

**STUDYING FOR WHAT? THE NECESSARY OVERCOMING OF THE PARADIGM
OF A MEANINGLESS EDUCATION**

***ESTUDAR PARA QUÊ? A NECESSÁRIA SUPERAÇÃO DO PARADIGMA DE UMA
EDUCAÇÃO SEM SENTIDO***

***¿ESTUDIAR PARA QUÉ? LA NECESARIA SUPERACIÓN DEL PARADIGMA DE
UNA EDUCACIÓN SIN SENTIDO***



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ABSTRACT: This article results from the main ideas of research developed in a master's thesis by the first author of this article entitled “*O impacto da evasão escolar nos níveis de desenvolvimento na região do Alto Vale do Rio do Peixe*”. The research was carried out based on bibliographic and statistical data, seeking to understand the relationship between regional underdevelopment and school dropout qualitatively. The study highlights the disconnection of students with education, which is commonly seen as a secondary choice in the face of the need for sustenance, especially in impoverished regions like the one investigated here. Persistent poverty in rural areas, on numerous occasions, forces families to choose between studying or working, which worsens the cycle of school dropout. The article also discusses the importance of contextualized and meaningful education, which is capable of engaging young people and contributing to overcoming the barriers that keep them away from school.

KEYWORDS: Education. School Dropout. Youth. Underdevelopment.

RESUMO: *Este artigo resulta das ideias principais de uma pesquisa desenvolvida em uma dissertação de mestrado do primeiro autor deste artigo, intitulada “O impacto da evasão escolar nos níveis de desenvolvimento na região do Alto Vale do Rio do Peixe”, realizada com base em dados bibliográficos e estatísticos, buscando entender qualitativamente a relação entre o subdesenvolvimento regional e a evasão escolar. Destaca a desconexão dos estudantes com a educação, que comumente é vista como uma escolha secundária diante da necessidade de sustento, sobretudo em regiões empobrecidas como a que foi aqui investigada. A pobreza persistente em áreas rurais, em inúmeras ocasiões, obriga famílias a optarem entre o estudo ou o trabalho, fato que agrava o ciclo de evasão escolar. O artigo também discute a importância de uma educação contextualizada e significativa, capaz de engajar os jovens e de contribuir para a superação das barreiras que os distanciam da escola.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Educação. Evasão Escolar. Juventude. Subdesenvolvimento.

RESUMEN: *Este artículo surge de las ideas principales de una investigación desarrollada en una tesis de maestría del primer autor de este artículo titulada “O impacto da evasão escolar nos níveis de desenvolvimento na região do Alto Vale do Rio do Peixe”. La investigación se realizó con base en datos bibliográficos y estadísticos, buscando comprender cualitativamente la relación entre el subdesarrollo regional y la deserción escolar. El estudio destaca la desconexión de los estudiantes con la educación, que comúnmente se ve como una opción secundaria frente a la necesidad de sustento, especialmente en regiones empobrecidas como la aquí investigada. La pobreza persistente en las zonas rurales, en numerosas ocasiones, obliga a las familias a elegir entre estudiar o trabajar, lo que agrava el ciclo de abandono escolar. El artículo también discute la importancia de una educación contextualizada y significativa, capaz de involucrar a los jóvenes y contribuir a superar las barreras que los alejan de la escuela.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: Educación. Abandono Escolar. Juventud. Subdesarrollo.

Introduction

Brazilian education is a recurring subject in academic events, university debates, and legislative chambers. From time to time, it becomes a key component in government plans and electoral campaign proposals. It is widely accepted in discussions about the development of societies that education holds a central position among the main factors determining a nation's success and the quality of life of its people. This fact is evidenced by the significant portions of the public budget allocated to education and the increasing investment from the private sector, which seeks to train its employees in response to the growing demand for a more qualified workforce.

The desire for better-quality education is a universal characteristic, as Wilson (2011) described in his presentation of the concept of the Four Worlds. The classification proposed by the author categorizes countries into four distinct groups, based on indicators such as per capita income, life expectancy, immigration policies, degree of industrialization, and labor specialization, among other factors. Wilson obtained interesting responses by investigating what would constitute a "better world" for individuals from each of the Four Worlds.

The vision of a "better world" varies among the groups. The countries of the First World, such as the United States, China, Australia, Canada, and Denmark, are characterized by high per capita incomes, high human development indices, advanced levels of industrialization, and low birth rates. In these nations, the idea of a better world is associated with stable governance and security against threats such as war and terrorism (Wilson, 2011).

The so-called Second World, in which the author includes Brazil, along with countries such as Bahrain, Malaysia, Turkey, and some former members of the Soviet bloc, such as Poland and Slovakia, is characterized by growing economic development and rising industrialization. However, these countries exhibit lower per capita incomes and human development indices than those observed in the First World. In these nations, the improvement of living conditions, including higher wages and job security, is seen as the pathway to building a better world (Wilson, 2011).

Development has historically been uneven in the Third World, including countries such as Venezuela, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, and several nations in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America. These countries have average Human Development Index (HDI) scores and educational levels ranging from medium to low. For these populations, the idea of a better world is associated with job and governance stability (Wilson, 2011).

The Fourth World consists of countries facing profound challenges, such as extreme poverty, disease, violence, and social chaos, especially in the African continent. These regions have the lowest human development indices and per capita income. In these contexts, the conception of a better world is linked to the fulfillment of basic needs, including access to water, sanitation, and housing (Wilson, 2011).

Despite the different visions of a better world, one common point among all inhabitants of these "Four Worlds" is the recognition of education as essential for achieving a better life. Education is seen as the primary engine for improving quality of life. Important indicators, such as the Human Development Index (HDI), are calculated by taking into account the educational factors of societies. There are no solid economies, highly industrialized and technological countries, nor high quality of life indices for the population without, at some point in history, the understanding of the need for a robust, continuous, and coordinated investment in education.

This text aims to discuss how education in the country has faced and continues to face numerous challenges in recent years, as well as the harmful consequences resulting from this situation, for the understanding that education is unequivocally a viable path to the improvement of the quality of life. However, for many young people and adults, this value may still not be perceived or recognized as a personal and social asset.

Educational Evolution in Brazil: A Multifaceted Process Marked by Inconsistencies

As a nation, Brazil has historically been negligent regarding education. There has never been a concise and concrete state project for education that was actually implemented and achieved success. When examining the trajectory of education as a right and its implementation through public policies, the perception emerges that Brazil's political foundations are rooted in liberalism, which was established since the Empire, but the national state only appropriated the concentration of wealth. Araujo (2011) clarifies that even classical liberalism, as expressed in Smith's *A Riqueza das Nações* (The Wealth of Nations), advocated that education should not be viewed as a profitable activity. Therefore, it would be the responsibility of the state to organize and finance education, as part of the interventions prescribed in the context of the Minimal State. However, throughout the development of this topic, Araujo (2011) highlights that Brazil followed a path distinct from the classical liberal ideal, at least in terms of education, demonstrating little effort to organize a national educational system.

It was only in the early decades of the 20th century, under the republican paradigm, that education began to be recognized as a right to be guaranteed by the state. With the rise of

Getúlio Vargas to power, the Ministry of Education and Public Health was created through Decree No. 19.402, dated November 14, 1930. This decree stipulated that all matters related to education, public health, and hospital care would be overseen by this new government ministry, establishing a significant milestone in the organization of Brazil's educational and health systems.

The new Ministry will include the establishments, institutions, and public offices that are dedicated to carrying out studies, services, or work specified in Article 2, such as, among others, the Department of Education, the Benjamin Constant Institute, the National School of Fine Arts, the National Institute of Music, the National Institute for the Deaf and Dumb, the School for Apprentice Craftsmen, the Venceslau Braz Normal School of Arts and Trades, the Superintendency of Commercial Education Establishments, the Department of Public Health, the Oswaldo Cruz Institute, the National Museum, and Hospital Assistance (Brasil, 1930, n. p., our translation).

The early years of the 20th century were marked by a profound transformation in global consumption patterns, driven by the increasing industrialization and the strengthening of the consumer economy in the United States. Capitalist propaganda in the post-World War I period spread the American Way of Life worldwide, promoting the American lifestyle, based on liberalism, consumerism, and the freedom associated with capitalism. This process culminated in expanding markets, developing new technologies, and the consequent need for a more specialized workforce.

The First World War, which devastated Europe, had an economic impact on a global scale. The primary consumer market for North American production went through a period of reconstruction, which directly affected imports, generating a surplus of production and a severe imbalance in the United States trade balance, culminating in the 1929 crisis and the collapse of the New York Stock Exchange. The Brazilian state, which suffered similar effects, particularly in the *commodities* sector such as coffee, its main export product, needed to reorganize itself politically and economically to confront the crisis.

Cano (2015) explains that the 1929 crisis profoundly impacted Latin America. Most Latin American countries faced pressure from the United States and England, which imposed unfavorable agreements and increased tariffs on regional exports. This resulted in a significant reduction in import capacity, depletion of reserves, and severe restrictions on public finances, hampering the continuation of liberal economic policies

The response to the crisis varied among Latin American countries: Venezuela, Ecuador, and Central American nations were slow to react, hoping for a return to economic

liberalism. In contrast, Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, and Chile acted swiftly, replacing liberal governments through revolutions or elections, implementing substantial changes in economic policies, and increasing state intervention in the economy. Among these countries, Brazil stood out by adopting policies aimed at protecting income and employment and promoting industrialization as a strategy to overcome the crisis and modernize the economy (Cano, 2015).

This shift towards industrialization also required an educational reform aimed at training the workforce needed for the new industry. This context may have been one of the factors that motivated the state to promote the first public policies focused on education. Within this framework, the 1930s brought important debates on Brazilian education. In 1932, Anísio Teixeira, Fernando de Azevedo, Lourenço Filho, and other Brazilian intellectuals published the Manifesto of the Pioneers of New Education, proposing a modernization of education in relation to the traditional model, which was focused on teaching. New Education, in turn, began to propose an education also aimed at learning (Andreotti, 2006).

The Manifesto of the Pioneers of New Education, published on March 19, 1932, marked a turning point in the history of education in Brazil by proposing a profound reform of the country's educational system. Among the key points outlined in the document was the conception of education as a duty of the State and a right of all Brazilians, regardless of social class, race, or gender. The text also advocated for the creation of a public school system that would be free, secular, compulsory, universal, and accessible. Moreover, the Pioneers proposed the idea of a comprehensive education aimed at promoting the complete development of the individual, addressing physical, intellectual, and moral aspects.

At the constitutional level, it was only in 1934 that education became, in practice, a legitimate agenda. That year, for the first time, the State took on the responsibility of establishing the guidelines for a national education system. This position is outlined in Article 149 of the 1934 Federal Constitution:

Education is the right of all and must be provided by the family and the Public Authorities, who are responsible for ensuring its provision to both Brazilians and foreigners residing in the country, in a manner that enables efficient factors for the moral and economic life of the nation and develops, in a Brazilian spirit, the consciousness of human solidarity (Brasil, 1934, art. 149, our translation).

With the exception of minor alterations made over the years and in subsequent Brazilian constitutions after 1934, it was only in the 1988 Federal Constitution that education was truly

given a more complex, plural, and better-defined organization in terms of its functions and attributions. In this text, which remains in effect today, education is presented as a fundamental social right, a right for all, and a duty of both the State and the Family. The Constitution asserts that education should be promoted with the collaboration of society in general, and that its two main purposes are to prepare individuals for the full exercise of citizenship and to prepare them for the workforce, aiming at the full development of the individual (Brasil, 1988).

Education in Brazil is a historical and central issue in social, political, and ideological discussions, encompassing all segments of society. It is seen by many as a transformative tool capable of addressing chronic problems such as unemployment and social inequalities, offering opportunities to families who previously lacked access to education. For these individuals, education represents emancipation and social transformation.

On the other hand, some view education as a mechanism for perpetuating inequality, controlled by an elite that keeps the majority of the population in a subordinate position. This group criticizes the ideas of meritocracy and competition, arguing that those with more resources dominate the best opportunities. Darcy Ribeiro emphasizes that the control of education is a conquest of the elites, and the deterioration of the educational system is a deliberate strategy to maintain the subjugation of the population. For him, educational failure is a fallacy, as it reflects coordinated actions of control rather than genuine attempts to resolve the sector's problems.

Total efficacy, however—the kind before which we must bow, and the one that truly stands as a great achievement we Brazilians can present to the world as unique—is the educational feat of our ruling class. This accomplishment is indeed extraordinary! For this reason, I disagree with those who, viewing education from another perspective, speak of a Brazilian failure in the effort to universalize education. I believe there has been no such failure, particularly since the primary requirement for our ruling class's survival and hegemony was to keep the people uneducated (Ribeiro, 2013, p. 14, our translation).

It is also important to mention a growing group of people, influenced by superficial moralism and extremist ideologies, who view education as a subversive and negative force, believing that it aims to fragment society and undermine families. These individuals assert that education introduces distorted concepts about gender and social structure and promotes ideological indoctrination. While such discourses have existed for some time, they have intensified in recent years due to political polarization and the rise of social media, which facilitates the dissemination of these ideas.

An example of this is the debate around Bill No. 867/2015, known as the “Schools Without Political Parties” project, which sought to restrict critical thinking in schools. This conservatism, which has gained traction in Brazilian politics, aimed to silence educational initiatives that encourage reflection and questioning, both essential for a conscious society. Political polarization, which has intensified over the last decade, has driven this agenda, turning education into a frequent target of conservative attacks that oppose the development of critical thinking and the fight against misinformation.

If previously there was limited space for defending retrograde ideas, social media has provided immense and almost unrestricted platforms for the propagation and dissemination of extremist views. Political polarization has been heightened under the influence of virtual algorithms, which act as powerful whirlpools, ready to drag in anyone who ventures too close without proper caution. Meanwhile, public education—the primary avenue of learning that could protect a vulnerable public from these traps—has been under constant attack (Cachoeira; Grobe; Bonin, 2023, p. 443, our translation).

Mentioning this example is fundamental to demonstrating that, being such a broad and encompassing concept, education sustains a myriad of opinions. These perspectives are founded in concrete, measurable, and verifiable terms, including truths, falsehoods, facts, statistical data, and scientific studies, such as those within this work. Nonetheless, education is also anchored in more subjective terms, such as the people’s hope and the belief that it contains the spark for constructing a new, possible world—a more equitable and just society. Belief, doubt, and hope in education compose the vast array of meanings that make it such a rich, controversial, and relevant topic for the formation of a nation.

In the context of this research, no single perspective is adopted. As such a complex and comprehensive issue, it is impractical to assume that solutions to educational problems are simplistic. The educational issue involves various factors and multiple possibilities, such that a single answer is insufficient to address all challenges. In this regard, Darcy Ribeiro’s analysis of the Brazilian educational landscape is incisive and remains regrettably relevant, although situated in the 1980s. An anthropologist, ethnologist, politician, and above all, an educator, Ribeiro teaches us that the crisis in Brazilian education is not an isolated event but a program, a nation’s project. This project was designed and structured to ensure the maintenance of the status quo and the perpetuation of the economic, political, and social power of the Brazilian elites. Throughout the country's history, there is clear evidence that Brazil has been meticulously organized to serve these elite interests (Ribeiro, 2013). Within this context, the

next topic aims to situate us: how can we envision a developed country when the greatest social bottleneck remains at the crossroads between access and success in education?

Education Between the Cross and the Sword: The Dilemma Between Access and Quality of Education in Brazil

The expansion of access to education in Brazil is a very recent development. The most significant and effective State efforts in this regard emerged only after the 1988 Federal Constitution. Until that point, only the Brazilian elites had the resources to pursue education, often abroad. Consequently, these individuals also held access, connections, and opportunities to secure positions that enabled them to influence the course of national policies, from economic to social spheres. For millions of illiterate Brazilians, heirs of the stigmas of slavery and political neglect in the hinterlands and the most remote regions far from the major Brazilian capitals, there was nothing left but to plant and harvest fruits that did not belong to them, on lands that would never be theirs unless they could one day afford to buy them (Ribeiro, 2013).

Furthermore, starting in the 1990s, Brazil implemented various programs to promote education, aiming to expand access and improve the quality of instruction. One of the main initiatives was *Fundef* (Fund for the Maintenance and Development of Primary Education and Valorization of Teaching), which operated from 1998 to 2006, ensuring the redistribution of resources to fund primary education, as well as supporting teachers and school infrastructure. In 2007, *Fundef* was replaced by *Fundeb* (Fund for the Maintenance and Development of Basic Education and Valorization of Education Professionals), which covered the entirety of basic education. Another notable program was the Bolsa Escola, launched in 1995, which laid the foundation for Bolsa Família, requiring minimum school attendance for benefit eligibility. *Auxílio Brasil*, launched in 2021, retained this requirement, and Bolsa Família was restructured in 2023.

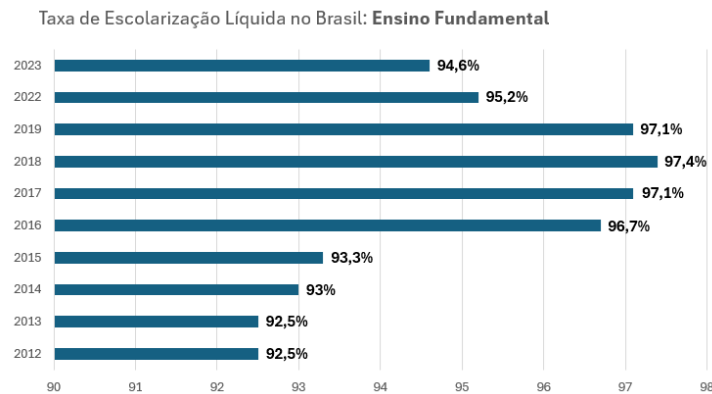
In higher education, the University for All Program (ProUni), established in 2004, aimed to expand access to higher education through scholarships for low-income students. In 2010, the Unified Selection System (SISU) was introduced, facilitating access to public universities based on *Enem* scores. In the field of technical education, the National Program for Access to Technical Education and Employment (PRONATEC) was created to expand access to vocational training, offering free courses in partnership with public and private institutions to qualify young people and workers.

Data on schooling in Brazil provide an updated overview of the educational situation. According to the 2022 Continuous PNAD, the gross enrollment rate for the population aged 6 to 14 remained high, reaching 99.4%. However, the net school attendance rate, which considers age-appropriate grade levels, showed a significant decline, dropping from 97.1% in 2019 to 95.2% in 2022—the lowest level since 2016. In contrast, the gross enrollment rate for youth aged 15 to 17 increased from 89% in 2019 to 92.2% in 2022. Additionally, there was an increase in the proportion of individuals who were at the appropriate stage in secondary education or had already completed it, rising from 71.3% in 2019 to 75.2% in 2022 (Ferreira; Gomes, 2023).

For instance, secondary education generally includes students aged 15 to 17, though it also includes those outside this age range due to grade repetition or acceleration, and as a result, it can exceed 100%. In contrast, the net enrollment rate is more precise, taking into account only students within the expected age range. For secondary education, it is calculated as the ratio between the number of enrolled students aged 15 to 17 and the total population of that age group. Thus, the net rate is always below 100%, reflecting how many young people are effectively studying at an appropriate educational age.

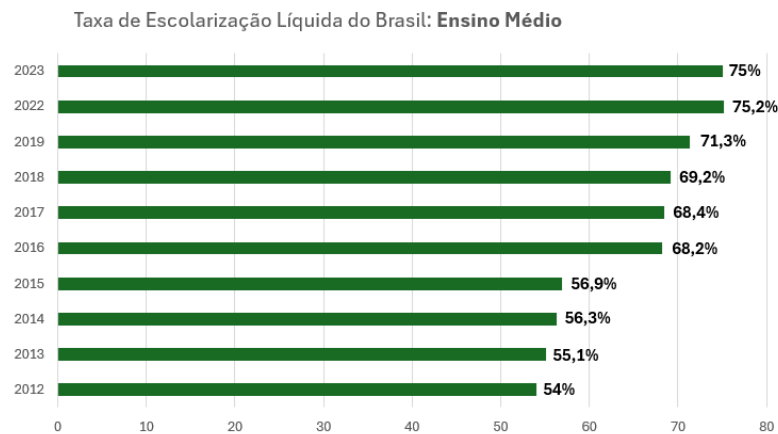
In this context, updated surveys of net enrollment indicators, which consider the appropriate age and grade level for both Primary and Secondary Education, show a decline since the COVID-19 pandemic. For those enrolled at the Primary Education stage, the net enrollment rate dropped from 95.2% in 2022 to 94.6% in 2023. This decline was also observed more subtly at the Secondary Education level, where the net enrollment rate fell from 75.2% in 2022 to 75% in 2023. It should be noted that these data were obtained from the Continuous National Household Sample Survey (*PNAD Contínua*) and can be reviewed in the graphs below:

Graph 1 – Net Enrollment Rate in Brazil for Primary Education



Source: Authors' elaboration based on *PNAD Contínua* data⁴.

Graph 2 – Net Enrollment Rate in Brazil for Secondary Education



Source: Authors' elaboration based on *PNAD Contínua* data⁵.

The data outlined above indicate that, over the span of just over a decade, there has been considerable progress in access to education. Support programs, such as those previously mentioned, along with increased availability of school places and the expansion of the school network, may be contributing factors to this improvement. It should be noted that, in 2020 and 2021, *PNAD Contínua* surveys were suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic and resumed only in 2022. Consequently, these years are not included in the tables.

Despite these advances, a decrease in the net enrollment rate has been observed since 2018, particularly in primary education. This phenomenon can be explained by data from the

⁴ Available at: <https://www.ibge.gov.br/estatisticas/sociais/trabalho/17270-pnad-continua.html>. Accessed in: 05 May 2024.

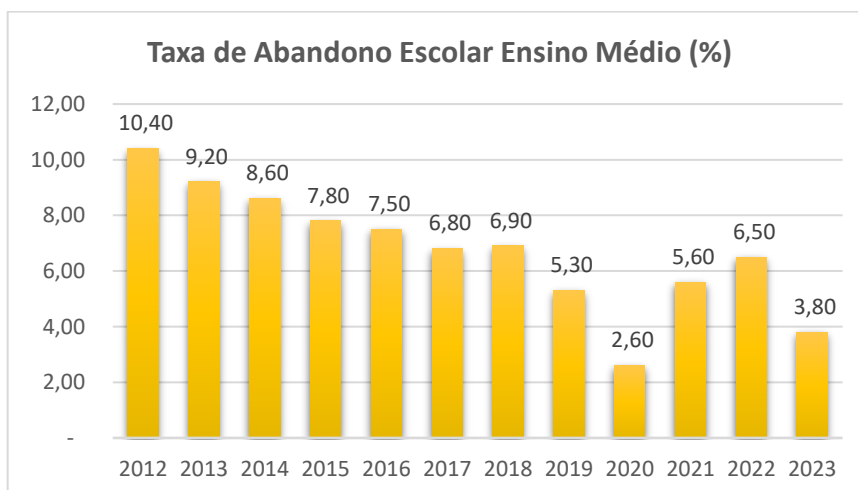
⁵ Available at: <https://www.ibge.gov.br/estatisticas/sociais/trabalho/17270-pnad-continua.html>. Accessed in: 05 May 2024.

QEDu platform, which compiles and organizes information on education in Brazil, providing indicators such as learning levels, IDEB scores, demographic data, school census, and performance rates. Between 2018 and 2023, approximately 700,000 fewer enrollments were recorded in the early years of primary education. Additionally, during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021 and 2022, a slight increase in the dropout rate was observed for primary education. The combination of reduced enrollments with an increased dropout rate may be considered one of the factors contributing to the decline of this indicator.

There are concerning data regarding young students' performance that must be evaluated to better understand the educational challenges in the country. The Basic Education Development Index (IDEB) and school dropout rates are two important indicators for this analysis. Quantitative indicators, such as enrollment rates, measure access, IDEB, and dropout rates, provide qualitative insights that help reflect on the quality of education in public schools and the reasons that lead young people to abandon their studies before completing this essential stage of educational development.

Moreover, the figures indicate that the main issue concerning school dropout is in the secondary education stage. As of early September 2024, the latest data on dropout rates for this stage were not yet available. Nonetheless, the following graph presents critical data on high school dropout rates in Brazil since 2012:

Graph 3 – Evolution of High School Dropout Rates in Brazil



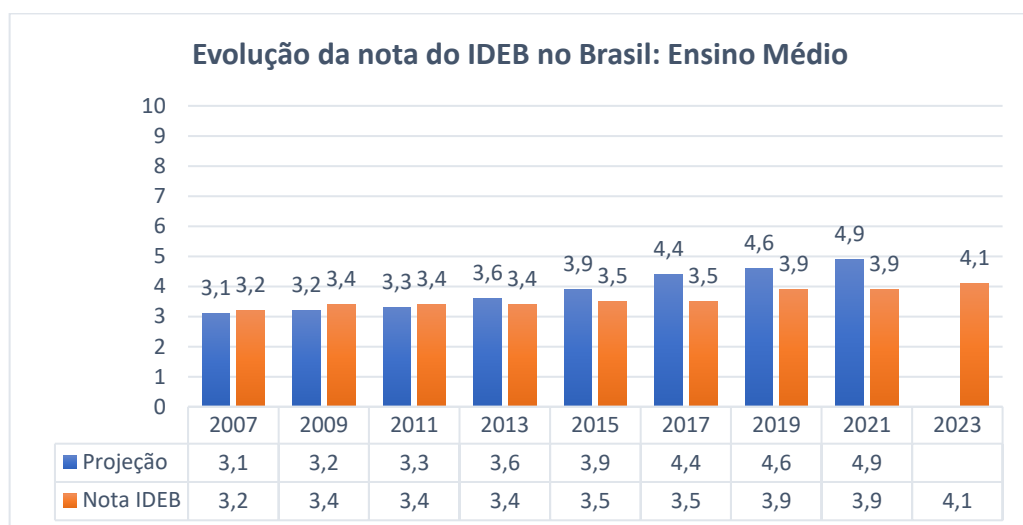
Source: Prepared by the authors with data from the Continuous National Household Sample Survey (PNAD Contínua)⁶.

⁶ Available at: <https://www.ibge.gov.br/estatisticas/sociais/trabalho/17270-pnad-continua.html>. Accessed in: Aug. 25, 2024.

Throughout the referenced period (2012–2023), a downward trend in dropout rates was observed, driven by various factors such as improved access to education, the construction of more schools, increased investments in education, restructuring of social income-transfer programs, and initiatives to discourage grade repetition. The year 2020 recorded the lowest dropout rate on record. However, authorities and researchers raised concerns over the trend that followed in 2021 and 2022, during and after the pandemic, when dropout rates began to rise again. Recent data, however, already show a new decline in dropout rates, indicating a potential downward trend in the coming years.

Perhaps the most alarming indicator is the IDEB score itself. The Basic Education Development Index (IDEB) has been used by the Ministry of Education since 2007 to evaluate the quality of education in Brazilian public and private schools. The score is calculated based on two components: student performance on standardized assessments, such as the *Prova Brasil* or SAEB (Basic Education Evaluation System), and the school pass rate, which measures the proportion of students advancing in grade level without repetition. Performance is assessed in Portuguese language and mathematics, and the pass rate reflects school efficiency, ensuring students progress according to age. The IDEB score is calculated as the product of assessment performance and the pass rate, meaning that schools with higher scores combine strong academic results with regular student progression, as illustrated in the following graph.

Graph 4 – Evolution of IDEB Scores in Brazil for Secondary Education



Source: Compiled by the authors using data from the QEdU platform (2023).

The previous graph presents two sets of data. The blue columns represent a projected IDEB score, an estimate of the expected IDEB score for the reference period, generated by the Ministry of Education based on targets set for each school, municipality, and state. These targets are defined from two main factors: the historical performance of each school unit or educational network in the IDEB and the growth needed to reach quality education standards that would bring Brazil closer to international performance levels.

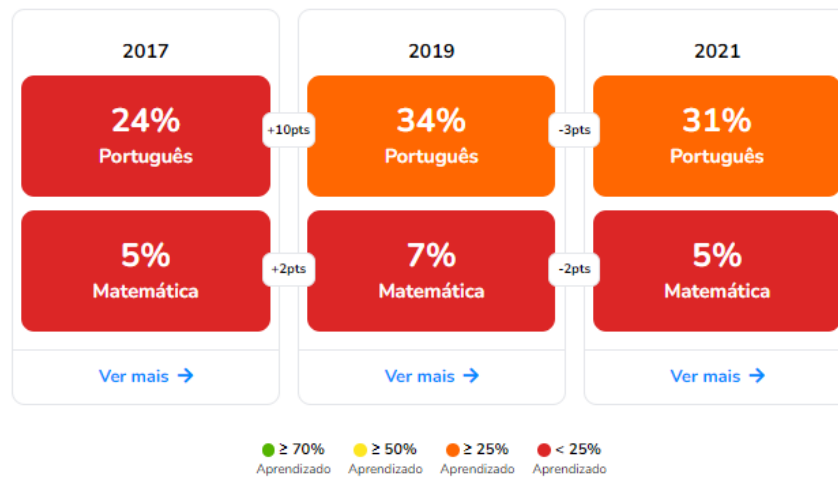
The orange columns, on the other hand, represent the actual IDEB scores for Brazil in each respective biennium analyzed. As shown in the data table below the column illustration, IDEB scores since 2007 have varied very little, revealing stagnation in educational quality, as these scores consistently fell below the expected targets for the entire period analyzed. An ideal and adequate IDEB score for Brazilian secondary education would be 6.0, according to the goals established by the Ministry of Education. This score is considered an international benchmark, equivalent to the performance of developed countries. Reaching this score in secondary education would indicate that Brazil is providing quality education, both in terms of student learning (in subjects like Portuguese and mathematics) and in school efficiency, reflected in the pass rate and reduced dropout rates. However, there are significant disparities between the ideal and the actual scores.

The situation becomes even more concerning when observing the actual learning levels of high school students. The final IDEB score, which centrally incorporates learning factors in mathematics and Portuguese as evaluated through SAEB assessments, is directly linked to the school pass rate. Thus, the lower the learning level, the lower the final score, even if the pass rate is high. This represents a substantial dilemma, as the underlying concept of this relationship reveals a dichotomy that requires constant examination. It is contradictory for students to advance through school levels without mastering essential skills, such as Portuguese and mathematics.

Although school dropout rates are declining, learning levels in Brazilian secondary education are decreasing. Ideally, a reduction in dropout rates would correspond with increased learning levels. However, the reality shows an inverse trend, indicating a concerning situation for secondary education in Brazil.

The following table presents the percentage of high school students with adequate learning levels in mathematics and Portuguese for the reference biennia between 2017 and 2021:

Chart 1 – Percentage of Adequate Learning for High School Students in Brazil⁷



Source: QEdu (2023).

These data indicate that the learning outcomes for Brazilian high school students are alarmingly inadequate in both Portuguese and Mathematics. In 2021, only 5% of third-year high school students in public schools demonstrated adequate proficiency in mathematics, while only 31% showed mastery in Portuguese. The IDEB assessment, conducted biennially, reveals that over nearly two decades, Brazilian education has made very little progress, particularly at the high school level. This stage of education has failed to meet the demands of society and the labor market, reflecting a decline in educational quality.

The graphical analysis of the results highlights a general decline in educational quality in Brazil, with student scores consistently below the established targets. The year 2021 stands out negatively, reflecting the adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to an increase in the number of children and adolescents out of school, from 1.1 million in 2019 to 5.1 million in 2020. According to the study “*Cenário da Exclusão Escolar no Brasil - um Alerta sobre os Impactos da Pandemia da Covid-19 na Educação*”, conducted by UNICEF (United Nations Children’s Fund) and Cenpec (Center for Research and Studies in Education, Culture, and Community Action), the suspension of in-person classes and limited internet access contributed to educational exclusion, resulting in a critical scenario for youth development in the country (Tokarnia, 2021).

⁷ Translation: Top column: Portuguese; Bottom column: Mathematics.

The Unspoken Indicator: The Urgent Need for Meaning and Context in Brazilian Education

As discussed thus far, despite improvements in various aspects of Brazilian education over the past two decades, particularly in terms of access for children and youth to schools, high school remains a particularly concerning bottleneck. In 2023, 36.3% of Brazilian youth who were out of school had dropped out of high school (QEdu, 2023). The decrease in failure and dropout rates over the past decade indeed points to efforts to keep youth in school. However, these efforts have not translated into improved IDEB scores, suggesting that, over nearly 20 years, there has been little to no improvement in the quality of education offered to high school students.

Poverty remains the primary factor driving school dropout among youth. Data from 2023 indicate that 47.2% of out-of-school youth, who had not completed basic education, were living in poverty. Approximately 14.7 million young people, corresponding to one-third of Brazil's youth population aged 15 to 29, face this condition. Among those who did not complete basic education, 41.8% reported that the primary reason was the need to work. Another 23.5% cited a lack of interest in studying, and 9.6% said they left school due to pregnancy (QEdu, 2023).

Added to this scenario is an increasing disillusionment among young people regarding education and its role in job market readiness. Essentially, a growing number of young people no longer see the value in studying and specializing, given that the job market cannot absorb the available workforce. The frequent narrative of “college graduates working as Uber drivers” contrasts with the reality of many family providers who either studied little or not at all, yet were able to work and support their families. Additionally, the entrepreneurial narrative, particularly popular among youth and fueled by social media as a new version of the *American dream*⁸, has gained prominence.

Today, many young people view entrepreneurship as the primary path to financial freedom and personal fulfillment, considering it a more attractive alternative to traditional

⁸ The American Dream is the idea that anyone, regardless of their background, can achieve success and prosperity through hard work and determination. This concept, associated with life in the United States, emphasizes the pursuit of freedom, economic opportunities, and a better future, symbolized by the possibility of owning a home, having a good job, and ensuring a quality education for one's children. However, the reality of this dream can be complex, as not everyone can achieve it due to factors such as social inequality and economic barriers. Thus, the *American Dream transmuted for Brazil presents itself as nothing more than a deceptive chimera.*

employment. This new outlook suggests that it is possible to create businesses and generate wealth using digital tools, regardless of location.

However, this emphasis on entrepreneurship may lead to a waning belief in formal education as a means of improving life conditions. Many young people believe that traditional education does not provide the skills necessary for business success, especially when confronted with stories of successful entrepreneurs without college degrees. Social media reinforces this idea, highlighting self-taught success stories and prompting young people to prioritize business opportunities, believing in rapid success, over academic training.

This shift in perception regarding personal success has created a cycle in which the focus on entrepreneurship appears more appealing; however, it often leads to disillusionment when faced with the challenges of starting and sustaining a business. The lack of a strong financial education can limit access to essential information and networking opportunities required for business growth, in addition to constraints posed by insufficient personal resources for business maintenance. Furthermore, the prevalent skepticism toward formal education is not supported by the data. In 2023, the majority of formal job positions in Brazil were filled by individuals with completed higher education, as illustrated in the table below:

Chart 2 – Percentage of Adequate Learning for High School Students in Brazil

Taxa de Ocupação por nível de escolaridade - Brasil - 2023



Source: QEdu (2023).

The chart shows that 54.6% of young people aged 15 to 29 are formally employed, meaning they have registered employment and contribute to social security. Among them, 35.4% have not completed high school, while 64.4% have completed it. Additionally, 74.6% hold a technical high school degree. However, the majority of formal job positions for this age group are occupied by individuals with a completed higher education degree (84.4%). Conversely, young people, especially those with fewer qualifications, are among the first to be laid off. They face greater difficulty re-entering the workforce and are typically in more vulnerable positions. Among unemployed youth aged 15 to 29, the majority (18.6%) do not have a high school diploma. The higher the level of education, the lower the unemployment rate among young people, as shown below:

Chart 3 – Percentage of Adequate Learning for High School Students in Brazil⁹

Taxa de desemprego por nível de escolaridade - Brasil - 2023



Source: QEdu (2023).

⁹ Translator: 14.1% Total; 18.6% without a full degree; 13.8% with a full degree; 11.2% with a high school diploma; 6.8% with a full degree.

The previously presented data challenge and refute the notion that education has lost its relevance. In reality, the current situation is markedly different. Fifty years ago, it was possible to enter the job market with only minimal experience and basic knowledge of mathematical operations and the functioning of machines, which were predominantly mechanical at the time. However, this is no longer sufficient. Computers now operate with increasing complexity, and innovation, along with the implementation of new technologies, has become fundamental to corporate competitiveness both nationally and internationally.

This dynamic extends beyond the industrial sector: the labor market as a whole is constantly adopting new methods of negotiation and resource and personnel management. Additionally, the growth of *e-commerce* and the diversity of its services present new challenges, demanding higher qualifications and the development of new skills in an increasingly globalized and unstable environment. In this context, formal education and qualifications are indeed indispensable for integration into the job market.

However, education ultimately lacks meaning and context to make sense. This observation is not new. Paulo Freire, a renowned educator and patron of education in Brazil, offers a profound and enriching analysis of this topic. In his writings, he emphasizes that true education cannot be one-sided. To illustrate this, Freire introduces the concept of “banking education,” where the student is treated as a receptacle or repository of knowledge. In this model, education follows a one-way path, disregarding the experiences, dreams, limitations, and capabilities of the students:

Education becomes an act of depositing, where students are the depositories and the educator is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the educator issues “communiqués” and deposits, which the students—mere recipients—receive passively, memorize, and repeat. This is the “banking” concept of education, where the only action allowed to students is to receive, store, and archive deposits. They are given the role of collectors or archivists of the things they store (Freire, 1987. p. 58, our translation).

An education rooted in real-life contexts should prioritize the agency of the student, fostering dialogue with diverse realities and encouraging discussions that go beyond the technical aspect. It is essential to consider the social context, addressing different spaces' needs, deficiencies, potentialities, and particularities. Four decades ago, human interactions were limited to a physical and geographical space; however, these boundaries have been transcended with the advent of the internet. Access to a vast range of information, both true and false, occurs

at an accelerated pace. If education does not account for the role of the student in this new, complex, and expansive scenario, it may contribute to the spread of misinformation:

Disregarding the student's role in relation to knowledge is an outdated paradigm of education, which has evolved significantly over the years, especially in light of the internet, which has brought students closer to all types of information (Cachoeira; Grobe; Bonin, 2023, p. 432, our translation).

The concept of an educational approach that surpasses the banking paradigm is not a recent ambition. In addition to Paulo Freire, other Brazilian educators, such as Anísio Teixeira and Darcy Ribeiro, also dedicated themselves to transforming education into a tool for building a more just and equitable society. Teixeira was a strong advocate for public, free, and high-quality education, striving for the creation of an educational system accessible to all. Darcy Ribeiro, in turn, was a visionary who sought an education that respected and valued Brazil's cultural and regional diversity, and he was responsible for establishing innovative institutions such as the Integrated Centers for Public Education (CIEPs).

The Integrated Centers for Public Education (CIEPs), conceived by Darcy Ribeiro and implemented in Rio de Janeiro during the government of Leonel Brizola in the 1980s, were full-time public schools. They aimed to provide a comprehensive education for children and adolescents from underprivileged communities, integrating quality teaching with cultural and sports activities and social and health assistance. With robust infrastructure, these schools offered a conducive environment for the holistic development of students, including classrooms, libraries, sports courts, and theaters. Located in vulnerable areas, they sought to expand educational opportunities for these youth, with an innovative pedagogical proposal that combined traditional subjects with artistic and sports activities, aiming to form critical citizens prepared for social challenges.

Although they initially made a positive impact, the CIEPs faced difficulties, such as a lack of funding due to governmental changes, leading to periods of neglect and necessary adaptations. Nevertheless, the CIEPs left a significant legacy and continue to serve as an example of a more inclusive and integrated educational approach.

However, a significant issue remains: the sense of disconnection that young people feel towards education. Many students often question the relevance of content such as chemistry formulas, complex mathematical equations, and physics concepts in their lives. These questions are valid, especially in the context of secondary education in Brazil, which faces high dropout rates. The education system's focus is often on preparing students for entrance exams like the

vestibular and ENEM, rather than considering their personal aspirations and realities. The lack of guidance and support to help students stay engaged in their studies results in a lack of clarity about their future goals and career choices.

Amidst this complex situation, the New High School (*Novo Ensino Médio - NEM*) was introduced in 2017. The initial goal seemed positive, but it ultimately turned out to be a misstep. The idea was to align students' needs with the demands of the job market, diversifying their education and offering greater autonomy in choosing their learning pathways. With a flexible curriculum proposal, consisting of the National Common Curricular Base (Base Nacional Comum Curricular - BNCC, Brazil, 2018) and formative itineraries, the reform aimed to allow students to delve into areas of personal interest, in addition to increasing the minimum workload from 2,400 to 3,000 hours over the course of high school. This structure also sought to integrate high school with vocational education, allowing students to graduate in technical areas while completing the regular curriculum.

As mentioned earlier, although the premises of the New High School (NEM) seemed to meet the expectations of students, a more detailed analysis revealed a political context that influenced its implementation. The reform was formulated quickly, amid a tumultuous historical period in Brazil, marked by the impeachment of then-president Dilma Rousseff in 2016. This scenario raised significant concerns about the lack of proper societal debate regarding such a crucial change in educational policy, which was introduced through a Provisional Measure at a time of great instability in the country.

On September 22, 2016, exactly 22 days after Michel Temer's definitive assumption of the presidency of the Republic, following the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff in a controversial process fraught with doubts regarding its legality and legitimacy, which led it to be described as a coup, Provisional Measure (MP) No. 746/2016 was issued. As outlined in the Exposition of Motives, the text submitted to the National Congress sought to regulate the organization of high school curricula, progressively expand the school day at this level of education, and establish the Policy for Promoting the Implementation of Full-Time High Schools (Ferreti; Silva, 2017, p. 386, our translation).

The reform quickly became controversial among teachers, authorities, researchers, and other education professionals, particularly due to the urgency with which it was implemented. However, a more in-depth analysis can offer valuable insights for a critical reflection on the issue of the New High School, such as: what interests does such a significant reform aim to serve, when it is introduced without the proper debate with society? As previously discussed,

Darcy Ribeiro, a Brazilian sociologist and educator, warned of the Brazilian state's organization favoring the interests of national and international elites. The present is a repetition of the past, as the *modus operandi* has not changed.

The problem does not lie in the high school reform itself, but in the interests it serves, namely, the interests of the market and capital. At first glance, dividing basic education into formative pathways may appear to help students find motivation to study and make more informed future choices. However, like ours, as reported by Daniel Cara, head of the National Campaign for the Right to Education (*apud* Ferreti; Silva, 2017, p. 395), approximately 3,000 municipalities have only one high school. Thus, dividing education into pathways and exempting students from certain subjects, such as philosophy, sociology, and the arts, may covertly undermine the development of critical thinking, aiming to prepare individuals solely for the labor market, one that is increasingly technical but less connected to the conditions of citizenship.

The solution is not to conceive of an entirely new system but to look at what already exists and envision new possibilities. The issue for young people is not learning the content offered through existing disciplines, but the lack of context. If students cannot find context in complex equations, philosophical reflections, sociological analyses, or the balancing of organic chemistry systems, the solution is not to eliminate these subjects or reduce their offerings. The solution is to create context, and the Brazilian pedagogical framework is vast and rich with ways to make this work. It is no coincidence that Paulo Freire, to name just one obvious example, is globally remembered as the creator of a pedagogical model focused on the contextualized reality of students' lives. It is essential to reconnect content, life, technology, and science as a synthesis for life; otherwise, the results will always be disappointing or disconnected from the true meaning of learning: improving and transforming people's lives.

Final considerations

Although Brazilian educators have made significant contributions to education, implementing these ideas into a profound transformation faces socio-economic, political, and structural challenges. For Brazil to become an educational powerhouse, it is necessary to overcome these obstacles through coordinated effort, long-term commitment, and the valorization of education in the country's development. This is the concept of a "national project," which goes beyond the state and requires the engagement of society as a whole. Without this collective support, failure will continue to define the national education system.

The pedagogical tradition in Brazil is characterized by the valorization of local cultures and the inclusion of popular knowledge in the school curriculum, as proposed by many educators. However, while the Brazilian pedagogical heritage is vast, the contradiction it unveils is even greater. If Brazil possesses such a renowned pedagogical tradition, why does our education fare so poorly? Why have we, as a nation, been unable to implement all that our educators and education scientists have produced and transform the country into a global educational powerhouse? The answer is complex. The country, marked by profound social and regional inequalities, reflects these disparities in its educational system. Poverty, lack of infrastructure, and the discrepancy of resources between urban and rural areas hinder the implementation of effective and uniform educational policies. While some regions manage to adopt advanced pedagogical practices, others still face fundamental structural problems, such as inadequate schools and poorly qualified teachers.

One of the main obstacles to improving education in Brazil is the discontinuity of educational policies, which are frequently interrupted or altered with changes in government. This cycle of interruptions prevents the consolidation of long-term projects that are essential for transforming the educational system. Even the best ideas and reforms are implemented superficially or partially, lacking the time necessary to generate consistent results. Furthermore, while there have been advances in terms of access to education, public investment remains insufficient to ensure the quality needed at all levels, affecting everything from infrastructure to teacher training and appreciation. The difficulties faced by the teaching profession, such as low salaries and inadequate working conditions, contribute to the devaluation of teaching, undermining the quality of education. Excessive bureaucracy and resistance to change in institutions and society also make it difficult to implement new pedagogical practices, which often encounter slow processes and an educational culture that clings to traditional methods, even if they are already obsolete.

Youth desire an education with meaning, but change will not come from the top. It must originate from the communities, from rural and urban areas, anchored in the dreams and expectations of children, young people, and families. It is essential to rebuild trust in the belief that education is the key to a better future, with more opportunities and quality of life. However, this belief must be grounded in concrete results, demonstrating the transformative power of education.

Brazil truly needs to implement a state-led educational project that is complex and ambitious, yet concise, concrete, and with clear goals. It is essential to conceive this project and invest not only financial resources but also effort to ensure there is oversight, direction, and adherence to established guidelines. It is unacceptable to face the recent information that 90% of the goals of the current National Education Plan (PNE 2014-2024) have not been met (Brasil, 2015). A report by the National Campaign for the Right to Education revealed that, in 10 years, only 4 out of the 38 goals were achieved. This data is alarming and demonstrates that the current model has not worked. Therefore, an educational project of the state that transcends political polarization and remains consistent throughout different governments is necessary. Otherwise, another 10, 20, or 30 years may pass, and Brazilian education will remain stagnant.

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