

# Secondary Education in Brazil: a system that persists in social reproduction<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This empirical research analyzes the transformation and expansion of secondary education in Brazil over the last decades. Despite the rapid growth in the enrolment rate observed after 2000, factors such as income, ethnicity, urban-rural are still strongly related to educational inequity. Secondary education in Brazil is extremely selective and responsive to the students' labor situation, with a low percentage of student workers accessing and succeeding at this level of education. Despite the policies and programs implemented in recent years, the crucial differences between public and private schools persist and reduce the role of education in social mobility, shaping a strongly reproductive educational system. Moreover, rather than being a propeller for reducing social inequality, secondary education is an important element in the process of formation and reproduction of the enormous inequality that marks the Brazilian society.

**Keywords:** secondary education; Brazil; social reproduction; inequalities; young students.

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## Introduction

As in many countries around the world, secondary education in Brazil has been in crisis in recent decades. Despite the initiatives and programs implemented over the years, including the National Plan of Education<sup>2</sup> and the proposal of a National Common Curricular Base, the country has not yet found a balance on providing both education for citizenship and professional development.

This scenario contrasts with the large amount of financial resources invested in education in Brazil over the last decades, especially if we consider that indicators of access, equity and quality have not experienced the expected improvement. The various programs implemented by federal, state and local governments have not been able to expand the system, maintaining and enhancing its quality. For many young students, attaining secondary education remains an unfulfilled dream. To get a sense of the challenge at hand, 49% of the population aged 25 to 64 did not complete secondary education; and among young people aged 15-17 years, 1.2 million are out of school, representing 12% of this age group (IBGE, 2019). Of this total, 52% had not even concluded primary education. Only 19% of this age group had attained upper secondary education. Considering secondary education, we can affirm that Brazilians can expect to go through 15.7 years of education between the ages of 5 and 39, less than the OECD average of 17.5 years (OECD, 2016). Among the reasons for this is the premature entry into the labor market, the difficult access to schools in rural regions and the social crisis on the legitimacy of this level of education. In

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2 The Brazilian National Plan for Education (2014-2024) was designed as a 10-year commitment to reduce educational inequalities. The goals include provision of early childhood education for all four- and five-year-olds; universal provision of nine years of schooling; and raising the enrolment rate in secondary education to 85%.

many cases, secondary education was reduced to “only” a required stage (or step) prior to higher education, having no relevance either to the formation of a social consciousness or to the preparation for the labor market. Therefore, this empirical research analyzes the transformation and expansion of secondary education in Brazil over the last decades. This article is organized into five main parts as follows. The first introduces the stratification process related to inequality in education. The second discusses the access to education in relation to territorial and educational opportunities. The next summarizes the changes and patterns in the Brazilian educational reality. The fourth part focuses on access and permanence of young people in education. Finally, the last part presents the final remarks.

### **Stratification, capital and habitus in education**

The topic of educational stratification relates to the interaction between social origin and educational levels achieved by individuals. Based on this relationship, it is possible to verify tendencies toward social mobility in selected populational segments. The classical interpretations on the subject diverge. The theory of modernization stresses the perspective that the school system is a mechanism for effective mobility (Parsons, 1991), education being a great means for overcoming social inequalities. On the other hand, the theory of cultural reproduction emphasizes the intergenerational trend to preserve the distribution of cultural capital inherited in the family environment. These social limits would only be overcome based on a lot of individual effort or with cultural goodwill (Bourdieu; Passeron, 1982). The condition of permanence in the same educational levels in relation to previous generations indicates stability in the system and little or no mobility. In contrast, educational systems are more open or democratic the more their results allow individuals to overcome social limitations determined by a family origin of low formal education level. However, if new populational

segments reach higher school results, this is not necessarily translated into a general equalization of educational and social opportunities (Caregnato et al., 2019; 2018; Grisa; Neves; Raizer, 2019).

The parents' level of education is usually presented along with other important variables to characterize and explain the unequal access to high levels of education. One of them is low income, which hinders the access to education. Another is the quantum of cultural capital accumulated in the family of origin, often found to be too limited to ensure the mastery of codes and references required to ensure success in this stage of education.

All these markers of diversity also point to different constellations of habitus. Due to the habitus' capacity of being transferred across multiple contexts, individuals use the same practical frameworks to answer to new situations (Bourdieu, 2007; Wacquant, 2007). An individual's habitus is usually constructed in their interaction with the other members of the social group in which they are inserted. This social group has variable quanta of economic, social, cultural and symbolic capitals, which entail different opportunities. In the convergence of cultural and social capitals, Kleanthous (2014) notes the influence of informational capital in the families' strategies for promoting a successful student transition to higher education. In the current Brazilian context, as a great educational expansion is succeeded by an economic retraction, it is possible to notice a trend characterized by Bourdieu (1982) in the relation between the educational system and the broader social system (habitus hysteresis and diploma inflation). This is linked to the habitus producing effects that are not exactly the intended ones. Therefore, the possible gains of the students from populational strata with low cultural capital within the system are limited (Ballantine, 2017).

Broadening this analysis, Nogueira (2013) emphasizes the role that the strategies pursued by the parents have on the academic performance of students and the choice among various school opportunities. Especially for the middle classes, the school choice becomes relevant as a device to feed

back into status, setting what some authors have named the *parentocracy*. The expansion of the public-school system in the last decade, especially the federal network of vocational and technological education , seems to be finding a major obstacle to reach the expected target group - poor and vulnerable potential students. The reason is that, in many states, it is precisely the middle class that has sought the schools providing such education not because of a faster integration into the labor market, but as a strategy of cultural capital accumulation.

### **Access to education, territorial and educational opportunities**

The division between urban and rural areas continues to be a relevant factor in social stratification and economic and cultural capital accumulation. In general, companies acting in industrial and specialized services areas demand a more skilled workforce, with higher education or technical training. This workforce is drawn both from the local population who seeks education in order to access the labor market and qualified people or people lacking qualification who migrate toward these areas seeking or presenting a better qualification to enter these worlds of streamlined work (Raizer, 2016).

In recent years, studies have shown that access and permanence in education are largely determined or at least influenced by income inequality (Grisa et al., 2019; Nogueira, 2013; Dayrell et al., 2012; Almeida; Nogueira 2002). Even with guaranteed access, in many cases, there are high dropout rates. These high rates have been explained both by the impossibility of the student to dispose of time to study rather than to work, and the inequality of cultural and social capitals among students from different social classes. In this

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<sup>3</sup> The Law 11892, of December 29, 2008, Establishes the Federal Network of Professional, Scientific and Technological Education, creates the Federal Institutes of Education, Science and Technology in all states of the country.

sense, the schooling trajectory and investment in education will be proportional to the economic capital available to the students' family, considering the family's expectation to convert the cultural capital attained through schooling back into economic gain (Costa, 2008). So that, the quantum of the student and their family's cultural capital will shape the future possibilities to accumulate economic capital. Although not mechanically, school success becomes essential to the potential professional/economic success. As Ribeiro (2017, p. 27) argues,

...the breakdown of 'mediated occupational inheritance' indicated that there was little equalization of access to education (the association between the parents' occupation and child's education decreased only slightly) and a much larger decrease to educational returns in terms of the occupational status attained (the association between the son's education and occupational status). All these elements, however, combined to produce a fairly modest increase in occupational mobility.

### **The Brazilian educational reality: changes and patterns**

Throughout our research trajectory, we have focused on the student population between ages 15 and 24, since this age range comprises the transition from secondary to higher education. Moreover, research on the links between the educational system and the labor market in young people's experience can yield significant findings to understand the complex relations involved in the process of social reproduction and its consequences.

Additionally, despite the universalization of access to education, with a large increase in the frequency of children in primary school, that is the most vulnerable population in the country, regarding school dropout, income indicators, age-series inadequacy, violence etc. Also, most of the so-called new audiences come from this group. Moreover, it is among the population between ages 15 and 29 that we find the highest percentage of people who neither study nor work in the country (18% among men; 28%

among women). For these reasons, in this study, we will show and analyze data on this population, without losing sight of other social groups.

With the purpose to analyze the situation of young people in Brazil in terms of access and permanence in secondary education - especially considering the age group between 15 and 24 years -, this study presents some data from the last decades (2000-2018) that contribute to understanding this reality. We present some data covering access and frequency indicators in the different educational levels according to age, gender, income and ethnical origin. We also explore the relations between this scenario and the labor market. The secondary data referenced are based on national census and sample surveys with national coverage.

Although the enrolment rate of children and youngsters between ages 6 and 14 in the country increased to almost 100% in recent decades, there are still relevant problems concerning expected years of study, frequency and dropout. These matters vary according to the attended level, ethnical group and age group. In the age group 15 to 17 years, for example, the percentage of young people not attending school in 2010 was 16.7%, 16.8% among men and 16.6% among women (IBGE, 2013). The biggest difference was between urban (15.6%) and rural (21.7%) areas, with substantial disparities in all regions of the country. In urban areas, the percentage of adolescents aged 15 to 17 years old who were not attending school was lower: 14.4% in the Southeast and 17.9% in the South. However, in rural areas, it reached 20.0% in the Northeast and 25.8% in the North, still quite high (IBGE, 2013). Data from 2014 show a resilient scenario, with 1.7 million young people aged 15-17 years still out of school, representing 16% of this age group. Of this total, 52% had not even concluded primary education, and only 19% of this age group had attained upper secondary education (IBGE, 2014). In 2018 (IBGE, 2019), 12% of young people aged 15-17 were still out of school, and more than 30% were in situation of age/grade distortion. The goal of the National Education Plan was for the first rate to reach 0% in 2016.

In the period between 2001 and 2014, the percentage of young people between 15 and 17 years of age attending upper secondary education went from 41.2% to 61.4%, representing a growth of 49% (IBGE, 2014). The National Education Plan's goal to meet the rate of 85% by 2024 would require an increase of about 40% over the next years. This may not be an easy task, since the enrolment rate of this population grew by only 6% by year (Simões, 2016).

Nevertheless, the educational deficit is much more significant among the age groups that span between ages 18-19 and 20-24. The percentage of women who were not attending school was 54.6% in the first group, and 73.2% in the second one. Among men, these indicators were 55.4 % and 76.5%, respectively in 2018. The difference between education in urban and rural areas was also high. In urban areas, the percentage of people who were not attending school was 54.2% in the first age group, and 73.6% in the second one. Meanwhile, in the rural area, these indicators corresponded to 59.0% and 82.3%, respectively (IBGE, 2019).

Data from the last national census (IBGE, 2013) shows that the level of household income is one of the most important factors to facilitate access to school, regardless of the person's age. The results showed that enrolment rates grew with the increase in household monthly nominal income per capita. Among children and adolescents of 10-17 years of age, there is a negative association between participation in the employed population and school attendance. The employment levels among children and adolescents who were not attending school reached 17.5% in age group 10-13, 23.2% in age group 14-15 and 37.5% in age group 16-17. Among students, the employment levels for these age groups were, respectively, 4.8%, 11.7% and 23.8%. This pattern can be observed for both men and women and is similar in urban and rural areas. Furthermore, the high level of age/grade distortion found among those who are studying should be considered: 21% of students in primary and 29.5% in lower secondary education were not in the age-



correspondent grade (IBGE, 2007). Data from 2019 show that among the richest 20%, the percentage of dropouts in the 15-17-year-old population drops to 1.4%, against 12% among the 20% poorer students (IBGE, 2019). Among young people in age group 15-17, school attendance drops from 92.2% to 72.6% in the passage from the richest quintile to the poorest quintile. For young people in age group 18-24, the situation worsens, as attendance rates drop from 48.6% to only 25.1% for the 20% poorest students (IBGE, 2019).

In this scenario, the obvious need to approximate schools and the labor market, enabling young people to combine basic training with the development of professional skills appears as an impending task. Nevertheless, only 4% of young people in 15-19 age group are attending upper secondary vocational programs. According to the OCDE report (2016, p. 2),

in 2014, only 4% of 15-19 year-olds in Brazil were enrolled in upper secondary vocational programmes (OECD average, 25%), compared to 40% enrolment rate in general programmes in the same age group. If current patterns persist, only 6% of young people in Brazil are expected to graduate from an upper secondary vocational programme in their lifetime. This is in sharp contrast to most OECD countries, where, on average, 46% of young people are expected to finish upper secondary vocational programme.

The Brazilian situation can be considered critical even in comparison with other Latin America countries (Chile, México, Costa Rica, Colombia), which enroll 30% of this age group in vocational education. The percentage of upper secondary students enrolled in vocational education was only 8% (INEP, 2016).

## **Access and permanence of young people in education: seeking answers**

Considering the data, indicators and studies presented so far, it is possible to identify some trends and dynamics of access and permanence in the Brazilian educational system. The various indicators analyzed show a great challenge related to the large number of young people who drop out of school very early: more than 65% of young people in age group 18-24 have already left any level of education. Besides, a second problem relates to age/grade distortion, as 32% of this age group concluded only elementary education. This finding makes clear a systematic process of exclusion, which is expressed both by the early exit from the educational system and the late attainment of school degrees resulting from age/grade distortion.

The dropout process can be identified from lower age groups, since primary education generating consequences such as the low number of students in higher education. This reinforces the idea of a perverse educational pyramid (Neves; Raizer; Fachinetto, 2007): although the universal access to education is provided to people between age 7-14, the main problem of how to keep these kids in school after this period, effectively expanding their educational and professional opportunities, has not been addressed.

Even with the improvement of schooling over the experience of previous generations, the Brazilian indicators are a far cry from other countries, including Latin American ones. It is also noteworthy that, while enrolment in primary and secondary education is concentrated in the public sector (88% and 80%, respectively), in higher education, this ratio is reversed, with 70% of students in private institutions. This fact further complicates the permanence of these young in higher education, despite current funding policies.

Additionally, if we consider the level of education attended, there is a remarkable concentration of young people from families with higher income attending upper secondary education in private schools. In relation to higher education, in percentage terms, only 8% of students in public institutions, and 3.4% in private institutions come from families in the first and second quintiles. On the other hand, the largest percentage of students attending this level of education (more than 78% both in public and in private institutions), come from families in the highest quintile of income (Caregnato et al., 2018).

In most cases, there has been a yearly increase in the number of average years of study. Given this is a recent trend, the serious situation of illiteracy among the population over 65 years old persists. In this case, it is possible to reflect on the importance of implementing policies that encourage permanence at school after the age of 14, as young people who remain in the system after this age are likely to continue for a longer period, to complete upper secondary school, and, increasingly, to enter higher education. Among the identified reasons for young people to drop out of school, entering the workforce, there is the need to help with household subsistence, to work or to look for work. Besides, 15% of the student-age population reported that there was either no school in their homes' vicinity, or there were no places, or they lacked transportation (Salata, 2019; IBGE, 2014).

This situation should be further contextualized in a scenario of "educational crisis", as pointed out by Mendonça (2011, p. 355):

The school has been unable so far to assimilate either the new social demands arising from the material relations of production or those related to an educational project capable of going beyond immediate issues towards human emancipation as its main goal.

Among young people between 18 and 24 years old, the percentage of individuals who only study decreases as age increases. There is also a

significant increase, about 80%, in the number of young people who only work and do not study. This scenario shows the inability of the Brazilian educational system to allow the permanence of young people in formal education, and to interact more dynamically and positively with their entry into the labor market, since most of the time, finding and keeping a job and attending school can be seen as conflicting demands.

### **Final remarks**

The existence of a National Education Plan with 20 targets to be met by 2024 indicates that, in spite of considerable progress, the country still has major challenges ahead. There is certainly much to be done in terms of expansion of access, particularly concerning early childhood education, secondary education and higher education, as well as social segments that have been historically excluded and are now being targeted by inclusion and diversity policies. The challenge for the coming years is universal access with quality.

The main argument guiding this study is that the effectiveness of current educational policy is compromised due to non-responsiveness to the demands of the target group (working class students, socially vulnerable population), keeping young people away from secondary education in their attempts to become integrated to the labor market. This has led to historically low levels of access to education by this population, well below the established national and international goals.

In summary, studies, research and educational data on the subject indicate a very challenging scenario, since the country has not managed to drive the expansion of access to the educational system toward an effective transformation in the pattern of integration of young people to the labor market. Future studies may further explore the causes of this gap by

analyzing the relationship between educational supply and demand with economic and social indicators; strategies for students to accumulate capital and capital conversion processes; school phenomena and possible impacts on the distribution of opportunities in the school system; impacts of social inequality, ethnicity and gender on educational opportunities.

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