SCHOOL TRAJECTORIES OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN ILLITERACY SITUATIONS: INVISIBILITY, DROPOUTS AND PERSISTENCE

TRAJETÓRIAS ESCOLARES DE JOVENS EM SITUAÇÃO DE ANALFABETISMO: INVISIBILIDADE, EVASÃO E PERSISTÊNCIA

TRAYECTORIAS ESCOLARES DE JÓVENES EN SITUACIÓN DE ANALFABETISMO: INVISIBILIDAD, ABANDONO Y PERSISTENCIA

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ABSTRACT: Literacy at all stages of life is a human right that promotes improving living conditions. This research aimed to understand the difficulties faced by illiterate young people in schooling. This qualitative and documentary research was carried out through analysis of school records and interviews with young students and their teachers in a Youth and Adult Education (EJA) school. The results indicate fragmented paths marked by failures in schooling, evasions, and some persistence. EJA represents hope for literacy achievement, work, and social inclusion. However, staying there is challenging due to learning difficulties; social vulnerabilities intensified by violent contexts; mental health disorders; drug abuse; early pregnancy, and overload in the working day. It was concluded that it is essential to offer psychosocial support and formal literacy spaces at all school stages, with strategies that contribute to access to the job market, autonomy, and citizenship.

KEYWORDS: Youth and Adult Education. Illiteracy. Youth. School education. School Failure.

RESUMO: A alfabetização em todas as etapas da vida é um direito humano que promove melhorias nas condições de vida. Esta pesquisa procurou compreender as dificuldades enfrentadas por jovens em situação de analfabetismo em seus processos de escolarização. Trata-se de uma pesquisa qualitativa e documental realizada por meio de análise dos históricos escolares e entrevistas com jovens e professores de uma escola de Educação de Jovens e Adultos (EJA). Os resultados indicam percursos fragmentados, marcados por reprovações, evasões e persistências. A EJA representa uma esperança de alfabetização, trabalho e inclusão social. Porém, a permanência é desafiadora devido às dificuldades de aprendizagem; vulnerabilidades sociais decorrentes de contextos violentos; saúde mental; abuso de drogas; gravidez precoce e sobrecarga na jornada de trabalho. Concluiu-se que é fundamental oferecer suportes psicossociais e espaços formais de alfabetização em todas as etapas escolares, com estratégias que favoreçam o acesso ao mercado de trabalho, a autonomia e cidadania.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Educação de Jovens e Adultos. Analfabetismo. Juventude. Educação Escolar. Fracasso Escolar.

RESUMEN: La alfabetización en todas las etapas de la vida es un derecho humano que promueve la mejora de las condiciones de vida. Esta investigación buscó comprender las dificultades escolares de jóvenes en situación de analfabetismo. Esta es una investigación cualitativa y documental realizada a través del análisis de expedientes escolares y entrevistas a jóvenes y docentes de una escuela de Educación de Adultos (EA). Los resultados indican escolarización fragmentada, marcada por fracasos, evasiones y perseverancia. La EA representa Esperanza de alfabetización, trabajo e inclusión social. Sin embargo, mantener el compromiso de los estudiantes resulta arduo debido a las dificultades de aprendizaje; vulnerabilidades en contextos violentos; la salud mental; abuso de drogas; embarazos precoces y sobrecarga de trabajo. Por consiguiente, es imperativo un sólido apoyo psicosocial con intervenciones de alfabetización eficaces en todas las etapas educativas para que se promuevan el acceso al empleo, la autonomía y la ciudadanía.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Educación de Jóvenes y Adultos. Analfabetismo. Juventud. Educación Escolar. Fracaso escolar

Introduction

The phenomenon of illiteracy among Brazilian youth encompasses complex and multifactorial dimensions, primarily involving historical and political contexts of unequal access to quality education. Despite the expansion of access to Basic Education in the country, which has contributed favorably to reducing the percentage of illiterate individuals, Brazil still falls short of the goal set by the National Education Plan (PNE) to eradicate illiteracy by 2024 (Brasil, 2014). According to data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), the illiteracy rate among individuals aged 15 years and older was 6.1% in 2019, decreasing to 5.6% in 2022. Nevertheless, this percentage translates to approximately 9.6 million Brazilians (IBGE, 2023a), a substantial number that, for comparison, is nearly equivalent to Portugal's population in 2022. In other words, it is nearly the size of a country populated entirely by non-literate individuals.

Moreover, Brazil has a significant number of young people who make very limited use of reading and writing skills. Although they can read and write a simple note, many struggle to read and interpret a news article correctly, as indicated by the latest assessment of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), in the 2022 assessment, more than half of 15-year-old Brazilians did not reach the basic level in reading (Brasil, 2023).

Regarding the definition of illiteracy, the Brazilian population census employs a simplified conception, considering illiterate those who "declare not to know how to read and write a simple note in their known language" and those who have learned but forgotten (IBGE, 2010). This definition was also adopted by the surveyed school to organize literacy groups and select young people who would benefit from these classes.

Throughout this research, it became evident that illiteracy in Brazil remains a taboo subject, especially among the younger population, influencing public policies that overlook illiterate individuals at all stages of education, omitting this need from curricula. Some studies indicate that illiteracy tends to be interpreted as an individual's responsibility and is associated with pejorative attributes such as laziness, ignorance, or lack of effort to learn (Galvão; Di Pierro, 2013). Individuals in this condition often feel discriminated against, ashamed, and blamed. This stigma and prejudice against illiterate individuals are encapsulated in the term "*analfabeto*" (illiterate), which, according to Souza (2022), should be replaced with "*analfabetizado*". The terminological change, according to the author, is necessary as a form of historical reparation regarding the state's responsibility in perpetuating literacy inequalities.

We agree with Souza (2022) on avoiding the use of the term "illiterate," which carries stigma. However, in this work, instead of using the term "illiterate," we opted for the expression "in a situation of illiteracy" because we understand that the issue should be addressed as a transient condition that can be overcome by most individuals with adequate support throughout their educational journeys.

Paulo Freire, in the 1960s and 1970s, in his renowned struggle against illiteracy and the associated prejudices, sought to place the socio-political subject at the center of pedagogical activity. The notions of empowerment and autonomy, in the Freirean perspective, should be developed simultaneously with the acquisition of literacy skills. According to Freire (2020), learning to read and write was a key to written communication and an opening to the systematic acquisition of culture, socioeconomic empowerment, and the construction of a democratic society.

We understand that adult literacy should be approached as a social investment, as it impacts people's health, working conditions, political-economic organization, productivity, and a nation's development (Gadotti, 2009). Moreover, it is a matter of human security, as emphasized by Sen (2003), because illiteracy generates uncertainties and represents a form of social, political, and financial insecurity, limiting individuals in defending their rights and participating in society.

Despite the positive legacy left by Freire among Brazilian educators regarding the hope of eliminating illiteracy, especially among those involved in adult education who struggle daily against numerous adversities, illiteracy persists. This persistence manifests unequally concerning age group, gender, race, social class, and region of the country. The age group with the highest concentration of illiterate individuals comprises those aged sixty years and older, individuals who likely had fewer opportunities for school access.

Among young people aged eighteen to twenty-four years, the percentage is 0.75%, which translates to approximately one hundred and seventy-two thousand young people. In 2022, Brazil had approximately 22.8 million young people in this age group. Considering the proportion of young people in illiteracy relative to the number of students in this age group, approximately 6.9 million, we arrive at an estimate of 2.45% who are not literate (IBGE, 2023a). These are young people who have gone through school but have been marginalized in their basic right to learn to read and write. They are affected by a fundamental social and human right, the right to education, as articulated by Gadotti (2009). He argues that "illiteracy among young people and adults is an unacceptable social deformity, produced by economic, social,

and cultural inequality" (Gadotti, 2009, p. 14, our translation). Therefore, when young people seek Adult and Youth Education without being literate, it is crucial that they find a space that accommodates this demand.

Young people who have non-completing of elementar school have the right to enroll in Youth and Adult schools to complete the educational stage from which they dropped out as specified by the National Education Guidelines and Bases Law (Brasil, 1996). With policies of continuous progression, an increasing number of youths who dropped out of primary education in the final stages have sought enrollment in EJA without being adequately literate. In the city of São Paulo, where the research was conducted, the curricular organization of this modality is structured into four stages: Literacy and Basic Education, corresponding to the initial years of regular Elementary School, and the Complementary and Final stages, corresponding to the final years of regular Elementary School (São Paulo, 2023).

This organization stipulates that individuals completing Elementary School I should be enrolled in the Complementary or Final stages, in groupings whose curriculum content is equivalent to that of Elementary School II, thus excluding them from literacy activities. If a youth dropped out of school in the eighth year, according to the legislation, they would only have to remain in EJA for one year. This organization results in young people in situations of illiteracy having their specific needs overlooked, which can be demotivating for their educational retention. Furthermore, if a youth completes Elementary or High School without being literate, they cannot enroll in EJA or any school offering the literacy class they need. In this sense, the youth would be deprived of a fundamental right that should be guaranteed to those who were already deprived during regular schooling, as Gadotti (2009) reveals.

There is a noticeable omission in the Brazilian education system due to the absence of formal space for the literacy of those who advance in schooling but are not literate. This starts in primary education, where remedial classes for those facing difficulties are often non-existent in many schools or, when they do exist, are not explicitly geared toward literacy (Prioste, 2020).

Illiteracy, school dropout, and reading difficulties can contribute to an increase in the number of young people who are neither studying nor working, commonly referred to as "NEETs" (Not in Education, Employment, or Training). In 2022, the proportion of young people in this condition rose. In the age group of 14 to 29 years, 20% of Brazilian youth were neither studying nor working. When considering race, this number rises to 22% (IBGE, 2023b).

The condition of NEETs is characterized by simultaneously being outside the education system and the labor market. Freire and Saboia (2021) categorize young people who are neither

studying nor working into two groups: inactive and unemployed. According to their study, the difference between these groups lies in the fact that unemployed individuals are actively seeking work, whereas inactive individuals are not, meaning they are not actively looking for employment. The disillusionment of young people regarding the future of work may also be a factor to consider.

Low educational attainment resulting from dropping out before completing elementary school directly impacts the ability of young people to access the labor market. The educational failure experienced by these youths marks them as different and lacking, leading them to develop a devalued self-image (Charlot, 2000).

The issue of weak attachment of young people to school is not new. According to Andrade (2008), while in the past young people dropped out due to failing grades, educational reforms that reduced school failure rates have led them to maintain an ambivalent relationship with the school, characterized by breaks and returns—they are neither completely out nor fully in. In Prioste's perspective (2016), among the various factors affecting the educational persistence of young people, two aspects are underexplored by research. The first concerns marketing exploitation by the digital entertainment industry, influencing youth preferences and habits that may limit their ability to concentrate and dedicate themselves to studies. A second aspect, possibly connected to the first, relates to learning problems neglected by educators during their educational journeys.

Such difficulties, especially evident at the beginning of the literacy process, can impact young people's interest in school, particularly when they advance through grades without having mastered the basics. A negative cycle is observed where young people with school difficulties tend to use digital resources more extensively for distraction, and digital and television distractions further exacerbate educational distortions.

During the pandemic and post-pandemic periods, this problem was exacerbated, especially for young people in public schools. According to Koerich and Pimenta (2023), difficulties faced by public school students in adapting to remote learning were at the heart of school dropout rates. The authors note that challenges with participating in synchronous activities led to a significant reduction in time dedicated to school education. Consequently, the school routines of young people underwent profound changes, resulting in disparate situations. Koerich and Pimenta (2023) highlight that while private school students followed structured school-assigned tasks, those in public schools struggled due to lack of access and study

conditions, experiencing considerable daily boredom. In the context of the pandemic, the condition of young people with fragile ties to school may have worsened.

It is important to note that in this study, the definition of youth is not limited solely to age, although age remains a relevant factor for research and public policy. According to the United Nations General Assembly of 1985, a youth is defined as a person aged between fifteen and twenty-four years (United Nations, 2013). The National Youth Statute adopts the age range of fifteen to twenty-nine years and, for the purposes of public policies, distinguishes between three subcategories: young adolescents aged fifteen to seventeen; young adults aged eighteen to twenty-four; and young adults aged fifteen to twenty-nine (Brasil, 2013). According to Abramo (2005), categorizing youth should be articulated with the everyday dimension, as youth refers to identity construction in a psychosocial process inseparable from daily life, within social relations and practices.

Starting from the premise that young people are shaped by different social contexts and that school plays a significant role in their life trajectories, this research aimed to analyze the educational journeys of young students in the Youth and Adult Education (EJA) system who were in a situation of illiteracy. The choice of this audience was related to their invisibility in research and educational projects. Key questions guided the study: How were the educational paths of these young people until they reached the EJA? What factors contributed to their staying or dropping out of the EJA?

Methodological Aspects

In this study, we present a segment of broader research on youth and cyberculture. The focus here pertains to young people in a situation of illiteracy enrolled in a Youth and Adult Education school in the outskirts of São Paulo. This research was conducted as part of a Master's in School Education, utilizing a qualitative approach characterized by descriptive and exploratory methods aimed at understanding the challenges faced by young people in their educational processes within public institutions. According to Gil, such research aims at "establishing relationships between variables" and providing "an approximate overview of a specific phenomenon" (1989, p. 45, our translation).

Data collection occurred in two stages. The first involved mapping young people aged eighteen to twenty-four enrolled in a Youth and Adult Education school, specifically in literacy classes. Based on this mapping, school records were selected for analysis of educational

trajectories. The second stage included active outreach to dropouts and interviews with those young people who continued attending classes. According to teachers' reports, literacy groups were established in this School to meet the needs of a growing number of students who reached Secondary Education without basic reading and writing skills, thus facing challenges in following the EJA curriculum without literacy support.

Convenience sampling was employed for this research, considering the number of enrollments within our age group of interest. Inclusion criteria included age between eighteen and twenty-four years and enrollment in literacy-focused classes. All young people underwent an initial diagnostic assessment conducted by school teachers to place them in appropriate groups. The main exclusion criterion was not having a diagnosis of intellectual disability, as this would require a more complex analysis of educational trajectories beyond the scope of this study.

In 2021, within the literacy groups, there were 25 individuals enrolled aged between eighteen and twenty-four years. Of these, fourteen identified as male and eleven as female according to school records. The school records of all twenty-five individuals were analyzed to identify the continuity and disruptions during their elementary education.

To further deepen and complement the documentary analysis and understand elements of these young people's trajectories, the second part of the research involved active searches conducted by the school team and included interviews with six young people and three teachers. The interviews aimed to analyze the young people's perceptions of barriers to literacy and the role of digital media in their lives.

This study focused on analyzing educational trajectories highlighted in the records and issues related to disruptions and school dropouts. The young people were informed about the research objectives, confidentiality, risks, and data confidentiality, and they agreed to and signed an Informed Consent Form, as approved by the Ethics Committee of the *Universidade Estadual Júlio de Mesquita Filho, Faculdade de Ciências e Letras de Araraquara*.

Results and Discussions

The first aspect analyzed pertained to the profile of young students in EJA, aged eighteen to twenty-four years, identified in a state of illiteracy. In the studied sample, regarding gender identification, the majority identified as male, corroborating the prevalence of illiteracy among males as determined in the IBGE research (2022). Studies on academic failure also

identify greater difficulties in the educational process for boys (Prioste, 2020), likely due to patriarchal socialization models that valorize activities related to strength and competition among male children.

Regarding racial dimension, out of the twenty-five enrolled students, nine identified as White, eight as mixed-race, and four as Black. Four students did not have this information available in their records. When combined, Black and mixed-race students constituted the majority among those who opted for self-declaration, totaling twelve students. These data highlight that the racial and gender issues mentioned earlier mark the scenario of educational failure among the most vulnerable student groups. The majority are young males, Black or mixed-race.

In IBGE surveys, it was identified that the illiteracy rate affected 3.4% of individuals aged fifteen or older who identified as White, and 7.4% of individuals in the same age group who self-identified as Black or mixed-race (IBGE, 2023b). The persistence of a high illiteracy rate among the mixed-race and Black population draws attention to the perpetuation of a racist bias in the education process of children and youth. According to Rosemberg (1987), this inequality limits access to social goods, operating insidiously both structurally and symbolically in Brazilian society.

Study Time and Persistence

In this sample of youth, the average age of entry into EJA was seventeen years old. One of the most relevant results of the analysis is that these young people, in some way, remained in schools for eight years or more without being literate and yet did not give up. They persisted in their connection with school, even though they were not learning the expected basics for each stage. Throughout the schooling process, their school records show school changes, interruptions, and repetitions, indicating a non-linear trajectory. These findings support Andrade's (2008) analysis regarding the "juvenilization" of EJA, resulting from an increasing number of individuals aged fifteen who dropped out of regular school after a tumultuous journey in Elementary Education marked by absenteeism and abandonment.

According to the analysis of their records, the average duration of schooling in Elementary Education was nine years. This includes all the years the student attended Elementary Education I and II, per the historical records. The average for Elementary Education II is analyzed only with students who continued to this stage, differing from the overall

population considered in Elementary Education I. Nine students had extended schooling periods, ranging from ten to twelve years, considering both stages of Elementary Education I and II.

Most of the youth began their education in early childhood education (75%), and all completed Elementary Education I. Generally, they started their schooling around the age of five. Six students began their educational journey in Elementary Education II. It is noted that the majority of youth passed through the stage preceding the literacy cycle.

The percentage of youth who attended Elementary Education II is relatively high at 79%, considering that this phase of schooling requires already consolidated writing and reading skills. This leads us to question how these young people reached this stage without being literate. How did they feel in school? What kind of support did they receive to overcome illiteracy during Elementary Education?

Repetitions and Breaks

Despite persisting in the educational process, these young people's connection with school institutions remained fragile, marked by ruptures, whether due to changing schools or due to failing grades and years without attendance. Regarding school changes during elementary education, two accounts highlighted the search for a study environment where students felt more welcomed or respected. The first account is from one of the young women:

> Because I suffered a lot of bullying, the teachers didn't care and belittled me. So, until I stopped at a school, I became definitive in a school. And then in this school, I went through the same thing, but I had to endure this school until eleven years old; I had to endure all this (interviewee).

Another student also explained: "I would leave, I would go from school to school... some schools I didn't adapt to and others I had a lot of difficulty learning at the same pace as people, to do the lessons." It is noted that lack of support, learning difficulties, and feelings of exclusion were reasons for changing schools.

Although such situations are reported, schools seem to serve as a lifelong reference for these young people, despite the persistence of their learning difficulties. According to Friedrich *et al.* (2010) the audience attending EJA tends to have an educational path marked by vulnerabilities stemming from precarious living conditions, repeated failures, difficulties in entering the job market, and challenges in adapting to school contexts (Friedrich *et al.,* 2010).

Another significant factor is the issue of repetition. In this regard, the number of failures and students who stopped attending school is distributed throughout Elementary Education. It is noteworthy that the 6th, 7th, and 5th grades are years where these two situations are concentrated, respectively. Graph 1 illustrates the number of failures and instances of non-attendance over the school years. These two conditions affected some students more than once in the same school year.

Graph 1 – Repetition / stopped attending
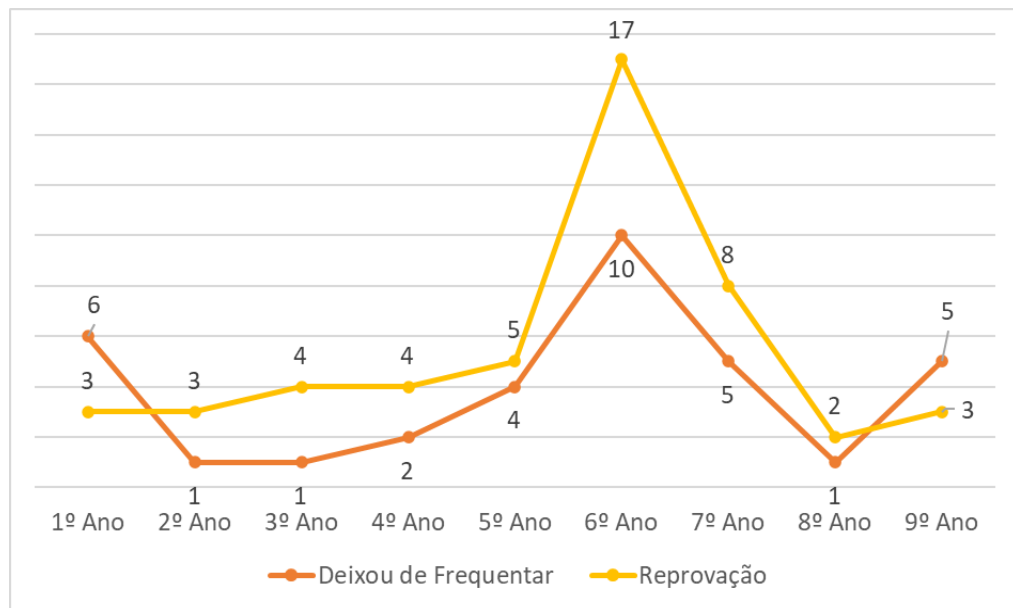
Source: Compiled by the authors (2022).

Grade retention and school dropout, with a higher incidence in the 6th Grade, appear to be closely related to the fact that these young people did not receive the necessary support to become literate during Elementary Education, rendering them invisible to public policies. In this regard, Prioste (2020) reveals that one of the main factors discouraging young people from continuing their studies is the lack of adequate literacy skills. Continual promotion without practical support in the literacy process allows students to advance to the next stage unprepared, leading them to feel uncomfortable in classes where reading and writing skills are required, especially in Middle School.

The adoption of cycle-based promotion was regulated in São Paulo by the State Council of Education (CEE) through Deliberation CEE nº 9/97, implemented in the public education system in 1998. This deliberation allowed for curriculum organization into one or more cycles with a guaranteed evaluation of the teaching-learning process, reinforcement, parallel recovery,

and attendance control throughout the schooling process. It also emphasized pedagogical and economic advantages, considering that retention contributed to the low self-esteem of a large number of students and represented financial waste. The curriculum organization adopted in São Paulo consisted of two cycles (1st to 4th and 5th to 8th grades, namely Cycle I and Cycle II) and was experienced by this group of young people. Graph 4 reveals the outcomes of these measures with pronounced difficulties at the end of Cycle I (4th Grade, equivalent to 5th year), leading to progression to the 6th Grade.

Cycle policies merely camouflage educational failure without addressing it properly. According to Zibetti, Pansini, and Souza (2012), the educational reinforcements envisioned since the beginning of the cycle system, consistently included in school pedagogical projects, have not led to improvement. Despite the guaranteed time allocated for teachers to provide support, the conditions under which children are assisted do not favor the learning process. The authors highlight issues such as inadequate physical spaces, lack of technical preparation, pedagogical shortcomings, and misunderstandings regarding children's learning needs. Thus, the issue of illiteracy persists, alongside the invisibility of this group.

The problem of illiteracy among young people who are nearing completion of Lower Secondary Education places this demographic in a policy limbo. In Adult and Youth Education (EJA), literacy classes are intended for those who have had no formal schooling throughout their lives, meaning they were not designed for those who completed Lower Secondary Education. If these young people manage to complete Lower Secondary Education, they can no longer enroll in the corresponding EJA segment, thus destined to contribute to illiteracy statistics. For those who do not reach the end of this stage, it is noticeable that while young people persist in continuing with Lower Secondary Education, the number decreases as the years progress.

Graph 2 – Total students per year enrolled
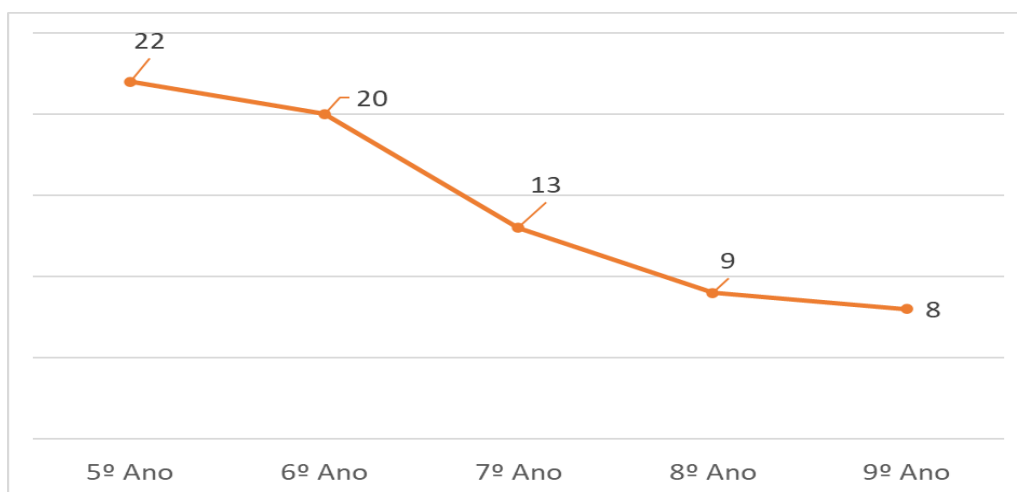
Source: Compiled by the authors (2022).

Of the total young people surveyed, the percentage who reached the 7th grade was 57%, which continued to decline to 39% in the 8th grade, ending with 35% in the 9th grade. The number of students decreases significantly in a trend that begins at the end of Lower Secondary Education and intensifies in Upper Secondary Education (Graph 2). The fact that more than half of the students in illiteracy reached the 7th grade indicates the severity of the problem; despite their persistence, young people gradually drop out of school. In addition to grade retention, it is likely that entering adolescence also affects their ties to school. We know that puberty begins around the age of twelve when young people would be in the 6th or 7th grade if they have not experienced grade retention.

It is during this phase that we observe the highest number of school dropouts. On one hand, this can be explained by grade retention and difficulties in the literacy process; on the other hand, we must consider the challenges of adolescence. Among young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, adolescents are often exposed to hypersexualization, face demands from families in vulnerable situations, and have the need to assert themselves among peers with consumer goods, as well as the seductions of digital media (Prioste, 2016). All of this, combined with racial, class, and gender stigmatizations, can contribute to weakening their connection to school during this phase.

Given the numerous social vulnerabilities and failures in public policies for child protection, many adolescents may be recruited by drug trafficking, as identified in one of the active search cases where a mother reported that her fourteen-year-old son overdosed and needed hospitalization.

In early adolescence, students are experiencing significant physical and psychological changes that can make them more vulnerable to a range of risks. Prioste (2016) in her analysis of adolescents in the outskirts of São Paulo, identified that illiteracy among adolescents attending the final year of Lower Secondary Education was a significant risk factor in virtual environments and involvement with criminal groups. Not being literate generated distress and shame among boys, although these feelings were masked by provocative behaviors at school. Despite this, on an individual level, boys expressed a desire to learn to read. For girls, absenteeism and school dropout during this phase were linked to dating and teenage pregnancy. Overall, young people felt deceived by the school since they reached the end of their education and were not prepared to continue to upper secondary education. This can lead some young people to drop out before completing Lower Secondary Education so they can have the opportunity to enroll in Adult and Youth Education (EJA).

Adult and Youth Education (EJA) and Hope for a Better Future

Enrolling in EJA represents, for many, the pursuit of a better life and opportunities for learning, freedom, and employment. In the case of this group of young people, it is noteworthy that educators in the EJA they attended had the sensitivity to organize the reception of these young people into literacy groups, thus ensuring their right to learn reading and writing. However, this initiative is a particularity of that space. If they had been placed in classes according to their respective school records, they would have had to follow the curriculum for the final years of Lower Secondary Education as if they were already literate.

Literacy classes represent respect and hope. Regarding the expectation of improvement through studies in EJA, one young person stated, "[...] because studying, it changes your life, for a job, because to have a job you have to study [...]". The pursuit of a certificate that can contribute to getting a job is a well-known demand among the EJA audience, yet this need does not guarantee persistence.

In addition to better employment, some young people dream of attending college, "[...] because my dream is to go to college. So, for me, studies are the most important thing because, truthfully, nowadays we need studies for everything [...]". The dream of attending college is accompanied by the belief that studying is part of life and that it can transform the course of their destinies. This statement supports evidence that literacy is an essential human right for promoting health and social development (Gadotti, 2009; Sen, 2003).

Regarding motivations for staying in EJA, the bond with teachers and "older people" was emphasized, a term used to refer to classmates over forty years old. Faced with so many abandonment situations they have experienced in life, they realize that in the EJA environment, someone cares about them, whether it's the teachers or their "older" peers who encourage them, advising them to persist in their studies.

The hope for better living conditions and a brighter future faces several barriers, causing many young people to either drop out of or maintain a fragile connection with EJA, as reported by teachers. The pandemic exacerbated this school connection issue. Accordingly, out of the twenty-five enrolled students, only eight continued their studies in the subsequent year, with two transferring to another school. In total, sixteen youths dropped out. During active searches conducted by the coordination team alongside teachers, reasons for dropout varied widely, including issues related to mental health, exhaustion from work, family violence, pregnancy, difficulty balancing studies and household tasks, insecurity in the neighborhood especially for women, drug problems, and lack of interest due to learning difficulties. A mother reported that her son didn't want to return to school because he wasn't learning anything, stating: "My son turned nineteen and said he won't go to school anymore because he doesn't learn, so he feels ashamed. He's working at a car wash." A father affirmed that his son "doesn't want to study or work. He just wants to fly kites with his friends. He doesn't want any commitments."

Among male individuals, issues such as drug use, disinterest, and fatigue stand out. A dropout young man stated: "I'm working as a kitchen assistant in a restaurant. I get too tired from work and can't stay awake to attend classes." Although EJA class hours are limited to 2 hours and 15 minutes daily, commuting to work in a congested city like São Paulo can still make attending classes challenging.

Among female individuals, reasons for dropping out included pregnancy, domestic violence, neighborhood insecurity, and the need to care for the household. Studies by Sousa *et al.* (2018) highlight that 94.4% of adolescents who experienced pregnancy reported interrupting their studies at some point in life, with 54.4% of them dropping out of school. While pregnancy itself is not the issue, the authors emphasize the need to break the cycle of poverty: pregnancy, school dropout, and poverty.

One factor to aid in breaking this cycle is to favor literacy strategies at all stages. In the young people's statements, there was an apparent urgency to learn to read and write in order to obtain a certificate that would contribute to improving their work conditions. Additionally, they highlighted that in EJA, in the literacy classes, there were two teachers who corrected their

assignments and closely monitored their activities. Finally, they also emphasized learning behaviors and attitudes that contribute to their perception of citizenship rights.

Final Considerations

This article presented partial results of a study conducted with young people in situations of illiteracy, aiming to analyze their trajectories in Elementary Education and discuss issues of school dropout and retention. Mapping the enrollment of young people, aged between eighteen and twenty-four years, grouped in literacy classes at a Youth and Adult Education school located in the periphery of São Paulo, identified a prevalence of males, predominantly self-identified as Black and mixed-race. Out of the twenty-five young people whose school records were analyzed, six remained studying at the institution, two requested transfers, and seventeen dropped out. Although young males were more numerous in the initial mapping, the profile whose dropout situation was concentrated in the second phase of the research was that of Black young women. These results reveal the inadequacy of educational public policies for this population and underscore the need for policies that promote school retention.

It is important to emphasize that this research relies on a small sample, representative of a specific school reality, subject to the regional context where these young people reside. However, the accounts of the students who dropped out were crucial in providing clues about the challenges that permeate current school lives. Issues within the school context, learning difficulties, pregnancy, mental health issues, work-related fatigue, and discouragement to study coexist with the need to complete studies and have minimal access to the job market. They experience the phenomenon of academic failure, manifested by a lengthy trajectory in Elementary Education marked by disruptions and returns, which demonstrate their attempts to persist. They have access to school and attempt to remain in these environments but do not advance in learning reading and writing. When they decide to continue their studies in EJA, they are made invisible because they cannot have their enrollments linked to literacy classes due to having dropped out of upper elementary school from the regular education system.

From the young people who remained in EJA, some perspectives emerged from the reports, offering contributions to future public policies. Among them, stands out the effort to minimize the impacts of their past school trajectories. Currently, an environment of learning that embraces, respects, dialogues, listens, motivates, and teaches is highlighted as extremely valuable and propelling improvements. The interviewed youth reported the significant

contribution provided by the interaction in the classroom with older individuals and, above all, the positive impact of dual teaching on their learning. For the group that remains, school represents a space that can improve their lives. Despite their previous educational setbacks, the youth hold the expectation in EJA to become literate and complete their Elementary Education with some degree of autonomy. Despite the hardships experienced before, the youth aspire to conditions that enable access to the job market or seek improvements in that regard. Workforce training is a relevant issue for these youth, along with a welcoming study environment. Regarding their current trajectories, challenges mainly relate to the urgency of learning reading and writing within a literacy policy that does not render them invisible and provides minimum conditions for social autonomy and access to the job market.

Finally, it is crucial to highlight that the goal of eradicating illiteracy by 2024, established in the National Education Plan (2014-2024), has not been achieved and may remain distant if more effective public policies for literacy at all stages of children's and young people's schooling, especially for populations in conditions of social and economic vulnerability, are not adopted.

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