

THE ROLE OF POPULAR PREP SCHOOLS AND EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITY: HIGH SCHOOL IN QUESTION

O PAPEL DOS CURSINHOS POPULARES E DESIGUALDADE EDUCACIONAL: ENSINO MÉDIO EM QUESTÃO

LA FUNCIÓN DE LOS CURSOS POPULARES DE PREPARACIÓN Y LA DESIGUALDAD EDUCATIVA: EDUCACIÓN SECUNDARIA EN CUESTIÓN



Aryanne Mila de BARROS¹
e-mail: alyanne.barros@sou.ufmt.br



Renata Teixeira NASCIMENTO²
e-mail: renata.nascimento2@sou.ufmt.br



Ana Lara CASAGRANDE³
e-mail: ana.casagrande@ufmt.br

How to reference this paper:

Barros, A. M., Nascimento, R. T., & Casagrande, A. L. (2026). The role of popular prep schools and educational inequality: high school in question. *Revista on line de Política e Gestão Educacional*, 30, e026058. <https://doi.org/10.22633/rpge.v30i00.19965>



| Submitted: 25/01/2025
| Revisions required: 27/03/2025
| Approved: 11/05/2026
| Published: 03/07/2026

Editor: Prof. Dr. Sebastião de Souza Lemes

Deputy Executive Editor: Prof. Dr. José Anderson Santos Cruz

¹ Federal University of Mato Grosso (UFMT), Cuiabá – Mato Grosso (MT) – Brazil. Master's degree in Education. Graduate Program in Education, Institute of Education (UFMT).

² Federal University of Mato Grosso (UFMT), Cuiabá – Mato Grosso (MT) – Brazil. Master's degree in Education. Graduate Program in Education, Institute of Education (UFMT).

³ Federal University of Mato Grosso (UFMT), Cuiabá – MT – Brazil. Ph.D. in Education. Professor in the Graduate Program in Education at the Federal University of Mato Grosso (PPGE/UFMT), Department of Teaching and School Organization (DEOE).

ABSTRACT: It is about the implications of popular courses on the inequality of access to Higher Education. An exploratory study with a qualitative approach is carried out, with a bibliographic survey (authors who study themes related to educational inequalities and High School are used) and documentary (Law nº13,415/2017, Law nº14,945/2024, and the 2023 School Census). The objective is to problematize the role that these courses fulfill, considering the age-grade distortion and the curricular structure of the New High School. The data show the possibility of re-enactment of inequalities for the public in the public schools, due to the diversified part of the curriculum and the socio-economic issues that affect them. A scenario in which free courses operate, enhancing more promising futures.

KEYWORDS: High School. Educational inequalities. Popular courses.

RESUMO: Trata-se das implicações dos cursinhos populares frente à desigualdade do acesso à Educação Superior. Realiza-se um estudo exploratório de abordagem qualitativa, com levantamento bibliográfico (são mobilizados autores que estudam as temáticas correlatas às desigualdades educacionais e ao Ensino Médio) e documental (Lei nº 13.415/2017, Lei nº 14.945/2024 e o Censo Escolar 2023). O objetivo consiste em problematizar o papel que tais cursinhos desempenham, considerando a distorção idade-série e a estrutura curricular do Novo Ensino Médio. Os dados evidenciam a possibilidade de reedição das desigualdades entre o público das escolas públicas, devido à diversidade do currículo e às questões socioeconômicas que os afetam. Cenário em que os cursinhos gratuitos atuam, potencializando futuros mais promissores.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Ensino Médio. Desigualdades educacionais. Cursinhos populares.

RESUMEN: Se trata de las implicaciones de los cursos populares ante la desigualdad en el acceso a la Educación Superior. Se realiza un estudio exploratorio con enfoque cualitativo, con relevamiento bibliográfico (se movilizan autores que estudian temas relacionados con las desigualdades educativas y la Educación Secundaria) y documental (Ley nº13.415/2017, Ley nº14.945/2024 y el Censo Escolar 2023). El objetivo es problematizar el rol que cumplen estos cursos, considerando la distorsión de la edad y la estructura curricular de la Nueva Educación Secundaria. Los datos muestran la posibilidad de más desigualdades para el público de las escuelas públicas, debido a la parte diversificada del currículo y a los problemas socioeconómicos que les afectan. Un escenario en el que operan los cursos gratuitos, potenciando futuros más prometedores.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Educación Secundaria. Desigualdades educativas. Cursos populares.

INTRODUCTION

High school, the focus of this text, is legally established as the final stage of Basic Education in Brazil, according to the Law on Guidelines and Foundations of National Education (LDB), and its purpose ranges from consolidating and deepening the knowledge acquired in elementary school, through basic preparation for work and citizenship, to the student's personal development as a human being (Brasil, 1996, Art. 35).

The most recent reform of secondary education was proposed through a Provisional Measure, as provided for in Article 62 of the 1988 Federal Constitution, for cases of "relevance and urgency." It has the force of law and must be immediately submitted to the National Congress. If it is not approved within 45 days of its publication, it blocks the voting agenda of the chamber in which it is pending until it is voted on (Brasil, 1988). It was subsequently converted into Law No. 13,415, dated February 16, 2017 (Brasil, 2017).

This law established the Policy to Promote the Implementation of Full-Time High Schools (Brasil, 2017). In addition to increasing the minimum annual course load, there are curricular changes with the introduction of the National Common Core Curriculum and the Educational Pathways (IF) (the diversified part of the curriculum, which may cover the following areas: Mathematics and its Technologies; Languages and their Technologies; Natural Sciences and their Technologies; Applied Humanities and Social Sciences; Technical and Vocational Training).

The National Common Core Curriculum defines learning rights and objectives for this stage of Basic Education, in accordance with the guidelines of the National Education Council, in the following areas of knowledge: I – Languages and Their Technologies; II – Mathematics and Its Technologies; III – Natural Sciences and Their Technologies; and IV – Applied Humanities and Social Sciences. Thus, the high school curriculum will consist of the National Common Core Curriculum and IF, divided into the areas described above, supplemented by technical and vocational training. According to Law No. 13,415/2017, the latter will include practical work experiences in the productive sector or in simulated environments (Brasil, 2017, 2018a).

The changes undertaken as part of the New High School Program are taking place against a backdrop of educational, social, economic, and cultural inequalities that directly affect students in this final stage of Basic Education. The National Common Core Curriculum itself acknowledges that the organization of education in the country takes place amid profound social

inequalities, which makes the implementation of a national curriculum policy for high school even more complex (Brasil, 2018a).

In this context, such changes tend to have a more intense impact on the educational trajectories of public school students, especially when considering the unequal conditions of access to higher education. Thus, the focus of this article is the relationship between high school, educational inequalities, and preparatory courses for low-income students, considering the possibilities for young people from low-income backgrounds to continue their studies.

The central issue guiding this discussion is the extent to which the restructuring of high school education—particularly with regard to the diversified portion of the curriculum and educational pathways—may affect students' opportunities for access to and continuation of higher education. It is based on the hypothesis that the reform, while promising flexibility and choice, tends to perpetuate existing inequalities, especially among public school students.

The central objective is to examine the role of low-cost preparatory courses in the context of these inequalities, taking into account age-grade mismatches, the structure of the New Secondary Education system, and the difficulties in preparing for admissions exams. To this end, the article discusses the recent restructuring of high school and its current implementation, examines the relationship between college entrance exams, the National High School Exam (ENEM), admission quotas, and the continuity of studies, analyzes data from the 2023 School Census, and, finally, reflects on how low-cost prep courses operate in the face of educational inequalities.

The text describes an exploratory study with a qualitative approach, based on a literature and documentary review. The literature review draws on authors who address educational inequalities and high school education, such as Zuin and Bastos (2019), Morais et al. (2020), and Rodrigues (2023). The documentary analysis draws on laws and official documents, particularly Laws No. 13,415/2017 and No. 14,945/2024, the National Common Core Curriculum, and data from the 2023 School Census (Brasil, 2017, 2018a, 2024c). This methodological approach integrates theory and educational data to highlight the effects of the restructuring of secondary education on the chances of young people from lower-income groups continuing their studies.

Restructuring of the New Secondary Education System and the current context for its implementation

During Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's third term (2023–2027), there has been pressure to repeal the New High School Reform. In response to these calls for repeal, the Ministry of Education pursued a process of public consultations and hearings, meetings, a series of webinars, and seminars aimed at restructuring the national secondary education policy, thereby suspending the reform's implementation schedule, as set forth in Ordinance No. 627 of April 4, 2023 (Brasil, 2023b).

The executive report on these consultations indicated a demand for increasing the number of class hours allocated to basic general education, reducing IF, and creating a new program to extend school hours: the Full-Time School Program, established by Law No. 14,640 of July 31, 2023 (Brasil, 2023a).

Consequently, the National Secondary Education Policy was approved and enacted on July 31 through Law No. 14,945/2024. The implementation of the restructured secondary education system—what we are calling the “reform of the reform”—beginning in 2025, is to take place in the education systems for students in the first grade of secondary school. In 2026, the rules will apply to the second year as well, and in 2027, to the third year.

Regarding regular high school education in the evening, the law stipulates that states must maintain, in the seat of each of their municipalities, at least one public school offering this program, when there is demand (Brasil, 2024a).

In his study, Rodrigues (2023) addresses the challenges faced by a state school in the outskirts of the urban area of Sant'Ana do Livramento, Rio Grande do Sul, during the evening shift, within the context of the New High School Program. This research was conducted during the year 2022. The institution serves students from approximately six different communities and, according to its Educational Policy Statement, the majority of students come from families with low income and low levels of education.

The author recalls the trajectory of the policy, which was implemented through mandatory measures following the Rio Grande do Sul State Government's adoption of the Support Program for the New High School System. This program was launched by the Federal Government to encourage the implementation of the reform in state school systems, without allowing time for debate or reflection on the changes proposed as part of the reform (Rodrigues, 2023).

Given the short timeframe for implementing it, the pilot schools—which were the first to adopt the program in 2019 and began the organization and planning process in 2020, using the new curriculum framework—sought to: meet the training requirements for their staff to work within the New High School System; to conduct a survey of students’ interests in IF, taking into account the schools’ autonomy in this process; to develop the new curriculum and revise the Pedagogical Policy Statement (Rodrigues, 2023).

In the course of this work, the author encountered a reality that differed from the initial policy proposals, beginning with the challenges of mapping out the possibilities for offering IF. In 2020, following the recommendation to suspend in-person activities, the pilot schools also faced the hardships of emergency remote learning (Rodrigues, 2023).

During the transition to the New High School System, Rodrigues (2023) notes that participation in the Pilot Project was limited to day students (2020 and 2021), however, on December 30, 2021, State Governor Eduardo Leite (PSDB) decreed that the New High School System would be implemented in all state schools in Rio Grande do Sul, across all shifts, for the 2022 school year (Rodrigues, 2023). It is worth noting that this is a representative example of the difficulties faced by many other Brazilian states.

It is interesting to identify some contradictions in the regulations governing the high school reform in relation to the notion of productivity, as they prescribe aspects presented as modernization and flexibility of the curriculum for student education, alongside a concern for the development of essential learning outcomes across the entire national territory (Rodrigues, 2023). Given these nuances, secondary education is clearly a space of contention, where the continuity of studies and the labor market are at odds.

It is therefore important to consider, in this discussion, the rise of informal and precarious work—which targets the children of the working class—under the logic of entrepreneurship, individualism, and being “your own boss,” a mindset that values labor flexibility and the use of digital technologies (Rodrigues, 2023, p. 47).

The author draws attention to high school students in night school, for whom there is a lack of state public policies that address this group’s needs, disregarding their specific circumstances and favoring already privileged classes (Rodrigues, 2023).

Inequalities become apparent when high school night students face a reduction in class hours for most subjects, leading to a hollowing out of the curriculum, which in turn results in an increase in “fictitious” class hours. Furthermore, the replacement of teachers who did not

wish to continue teaching the subjects or who lacked the necessary training to teach them, as well as a lack of interest on the part of students, were aspects highlighted by Rodrigues (2023).

This leads to the problem of growing inequalities, such as those regarding access to higher education. For which young people is the possibility of continuing their studies reserved, and how have curricula legitimized the status quo? The next section is dedicated to exploring these issues.

College entrance exams, the Enem, quotas, and continuing one's education at the higher education level

College entrance exams and the Enem mark the transition toward fulfilling young people's dreams, but not everyone has this privilege, since many are struggling to make ends meet and/or caught up in the desire to participate in consumer society.

The aforementioned selective assessment processes are used as a means of admission to higher education. Specifically regarding the Enem, it was expected to be aligned with the curriculum for this stage of basic education; however, since the enactment of Law 13.415/2017, high school education has been reformed, while the Enem has not (Brasil, 2017).

The Enem stands out because the exam aims to assess the state of high school education in Brazil; it is an external evaluation that maps the learning outcomes achieved in the final stage of basic education. According to Biasus and Schneider (2014): "the government's position is that the Enem, while serving as a self-assessment tool for thousands of students, also provides qualitative measures of high school education in the country" (p. 237). Although this assessment is one of the Enem's primary focuses, in practice, the exam is best known as a means of gaining admission to higher education.

Both processes—university entrance exams and the Enem—function as a kind of "filter," in which those who answer the most questions correctly have a greater chance of securing a spot. From the perspective of studies on educational inequality, Cesar (2013) asserts that the meritocratic mechanisms involved in admission to higher education have two dimensions.

The first is stratification external to institutions (resulting from characteristics related to students' social background and prior education). The second dimension, in turn, refers to "the degree of stratification within institutions, expressed by the extent to which these same characteristics affect the distribution of students among programs of higher or lower status" (Cesar, 2013, p. 11).

Thus, the more demanding the selection criteria—that is, the higher the student-to-spot ratio—the more evident it becomes who secures those spots and who the students enrolled in these programs are. Furthermore, from the perspective of the aforementioned author, access to higher education is not linked solely to the number of spots offered by institutions, but primarily to these young people’s prior educational history, particularly in high school (Cesar, 2013).

In this context, “it is well known that competitive admission mechanisms, based on academic success, are a major obstacle for students of low socioeconomic status” (Cesar, 2013, p. 12). According to Vasconcelos and Silva (2005), young people from public schools are at a disadvantage in admissions processes compared to those from private schools, as the latter prepare their students thoroughly for the competition for a spot in higher education.

Furthermore, social, economic, and cultural factors, as well as educational inequalities, are overlooked. It is as if everyone were competing under the same conditions. Given the inequality of access to higher education, Cesar (2013) argues that the issues surrounding this topic are related to the educational system that precedes the admission processes for higher education.

In a study on admissions to the University of Brasília (UnB) in 2012, Cesar (2013) highlighted the profiles of students and the impact that economic, social, and educational inequalities have on those applying for a spot, stating that the distribution of scores reveals that “the personal and socioeconomic characteristics of applicants are strongly correlated with their performance” (p. 59). The effect of socioeconomic and educational inequality throughout students’ academic trajectories is one of the factors fueling the debate over quota systems for admission to public universities.

The University of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ) and the University of Brasília (UnB) were pioneers in implementing affirmative action measures in the form of reserved spots—popularly known as quotas—“beginning in 2003, in the name of individuals’ fundamental and social rights and the principle of equal access to education” (Bayma, 2012, p. 326). Against this backdrop, Law No. 12,711 was enacted in 2012 and amended in 2023 by Law No. 14,723 (Brasil, 2023a). The Quota Law aims to reserve 50% of spots in higher education programs for applicants who meet specific criteria regarding income, skin color, and race (Brasil, 2023).

On the topic of quotas, Vasconcelos and Silva (2005) ask whether the idea that “correcting the mistakes of an entire school career in higher education would truly be the most appropriate way to help a community that visibly feels the educational gap” (p. 463) holds true.

For the authors, quotas provide effective mechanisms for access when implemented in a cohesive and coherent manner.

The authors argue that when quotas are “adopted without criteria or oversight, they can be disastrous” (Vasconcelos & Silva, 2005, p. 464). To illustrate this, they cite the case of Law No. 5,465/1968, popularly known as the “*Lei do Boi*,” “which theoretically benefited the children of farmers in university agricultural science programs but, in practice, favored the children of large landowners” (Vasconcelos & Silva, 2005, p. 464).

From this perspective, Vasconcelos and Silva (2005) believe in the benefits that affirmative action can offer, but advocate for initiatives that encourage the deepening of knowledge development in stages preceding higher education, rather than placing students in a context where their very continued enrollment may be jeopardized.

Zuin and Bastos (2019), on the other hand, advocate for affirmative action and illustrate their point with the situation of open competition for admission to the law and medicine programs at the Federal University of Rondônia (UNIR). In the open admissions process, to which affirmative action does not apply, the available spots in 2017 were filled “mostly by students from private schools” (Zuin & Bastos, 2019, p. 108).

The authors compare the period before (2013) and after (2017) the establishment of quotas and show that, at UNIR, there was “a significant change in the ‘color/race/ethnicity’ profile of students. [...] Diversity began to be achieved through quotas” (Zuin & Bastos, 2019, p. 115). For this reason, they state that: “The best way for public institutions of higher education to achieve social justice with equity in student admissions is precisely through the implementation of affirmative action at universities” (Zuin & Bastos, 2019, pp. 118–119).

Studies by Vasconcelos and Silva (2005) and Cesar (2013) highlight the need to focus on the access and retention of students admitted through quotas, who must receive support in order to prevent dropout and effectively promote social justice, as indicated by Zuin and Bastos (2019). Coordinated public policies on access and retention are necessary. In the next section, we will examine data from the most recent School Census available at the time of writing this text, in order to address challenges related to high school education and, consequently, to young people, the study’s target audience.

School Census and challenges in High School

The data from the 2023 School Census (preliminary version) are used as the subject of analysis, given that it is the most comprehensive statistical survey of basic education, as it

covers all public and private schools in Brazil. Thus, it provides insight into the country's educational situation, allowing for an assessment of current public education policies and the necessary adjustments.

The first factor to consider is the age-grade mismatch, which occurs when students are not, at any point during the school year, of the recommended age for the grade they are attending. In the case of high school, the age of 15 is considered ideal/recommended for entering the 1st year.

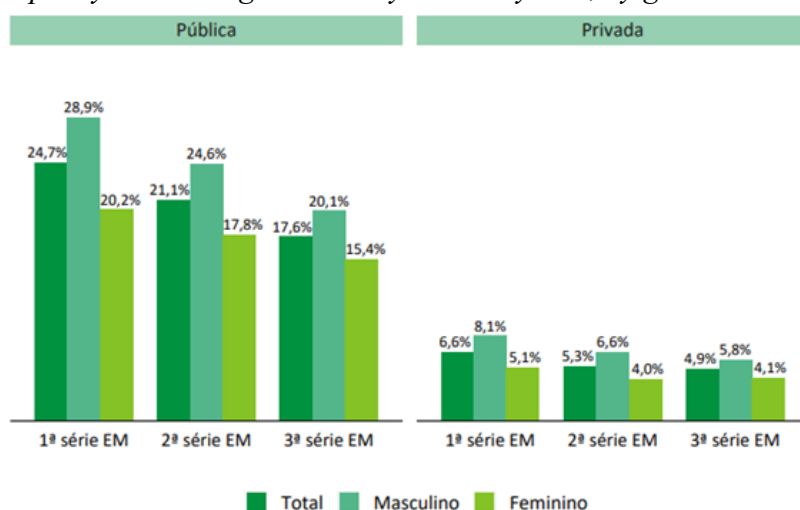
In 2023, the age-grade mismatch in high school was 19.5%, lower than the figure recorded in 2022 (22.2%). An important finding to consider, as shown in Figure 1, is that age-grade distortion rates in high school are higher in the public school system than in the private system. In the public school system, considering the first three grades of this level, the greatest distortion is observed in the 1st grade, with a rate of 24.7% (Brasil, 2024c).

The Census report indicates that there is an increase in the percentage of enrollments with age-grade mismatches from the 2nd through the 8th grade of elementary school and then, again, in the 1st grade of high school. This data is particularly relevant given that academic delay is one of the barriers to Brazilian youth's access to higher education (Brasil, 2024c).

Figure 1 also shows that the proportion of male students with an age gap relative to the educational stage they are enrolled in is higher than that of female students at all educational levels. The most striking difference is observed in the 1st year of high school, where the age-grade mismatch rate is 26.4% for males and 18.3% for females (Brasil, 2024c).

Figure 1.

Age-grade discrepancy rate in High School by school system, by gender – Brazil – 2023



Note. Brasil (2024c).

The greatest disparity in the first year of high school indicates that, despite having completed elementary school, students either did not enroll in high school or, if they did, did not complete it. Obviously, this warrants more in-depth studies on the factors driving the inequalities these students face, for example, as well as the consequences for their futures.

To examine other factors that may influence young people's futures, we return to the curriculum structure established by the New High School Program. As presented, the National Common Core Curriculum provides a framework for the development of curricula by state education departments, defining the organic and progressive set of essential learning outcomes for high school. These are outlined in the Basic General Education (FGB), which comprises the set of competencies and skills intended to guide the curricula (Brasil, 2018a).

The IFs, on the other hand, correspond to the curricular components, projects, and workshops available to high school students to supposedly choose from and deepen their knowledge, in accordance with Resolution No. 3 of November 21, 2018, which updates the Curriculum Guidelines for High School (Brasil, 2018b). School districts, therefore, have the autonomy to determine which IFs will be offered.

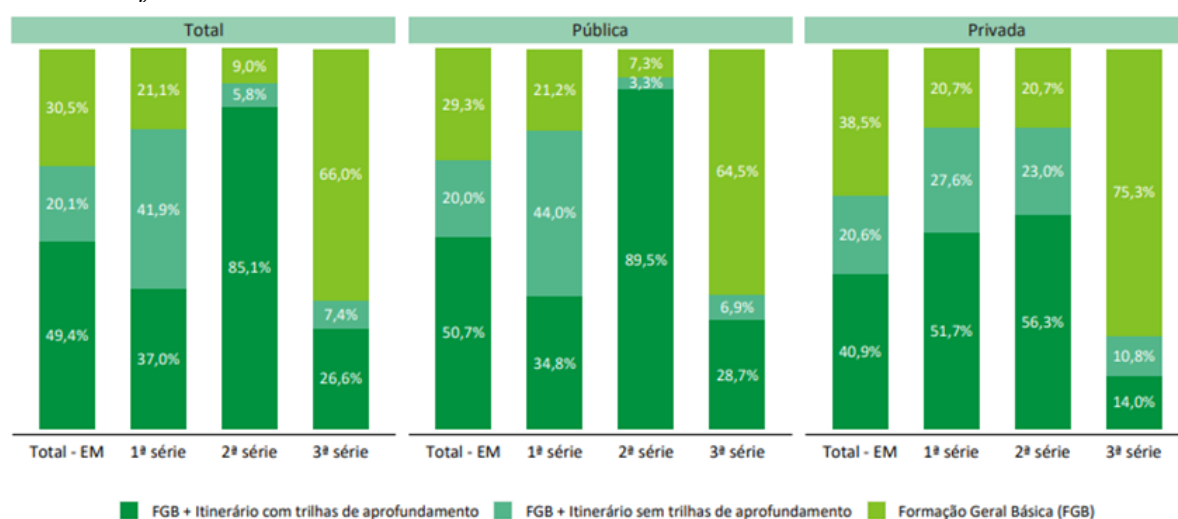
'Supposedly' because elective IFs are offered based on the capacity of state school systems; that is, although it may seem advantageous for students to have a say in their educational pathways and customize their course of study, the availability of IFs may be limited. The legislation itself stipulates that they be made available "according to their relevance to the local context and the capacity of the education systems" (Brasil, 2018a, p. 475).

The issue of the diversified track warrants attention because it has the potential to widen educational inequalities, given the varying emphases. If certain IFs are not offered, students will have limited choices. As Gontijo (2018) points out when addressing this issue: "Schools, however, will not be required to offer all five areas, so that students, depending on their choice, may be forced to change schools or opt for a program offered at the school they currently attend" (p. 68).

The 2023 School Census surveyed the composition of the curriculum structure, presented in Figure 2, throughout high school. It shows the percentage of students in FGB and IF classes with and without specialization tracks. According to the document, the distinction based on the presence or absence of specialization tracks was made because this distinction indicates a more clearly defined curricular path, although enrollment in a specialization track is not mandatory for the first year of high school (Brasil, 2024c).

Figure 2.

Percentage of High School students, by school system and educational stage, second curriculum framework – Brazil – 2023



Note. Brasil (2024c).

It is noted that the percentage of students in FGB classes and educational tracks with specialized tracks was 37% in the 1st year, 85.1% in the 2nd year, and 26.6% in the 3rd year of high school. The percentage of students in FGB and IF classes without specialized tracks was 41.9% in the 1st year, 5.8% in the 2nd year, and 7.4% in the 3rd year of high school. The percentage of students enrolled only in FGB classes (without specific components of the New High School curriculum) was 21.1% in the 1st year, 9.0% in the 2nd year, and 66.0% in the 3rd year of high school (Brasil, 2024c).

These data illustrate the diversity in the curricular composition of the New High School system and support the point made here regarding the potential for widening inequalities. One striking aspect is that, in the second and third years, private schools are, percentage-wise, more focused on FGB. This was one of the demands raised during the high school consultation process: an increase in the number of hours dedicated to FGB.

Gontijo (2018) discusses how high school assessments should follow the National Common Core Curriculum; however, he warns against the potential elimination of curricular components in the educational process of young people and adults who choose to pursue, during high school, a vocational program, unlike students who attend non-vocational FGB and IF programs full-time, which may further distance them from the possibility of continuing their studies at the higher education level.

According to the author, what was being omitted from the Ministry of Education's proposal—as it carried out the reform—was that not all students would have the opportunity to

choose independently among various IFs, truly taking into account their preferences and convenience, within the options established by the education system (Gontijo, 2018).

The range of available options is shaped by the conditions described by Rodrigues (2023), which range from structural conditions to the teaching staff required to offer the programs—which, in some schools, are restricted to those that do not meet students' interests and lead to demotivation. Gontijo (2018) therefore considers them a 'farce,' since the National Education Council (CNE) has been denouncing, for several years now, the historical shortage of teachers in many curricular areas.

In this regard, the author points to the responsibility involved in proposing IFs, which may foreshadow problems encountered when obtaining a score on the higher education entrance exam—an exam that reveals a high dropout rate caused by career choices incompatible with students' interests (Gontijo, 2018).

According to the researcher, it is necessary to consider the issue of early entry into the labor market by working-class youth (Gontijo, 2018). This is a point that Rodrigues (2023) also addressed when discussing the youthification of precarious work, which is often driven by the desire to contribute to the family income.

The integration, within the context of the recent high school reform, of technical and vocational training into the regular high school curriculum raises questions about the circumstances of students who prioritize this aspect of the New High School curriculum in order to gain admission to universities (Gontijo, 2018). It is as if a decision were made in advance to 'give up' on continuing one's studies. If this is the student's future desire, the barriers may become even more concrete, leading some students to need preparatory courses for the Enem exams, or even to pursue another educational path that allows them to bridge a gap in curricular content (Gontijo, 2018).

In Rodrigues's (2023) study, some teachers also expressed concern regarding the reduction in the number of class hours for curriculum components that are heavily emphasized in the selection processes for admission to higher education, such as college entrance exams and similar assessments.

Given that students who are most socially vulnerable also lack the resources to attend preparatory courses designed to help them develop strategies for securing a spot at top universities, they turn to popular preparatory courses, which emerged from the experience of pre-university entrance exam preparation programs for Black and underprivileged students in Rio de Janeiro, according to Pereira et al. (2010). For the authors, these prep courses serve as

laboratories for pedagogical experiments whose limits and possibilities have yet to be fully explored.

The founders of these preparatory courses, according to Pereira et al. (2010), “are, as a rule, college students who, aware of their role in the university and society, seek to organize preparatory courses capable of addressing the needs of low-income segments excluded from access to higher education” (p. 89). In the following section, the focus will be on these preparatory courses in light of the educational inequalities they seek to address and combat, as a guiding principle.

Educational inequality and popular prep courses

The current state of High School education has reignited the debate on educational inequalities, since—with the reform, particularly regarding the diversified portion of the curriculum—students can complete their High School studies through different educational pathways. What is concerning is not the fact that these pathways are different, but that educational inequalities are becoming more acute.

The relationship between high school education and admission to higher education is decisive, according to Cesar (2013). In her discussion of the selection mechanisms for higher education at the University of Brasília (UnB), Cesar (2013) highlights the profile of students admitted through the Serial Assessment Program (PAS)—a selection process conducted over the three years of regular high school—and through the entrance exam.

For the author, what stands out most regarding admission “is the institutional nature of the high school attended. Attending a private high school nearly doubles the chances of admission to either of the two systems” (Cesar, 2013, p. 48).

The author further notes, regarding the factors that lead to non-enrollment in higher education, that these are related to “educational inequality accumulated by applicants throughout their educational trajectory, which is reinforced by a meritocratic selection principle” (Cesar, 2013, p. 48).

Against this backdrop of educational inequalities, “with the aim of reducing inequality in access to higher education and in response to a demand from society, the first popular college preparatory courses emerged in the mid-1980s” (Morais et al., 2020, p. 5). These courses aim to provide educational support to students so that these young people can gain admission to higher education and continue their studies at that level—where, due to financial constraints, they face difficulties and/or are unable to afford private college entrance exam prep courses.

Vasconcelos and Silva (2005) recognize that community-based prep courses will not, on their own, change the learning reality of the young people who attend them, but rather provide a supportive space to help them take the exam. The authors note that “these are valid initiatives which, although they do not solve the problem, certainly help to reduce inequalities” (Vasconcelos & Silva, 2005, p. 456).

Pereira et al. (2010) highlight the central objective of these preparatory courses, pointing out that they cannot structurally change society, since they already work with a population that has already completed high school. In their view, perhaps the greatest merit of these prep courses is to expose “the meritocratic and unfair college entrance exam process, which, according to the analysis conducted, excludes a significant number of people who, in one way or another, have completed high school and have the right to continue their studies” (Pereira et al., 2010, p. 94).

These social projects exist both because of the identified gap in preparation for the competitive college admissions process—particularly in public high schools—and because of the inability of many young people to afford a college preparatory course that would support their pursuit of fair conditions for participation in higher education admissions.

According to Cunha (1977), one of the measures historically taken to address the high demand for higher education was to invest in what the author calls “distorted secondary education,” given that “if it prepared students for the workforce, it would reduce the number of applicants to universities” (p. 143) and would continue to supply the workforce of mid-level technicians.

The new direction given to secondary education has reignited discussions regarding: the nature of its central objective; developing effective measures to address the problems of this stage; and public versus private education. Considering these issues in the current political context and the effects that politics has had on Brazilian education is even more challenging.

Regarding the extension of the school day, we highlight one aspect that deserves attention: its selective nature. Young working students may be compelled to change schools and have no alternative but to attend night classes, since it becomes unfeasible to remain in full-time high school while also working.

This work is sought in some cases due to the family’s need for additional income, but also (and possibly, today, the most obvious reason) by the desire to acquire items that identify them as young people within their peer group, as noted by Zaluar, a Brazilian anthropologist known for her studies on poverty, violence, and urban sociability, in research conducted among

young people in a low-income neighborhood of Rio de Janeiro (Zaluar, 2012). Bourdieu (1983) also identified the desire among children from working-class families to attain adult status—and the economic capabilities associated with it—as quickly as possible.

To address this issue, the *Pé-de-meia* Program was established. It is a savings program for public high school students and aims to reduce dropout rates at this stage of basic education (Brasil, 2024b).

The program is administered by the Secretariat of Basic Education (SEB), with an annual federal investment of approximately 8.2 billion in 2024. The financial incentive is designed to help students remain in High School, mitigating the effects of social inequalities on continuity and completion of this educational stage, with the aim of reducing dropout and truancy rates. It also aims to promote human development by addressing the structural determinants of extreme poverty and its intergenerational transmission, as well as by fostering social mobility (Brasil, 2024b).

The *Pé-de-meia* Program guarantees that, once enrollment is verified, the student will receive R\$ 200.00, to which is added a monthly incentive of R\$ 200.00, provided they attend more than 80% of classes during the month; these funds can be withdrawn at any time, plus deposits of R\$ 1,000.00 at the end of each of the three completed years of high school, which may only be withdrawn from the savings account after this period. In total, the annual incentive deposits, the installment corresponding to enrollment, the monthly installments, and an additional R\$ 200.00 for participating in the Enem will be accounted for, totaling R\$ 9,200.00 per student (Brasil, 2024b).

The Program is approached as a means of reflecting on how public policies can serve as a way to address the well-known inequalities faced by some Brazilian youth.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In terms of potential, it is evident that affordable preparatory courses provide greater opportunities for access to higher education for a segment of young people plagued by inequalities, including educational ones. Thus, they play a limited role in democratizing access to higher education, as there is no guarantee that, in the short term, these young people will have conditions similar to those of privileged youth, and because they serve a segment that has already managed to complete high school.

The high school reform enters the picture with the proposal to establish a set of competencies and skills outlined in the BNCC to strengthen the comprehensive education of students and IFs—a diversified component that can take place within a single field of knowledge or by combining fields with technical and vocational training. Data from the School Census (Brasil, 2024c) show that the composition of the curriculum is indeed diversifying, with the private sector focusing on a higher percentage of General Education (FGB) in the 2nd and 3rd years of high school.

The profound inequalities in access to higher education at a time when adjustments are being made for the New High School System demonstrate that educational policy—through the implementation of affirmative action measures, such as quotas and the *Pé-de-meia* Program—has the potential to effectively mitigate inequalities among young people.

REFERENCES

- Bayma, F. (2012). Reflexões sobre a constitucionalidade das cotas raciais em universidades públicas no Brasil: Referências internacionais e os desafios pós-julgamento das cotas. *Ensaio: Avaliação e Políticas Públicas em Educação*, 20(75), 325–346. <https://doi.org/10.1590/S0104-40362012000200006>
- Biasus, S. T., & Schneider, M. P. (2014). Exame Nacional do Ensino Médio (ENEM): Os caminhos das políticas públicas educacionais nacionais do ensino médio. *Educativa*, 17(1), 223–251. <https://doi.org/10.18224/educ.v17i1.3604>
- Bourdieu, P. (1983). *Questões de sociologia* (J. Vaitsman, Trad.). Marco Zero.
- Brasil. (1988). *Constituição da República Federativa do Brasil*. Senado Federal.
- Brasil. (1996). *Lei nº 9.394, de 20 de dezembro de 1996. Estabelece as diretrizes e bases da educação nacional*. Diário Oficial da União. https://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/leis/19394.htm
- Brasil. (2017). *Lei nº 13.415, de 16 de fevereiro de 2017. Altera as Leis nº 9.394, de 20 de dezembro de 1996, que estabelece as diretrizes e bases da educação nacional, e nº 11.494, de 20 de junho de 2007 [...]*. Diário Oficial da União. https://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/_ato2015-2018/2017/lei/113415.htm
- Brasil. (2018a). *Base Nacional Comum Curricular*. Ministério da Educação.
- Brasil. (2018b). *Resolução nº 3, de 21 de novembro de 2018. Atualiza as Diretrizes Curriculares Nacionais para o Ensino Médio*. Diário Oficial da União. https://www.in.gov.br/materia/-/asset_publisher/Kujrw0TZC2Mb/content/id/51281622
- Brasil. (2023a). *Lei nº 14.723, de 13 de novembro de 2023. Altera a Lei nº 12.711, de 29 de agosto de 2012, para dispor sobre o programa especial para o acesso às instituições federais de educação superior e de ensino técnico de nível médio de estudantes pretos, pardos, indígenas e quilombolas e de pessoas com deficiência, bem como daqueles que tenham cursado integralmente o ensino médio ou fundamental em escola pública*. Diário Oficial da União. https://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/_ato2023-2026/2023/lei/114723.htm
- Brasil. (2023b). *Portaria nº 627, de 4 de abril de 2023. Suspende os prazos em curso da Portaria MEC nº 521, de 13 de julho de 2021, que instituiu o Cronograma Nacional de Implementação do Novo Ensino Médio*. Diário Oficial da União. <https://www.in.gov.br/en/web/dou/-/portaria-n-627-de-4-de-abril-de-2023-475187235>
- Brasil. (2024a). *Lei nº 14.945, de 31 de julho de 2024. Altera a Lei nº 9.394, de 20 de dezembro de 1996 [...] e as Leis nº 14.818, de 16 de janeiro de 2024, nº 12.711, de 29 de agosto de 2012, nº 11.096, de 13 de janeiro de 2005, e nº 14.640, de 31 de julho de 2023*. Diário Oficial da União. https://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/_ato2023-2026/2024/lei/114945.htm
- Brasil. (2024b). *Pé-de-meia*. Ministério da Educação. <https://www.gov.br/mec/pt-br/pe-de-meia>

- Brasil. (2024c). *Resumo técnico: Censo Escolar da Educação Básica 2023*. Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais Anísio Teixeira.
- Cesar, L. J. T. (2013). Mecanismos de seleção para o ensino superior e desigualdade educacional: Um estudo sobre o PAS e o vestibular na Universidade de Brasília. *Sociedade e Estado*, 28(3), 723–742.
- Cunha, L. A. (1977). *Política educacional no Brasil: A profissionalização do ensino médio* (2ª ed.). Eldorado.
- Gontijo, J. R. M. (2018). *Reforma do ensino médio: Aspectos pedagógicos, formativos, legais e perspectivas* (Dissertação de mestrado, Universidade de Uberaba).
- Morais, E. A., Pedro, D. F. P., Fernandes, B. M., Silva, J. J. R., Cruz, M. P., Nogueira Neto, L. F., Oliveira, C. E. M., & Geraldo, V. (2020). Curso popular para o Exame Nacional do Ensino Médio: Um meio de inclusão social em Itabira. *Research, Society and Development*, 9(5), e60952849. <https://doi.org/10.33448/rsd-v9i5.2849>
- Pereira, T. I., Raizer, L., & Meirelles, M. (2010). A luta pela democratização do acesso ao ensino superior: O caso dos cursinhos populares. *Espaço Pedagógico*, 17(1), 86–96. <https://doi.org/10.5335/rep.2013.2029>
- Rodrigues, Z. C. (2023). *O Novo Ensino Médio e o noturno: Desafios em uma Escola Estadual periférica de Sant'Ana do Livramento/RS* (Dissertação de mestrado, Universidade Federal do Pampa).
- Vasconcelos, S. D., & Silva, E. G. (2005). Acesso à universidade pública através de cotas: Uma reflexão a partir da percepção dos alunos de um pré-vestibular inclusivo. *Ensaio: Avaliação e Políticas Públicas em Educação*, 13(49), 453–467. <https://doi.org/10.1590/S0104-40362005000400004>
- Zaluar, A. (2012). Juventude violenta: Processos, retrocessos e novos percursos. *Dados*, 55(2), 327–365. <https://doi.org/10.1590/S0011-52582012000200003>
- Zuin, A. L. A., & Bastos, E. (2019). A justiça social por meio das cotas na Universidade Federal de Rondônia. *Educação & Formação*, 4(12), 104–123. <https://doi.org/10.25053/redufor.v4i12.945>

CRediT Author Statement

- ☐ **Acknowledgments:** To the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES), for the fellowships awarded to the researchers during the period in which this research was conducted.
 - ☐ **Funding:** Federal University of Mato Grosso (UFMT), through the Office of the Vice-Rector for Research (PROPESQ).
 - ☐ **Conflicts of interest:** The authors certify that they have no commercial or associative interests that represent a conflict of interest regarding this manuscript.
 - ☐ **Ethical approval:** Not applicable.
 - ☐ **Data and materials availability:** The data and materials used in this study are available and open access.
 - ☐ **Authors' contributions:** The authors declare that they contributed equally to all stages of the article's preparation, including: Conceptualization, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing (original draft, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, and Final Draft), review, and editing.
-

Processing and editing: Editora Ibero-Americana de Educação
Proofreading, formatting, normalization and translation

