliográfico y documental, pretende analizar la cultura juvenil y el sentido de la escuela de educación secundaria para los jóvenes, con el fin de que puedan reconocerse en los currículos y en el cotidiano escolar. Los altos índices de deserción y abandono en la Educación Secundaria deben ser un punto de atención de las políticas públicas, ya que la escolarización es el punto de partida para otras conquistas de orden profesional, social y cultural. Considerar las transformaciones de la trayectoria juvenil a lo largo de la historia es condición básica para pensar en las reformas de la Educación Secundaria, concibiendo la educación como un proceso de construcción colectiva del saber, buscando la integralidad del ser humano.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Educación Secundaria. Juventudes. Trayectorias juveniles.

Introduction

Currently, there is a significant diversity of youth types, which can be categorized according to their chronological, social, cultural, and familial, among other characteristics. Thus, several authors (Carrano, 2000, 2011; Abramovay; Castro, 2002; Abramo; Branco, 2005) adopt the term "youths" to account for this multiplicity.

A thorough analysis of this complexity of factors is crucial for reflecting on reforms in secondary education and its current state of uncertainty in the historical moment. This is necessary so that these factors can serve as a basis for public policies directed at this level of education, ensuring that legislation is legitimized by its target audience (Guerra; Cruz, 2023).

The present research was guided by the principles of qualitative research, meaning that the studies are focused on understanding specific collective realities and attempting to grasp real practices and daily experiences. According to Lankshear and Knobel (2008, p. 66, our translation), "[...] qualitative research is primarily interested in how people experience, understand, interpret, and participate in their social and cultural worlds." This type of research provided an understanding of the social construction of the realities under study, focusing on daily practices, representations, and perspectives of participants in their natural contexts, seeking to understand and interpret the context of transitions experienced by young people (Flick, 2009).

The study also relies on bibliographical and documentary research as a data collection method. As indicated by Lakatos and Marconi (2010), this technique allows for a survey and subsequent selection of authors who address the researched topic. This activity facilitates direct engagement between the researcher and the available material. Thus, bibliographical and documentary research provides access to publicly accessible academic studies, encompassing sources such as books, scientific articles, theses, and monographs, among others.

Another methodological characteristic of this study concerns its descriptive approach. It is understood that a detailed analysis of the subject matter can be conducted through these methodological choices. In addition to identifying the focal points of the analyzed texts and documents, the aim is to provide a thorough description of the theoretical, conceptual, and epistemological elements related to public policies for secondary education. This allows for a deeper understanding of the study object, enabling the identification of patterns, trends, and relationships that permeate its dynamics.

Given this proposal, the study aims to analyze youth culture and the significance of high school for young people. The specific objectives are: to deepen the concept of youth; to

analyze the youth category in the context of high school, considering the multiplicity of factors that influence this stage; and to characterize the uncertainties of high school in the present day.

The scientific and social relevance of this theme lies in highlighting the main characteristics of youth culture, emphasizing the factors that contribute to the retention of young people in high school. This is achieved through understanding the students' profiles, their projects, and their future expectations, aiming to identify means and strategies that enhance the possibility of fostering a sense of belonging to the school, and recognizing the importance of knowledge in the construction of civic and democratic life.

High school students

According to Abramovay and Castro (2002), Abramo and Branco (2005), Carrano (2000, 2011), Dayrell (2003, 2009, 2011), Groppo (2000, 2004, 2011), Pais (2009, 2010), Doutor (2016), Perondi and Vieira (2018), and Kuenzer (2009, 2017, 2023), youth can be characterized in two ways: as a life phase defined by linear and homogeneous aspects, where all young people commonly face behavioral issues; or, at the other extreme, by the diversity and differences that characterize each social group, with distinct youth groups in society depending on social classes, work, interests, etc.

Authors such as Sukarieh and Tannock (2015), Pais (2010), and Groppo (2004, 2011) argue that youth is a socially manipulated and manipulable category. The unity established around it molds everyone into predetermined roles, classifying individuals, normalizing their behaviors, and defining rights and duties. Thus, youth is not merely an invariant natural order but constitutes a social order and, therefore, a historical creation.

To address the concept of youth, Pais (2009, 2010) adopts the methodological perspective of the life course. While young people's trajectories are unique, they bear cultural marks that express their regularities and are reflected in their representations and their life course. However, the lines delimiting the different life stages are blurred, with individuals playing a more active role in constructing their projects. On the other hand, Groppo (2004, 2011) considers that the life course assumes neutral and natural criteria, reflecting in various areas (sciences, education, law, etc.) the determination of life stages. The criterion of absolute time is an effective way to reduce multiple social, cultural, and individual differences to a single universal idea.

What does it mean to be young? Bourdieu (1983) asserts that "youth is just a word." It is a polysemic term, rich in diversity and plurality, which cannot be simply categorized as a group of people of a certain age range with their characteristics and profiles. Therefore, the issue of age is a social construction involving gender and class disputes and is insufficient to understand the social processes through which individuals are recognized and constituted as young.

Youth development occurs through the interaction between individual history and societal history, psychosocial acquisitions, and available projects and goals (Krauskopf, 1998; Guerra; Cruz, 2023). The paradigm that viewed adolescents as oversized children and adults in formation, preparing them to consolidate their development according to adult guidance, no longer holds. Sukarieh and Tannock (2015) argue that the concept of youth has evolved over time due to the interference of political, ideological, and economic agendas from different sectors such as the state, schools, universities, NGOs, corporations, and media, among others. However, it was through neoliberal policies that there was an exponential increase and popularization of the youth category.

Given this multiplicity of issues affecting youth identity today, the term "youths" (Carrano, 2000; Abramovay; Castro, 2002; Abramo; Branco, 2005) has been used to consider the diversities of socio-historical, economic, cultural, and relational contexts that influence the ways of being young today.

The existing differences among youths are an essential aspect to consider, as standardizing and generalizing this concept can lead to serious distortions regarding expectations, consumption, social groups, etc., resulting in a mythified understanding of young people that often favors a rigid and pessimistic discourse, labeling this age group as a social problem. As Pais (1990, p. 145, our translation) states: "The definition of youth culture [...] is like any myth, a social construction that exists more as a social representation than as a reality."

In this sense, it is more appropriate to refer to young people and youths, recognizing that each individual experiences, experiments, and uniquely interprets life's issues, influenced by their socio-cultural background, family values, and educational conditions. This results in different ways of being young and in the definition of varied social, cultural, and affective profiles.

Sposito (2010) and Kuenzer (2017, 2023) highlight that for decades, youth research prioritized elements such as transitoriness, social maladjustments, political dimensions, and work, often neglecting educational processes and how young people perceive themselves as

agents of their trajectories. Since the 1990s, the topic of youth has gained greater visibility on the public agenda and in studies in the fields of Pedagogy, Psychology, Sociology, and Anthropology in the Brazilian context.

Therefore, to define the term youth today, criteria such as sociocultural context, social, economic, and legal status, among others, are considered. It is understood as an open concept, continuously constructed within the context of the historical-cultural process (Melo; Borges, 2007).

The increased attention devoted to youth has transformed the negative perception of viewing them as a problem, deficit, pathology, or threat to the social fabric into a more positive outlook aligned with neoliberal policies and agendas aimed at molding young people into workers and consumers (Sukarieh; Tannock, 2015). In this perspective, the vacuum that restricted young people from having autonomy, rights, and projects, while stigmatizing them with various stereotypes, is gradually being overcome. Currently, individuals are in a constant process of study, improvement, and movement, breaking away from the linearity and security of the past, ensuring all young people are in continuous preparation for life.

The formation of identity and the experience of youth condition are intrinsically linked to various social institutions that nowadays extend beyond schools, families, churches, and universities, including political parties, class associations, cultural facilities, peer organizations, and electronic media (Abramo, 2014; Viana, 2009; Lebourg; Coutrim; Silva, 2021). However, access to these institutions is unequal for all Brazilian youth, resulting in significant differences within this category influenced by their social and cultural conditions.

In this context, it is relevant to reflect on the role of school (Bourdieu, 1983), as it represents the primary institution providing young people with the opportunity to integrate into society, albeit in a figurative and experimental manner. This period of experimentation and postponement of social responsibilities, preparing for the future, varies according to the social condition of the youth. Many must balance school routines with work, facing life's demands prematurely, which can limit the time dedicated to fully experiencing youth. For some, entering the workforce is seen as entering adulthood and, through wages, achieving respect and autonomy to decide their paths. From this perspective, prolonged schooling is an obstacle to realizing their professional projects.

On the other end, there are young people from economically and culturally established families who aspire to continue their studies, enter higher education and graduate school, study abroad, and pursue a professional career aiming for success and recognition.

Krauskopf (1998) argues that social, economic, and cultural transformations have directly influenced intergenerational relationships, gender dynamics, and social institutions. The author emphasizes that differences between social classes⁴ define how youth groups position themselves in society, and technological advancements, which are not always accessible to everyone, promote duality and heterogeneity.

The trajectory of youth in Brazilian high schools

Initially, it is crucial to examine the number of young people regularly enrolled in high school in Brazil. According to the Basic Education Census (2023), there were 7.7 million enrollments in high school, a decrease of 2.4% compared to the previous year. Enrollments integrated into vocational education increased by 32.2% over the last five years, from 623,178 in 2019 to 823,587 in 2023 (MEC/INEP, 2023).

Census data (MEC/INEP, 2023) also reveal that out of 22.5 million young people aged 18 to 24 in the country,

- 21.2% dropped out of high school;
- 9.9% are currently attending high school;
- 1.2% are still attending elementary school;
- 20.2% are attending higher education;
- 4% have already completed higher education.

The preceding data raises a question: what are the reasons behind a significant number of young people dropping out of school? Many students express dissatisfaction with school, citing a lack of spaces for dialogue, participation, and interaction. They also lament the absence of diverse classes with innovative resources, motivated teachers, and cultural and recreational activities that could enhance sociability and interaction among groups.

A lack of meaning in school life is another challenge faced by youth. Maintaining focus on teacher explanations, textbooks, assessments, and other educational activities becomes

⁴ There is no consensus in the sociological literature on the concept of class nor its operationalization [...] that is, what differentiates the poor, the middle class, and the rich is the average income of each group, which indicates their consumption capacity and your level of well-being. Thus, each of the classes – low, middle, and high – appropriates a third of the total income, and what differentiates them is the size and, consequently, the average income (Osório, 2009, p. 868-869, our translation).

difficult when everyday problems dominate their thoughts: difficulties in securing first jobs, low wages, housing shortages, teenage pregnancy, family conflicts, among others. Regarding full-time education, in 2023, 20.4% of high school enrollees spent at least 35 hours per week in school or school-related activities (equivalent to an average of 7 hours daily, considering five days of weekly activity), classified as full-time students (MEC/INEP, 2023).

Among these high school students, 87.7% are enrolled in public schools, unlike higher education, where the majority of enrollments occur in private institutions. This disparity underscores the need for public policies that facilitate access to higher education for high school students through scholarships and/or financing (INSTITUTO SEMESP, 2023).

In an effort to address various issues at this educational level, Law No. 13,415/2017 brought about significant changes to the high school curriculum structure, amending the National Education Guidelines and Framework Law (Law No. 9394/1996). Among the changes, notable ones include the increase in the minimum student workload at school (from 2,400 hours to 3,000 hours over the three years of the course), the adoption of a new curriculum organization aligned with the Common National Curriculum Base (BNCC), and the introduction of formative pathways focused on knowledge areas (Mathematics and its Technologies, Languages and their Technologies, Natural Sciences and their Technologies, Human and Social Sciences Applied) and technical and professional education (Brasil, 2017).

According to Corti (2019), this reform follows a logic of curriculum reduction and serves the interests of cost reduction in education, allowing up to 40% of the workload to be completed through Distance Education (EAD), while Youth and Adult Education (EJA) can be fully offered in this modality.

The year 2022 was set as the deadline for implementing the increase in the workload in high school. Data from the 2023 School Census (MEC/INEP, 2023) indicate that the majority of school networks have already implemented features of the new high school curriculum in the first and second years.

However, some weaknesses have been identified in this new model, such as reduced hours for Common Base subjects, disparities in the implementation of formative pathways between public and private schools, insufficient and superficial supporting teaching materials, lack of pedagogical resources, inadequate teacher training, inadequate and insufficient school physical structures, difficulties for students in changing formative pathways, issues arising from school transfers, and inadequate allocation of financial resources, among others.

The federal government has launched a public consultation to allow the democratic participation of civil society in formulating a new reform for high school education, aiming to improve the current model. The previous legislation was amended by Bill No. 5,230/2023, approved by the Chamber of Deputies, and is currently under review in the Federal Senate. The approved text increases the workload for mandatory subjects and reduces the time for formative pathways, while maintaining the final workload of 3,000 hours.

Another initiative aimed at improving retention rates in high school is the Federal Government's "*Pé de Meia*" Program, which aims to reduce dropout rates by providing annual incentives of US\$ 543,26 per beneficiary, totaling up to US\$ 1.666,00 over the three years of high school, with an additional US\$ 36,22 for participation in the National High School Exam (ENEM)⁵.

For Kuenzer (2009, 2017, 2023), the challenge lies in an ambivalent model of high school education that aims to prepare students both for further studies and for entry into the labor market. The author argues that this duality results from a system offering vocational education for youth already in the workforce or seeking rapid qualification for professional life, alongside a general education for those aspiring to enter higher education, thus reflecting significant life asymmetries and future perspectives, reinforcing class inequalities.

It is within this scenario that high schools must formulate their curriculum guidelines, considering a diverse contingent of youth differentiated by living conditions and diverse perspectives. It is from this context that its conception should be approached (Arroyo, 2012a, 2012b). Faced with the current structural and pedagogical challenges of high school education, Oliveira (2012) highlights the need to understand this educational phase in its complexity.

[...] an analysis of current public policies, which [...] gather daily, within Brazilian classrooms, young people whose social destinies are already fixed, predetermined by the precariousness of the personal lives of their poorly paid teachers and by the structural neglect to which they are confined in their schools; however, these same individuals are often publicly proclaimed as participants in a process referred to as the universalization of high school education [...] (Oliveira, 2012, p. 49-50, our translation).

According to IBGE (2023), Brazil recorded 48.5 million young people aged 15 to 29 years old, with 15.3% of them being occupied and studying, 19.8% neither occupied nor studying, 25.5% not occupied but studying (equivalent to 7.7 million enrollments in high school), and 39.4% occupied but not studying.

⁵ Similar to the Scholastic Achievement Test (SAT).

The high proportion of young people out of school requires a multifaceted analysis. There is no single factor responsible for these high dropout and repetition rates, and the school cannot bear sole responsibility for this crisis. It is essential to consider political, social, cultural, economic, and family factors, as all adversities faced by society are reflected in school institutions and influence the established dynamics there.

It is concerning to observe that many young people do not receive the necessary support for their cognitive development and skills enhancement after years of schooling, which are essential for their meaningful integration into the world. The values and aspirations of young people often do not align with the discipline, personal effort, and knowledge transmission offered by schools, resulting in mismatches of expectations, tensions, and conflicts in the school environment. This situation highlights a crisis in current educational models, demanding extensive discussion and reevaluation of public policies to meet the needs of this diverse clientele, coming from highly varied realities but united by the common goal of finding their place in society.

Youth culture and its implications should constitute a central axis in teacher training, given that educators play a crucial role in interacting with young students. By understanding the intricate web of relationships that compose youth culture, teachers will be able to more effectively articulate the interests and needs of young people with educational objectives, promoting greater adherence to the academic project. The crisis in high school reflects a lack of recognition of multiple youth identities, with schools often prioritizing curriculum compliance and student approval (Carrano, 2000, 2011; Dayrell; Jesus, 2016).

The challenges faced by schools reflect broader social issues such as the decline of alterity, information overload, performance pressure, fragmentation of social relations, and structural violence. Sposito (2010) argues that understanding young people's educational conflicts requires understanding how they are socially and culturally shaped by the spaces they inhabit, the interactions they maintain, and how they cope with the demands of the contemporary world.

Therefore, it is crucial that schools are not dissociated from their social context and historical trajectory in humanity (Arroyo, 2012a, 2012b). All conflicts and challenges faced in daily school life are reflections of public policies, hegemonic interests, and the influence of neoliberal politics, which often relegate the importance of knowledge, research, and learning in favor of utilitarian objectives and personal interests.

Carrano (2010, 2011) argues that Brazilian education has been grounded in an alienating, dehumanizing, and distorting pedagogical model that suppresses the rich diversity of experiences, impoverishing the processes of knowledge production and forms of thinking. According to Dayrell (2003) and Dayrell and Jesus (2016), the school is polysemic and, in its diversity, assumes a multiplicity of meanings. However, it is crucial to reflect: do students recognize the spaces, times, relationships, and projects of the school? These interpretations vary significantly and are influenced by different social groups that navigate the school environment, attributing different meanings to it.

There is an apparent mismatch between students' expectations, life projects, interests, and the reality of the classroom. Corti (2009, 2019) discusses cultural diversity and social and economic inequalities that permeate daily school life, demanding a reformulation of the school. Faced with an extremely diverse youth audience that brings social contradictions into the school, the new high school is being shaped. Social inequalities begin to strain the school institution and generate new conflicts.

Schlickmann (2013) observes in youth a future orientation. They enjoy the present, engaging in social activities with friends, having fun, reflecting a strong tendency to live in the moment because the future seems uncertain and conflicted, offering no clear prospects. Besides cultural expressions, sociability is another crucial dimension when discussing youth, especially considering significant transformations in social interactions through digital networks.

According to Corti (2019), we are experiencing a moment of transition in educational and cultural paradigms, marked by the opposition between an education focused on content transmission, discipline, self-regulation, and conservative values, and a more democratic, critical, and pluralistic approach, where the student is the protagonist of their educational journey. In this latter model, education is conceived as a collective process of knowledge construction, empowering students to act effectively in their social contexts. High school reforms represent a crucial arena in overcoming educational challenges for various governments, regardless of their political orientation.

The challenges to establishing an effective relationship between youth and high school are diverse. The democratization and universalization of this level of education do not guarantee its quality by themselves. High school needs to define its identity as the final stage of Basic Education, being decisive for many youth who conclude their school trajectory at this point, without another opportunity to remedy the weaknesses and deficiencies of the educational process.

Schlickmann (2013) suggests that awareness absorbs what arouses interest. Thus, to promote dynamism, interest, and action, education needs to escape from the obvious, the predictable, and the routine. Therefore, a school committed to democratizing high school education and promoting the retention and completion of studies must listen to students regarding their expectations and projects. This allows for aligning individual and collective youth objectives with educational goals, collaboratively seeking solutions to current educational challenges.

In this sense, educational public policies and institutions need to consider youth not only as beneficiaries but as active agents, integrating their voices and expectations into the educational process more significantly.

Final considerations

The fabric of youth development unfolds amidst a diversity of contexts and possibilities, gaining increasing visibility in the 21st century and presenting ever more significant variability in the transition to adulthood. The concepts of youth are social constructions rooted in diverse fields of knowledge, varying historical epochs, and distinct social phenomena, thus constantly evolving. These concepts are influenced by factors such as age, social role, relationship with work, leaving the parental home, and forming new families.

The limitations of this study lie in the difficulty of obtaining a comprehensive view of social, regional, and living conditions that determine the diversities and specificities of multiple youth experiences. Without this understanding of youth trajectories, the analysis of their needs and challenges faced in this phase of life may be compromised due to the generalization of concepts.

Therefore, this research underscores the importance of understanding the diverse characteristics, meanings, and transformations of youth trajectories throughout history. This is essential for developing resources that allow a deeper understanding of their culture, linking inherited representations historically constructed with challenges and tensions of contemporary relationships. These reflections are crucial for contemplating high school reforms, especially in offering students the choice between academic areas or technical-professional training. This requires significant human and material resources and a conducive environment for dialogue. Otherwise, there is a risk of implementing education reforms that are devoid of meaning and

are unable to effectively engage the thousands of Brazilian youth in their educational development.

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