



## Youths and high school: tensions and fights for meanings

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**ABSTRACT.** This paper aimed to contribute to the debate on the meaning that high school has to youths in the current context. It points out both historical and recent tensions and fights involving high school and articulates them with the results of a field research carried out with high school youths attending a private school known for its high quality. Based on the authors consulted and the research, this study questions the quality of private high school and argues that both that quality and the meaning attributed, even if universalized, would be useless to the construction of a more equitable and egalitarian society.

**Keywords:** youth; high school; construction of meaning.

### Juventudes e ensino médio: tensões e disputas pelos sentidos

**RESUMO.** O artigo objetiva contribuir para o debate sobre o sentido do ensino médio para as juventudes no contexto atual. Para tanto apresenta as tensões e disputas históricas e as mais recentes em torno do ensino médio e as articula com os resultados de uma pesquisa de campo realizada com jovens do ensino médio de uma escola particular reconhecida como sendo de qualidade. Com base nos autores utilizados e na pesquisa efetuada, questiona a qualidade do ensino médio particular e argumenta que tanto ela quanto o sentido que este possui, ainda que fossem universalizados, não serviriam para a construção de uma sociedade mais justa e igualitária.

**Palavras-chave:** juventude; ensino médio; construção de sentido.

### Juventudes y enseñanza secundaria: tensiones y disputas por los sentidos

**RESUMEN.** El artículo tiene el objetivo de contribuir al debate sobre el sentido de la enseñanza secundaria para los jóvenes en el contexto actual. Para tal fin presenta las tensiones y disputas históricas y las más recientes sobre la enseñanza secundaria y las articula con los resultados de una investigación de campo realizada con jóvenes de enseñanza secundaria de un colegio particular reconocido como de calidad. Con base en los autores utilizados y en la investigación efectuada, se cuestiona la calidad de la enseñanza secundaria particular y se argumenta que tanto la calidad como el sentido que posee, aunque fuesen universalizados, no servirían para la construcción de una sociedad más justa e igualitaria.

**Palabras-clave:** juventud; enseñanza secundaria; construcción de sentido.

### Introduction

One can state that concerns related to high school have intensified in the last years, bringing about disputes and tensions still unresolved from other times (polytechnic education, professional training vs. preparatory training, teaching directed at the interests of young people, unified teaching). New demands and tensions are also emerging due to the great cultural and economic transformations that Brazilian society has undergone and which are taking place in a neo-liberal global context (commodification of education, life for consumption), as well as due to demands derived from new social movements (race/ethnicity, gender, and others).

These are transformations that affect our way of life, change our expectations, our work, our relationships with ourselves and with others. They change, above all, the meaning of what it means to be young, along with young people's interests, concerns, and projects. Our intention is to contribute to the debate over these tensions and clashes, using field research conducted with young people from a private high school known for its quality, especially many of its students have access to the best public universities. We intend to problematize the different theoretical meanings of high school and to argue, based on an empirical research, that private high school makes sense for young people, mainly due to their social condition. In this way, the present article aims to identify the

main theoretical groups that problematize the meaning of high school, pointing out convergences and divergences; to present the analysis of field research conducted with middle to upper-class high school students at a private institution that shows what they think of themselves and the young people at public schools; and to contribute to the debate around quality high school education for all youngsters, apart from the notion of quality usually assigned to private schools.

Firstly, in the present piece, we present the main issues brought up by the authors that have been carrying out studies with high school youth about high school policies and curricula, showing how this is a field of convergences and divergences. We note that we consider divergences and tensions to be highly positive elements for the building of a high school that is meaningful for youngsters and for democratic society as a whole.

Secondly, and in relation to the first part of our article, we present the results of field research carried out with high school students at a private institution, notably young people who belong to the most privileged social strata. One must note that when reporting what high schoolers think of themselves and others, we are not holding them accountable for their thinking, nor making moral judgments; we only seek to show what an institution considered to be a quality school, in the context of a neo-liberal society and surrounded by the culture of individualism, creates in its young students. We take young people as largely an effect of different contexts that has produced and is still producing them, and not as a consequence of their individual effort and choices, even though, as we shall see, they are being led to believe this (Bauman, 1999, 2003, 2008, 2013; Reis, 2012; Silva, Pelissari, & Steimbach, 2013; Silva Júnior, Lucena, & Ferreira, 2011; Silva, 2014).

Some of the questions raised by these authors are echoed partially in the data collected in the research, while others become less clear, resulting in the fact that the debate around high school and its youth maintains its tensions and clashes. It is through these tensions, and not without them, that one builds a counter-hegemonic process, which, in the current context, involves the decreasing primacy of the market over high school policies and, consequently, the youth themselves.

### **Youth and high school: different struggles, perspectives, and meanings**

As mentioned above, there are historical struggles, tensions, and clashes associated with class

movements that remain unresolved; there are newer struggles, tensions, and clashes that have arisen as a consequence of the development of capitalism, better known as neo-liberalism; and there are struggles arising from the new social movements, notably those around race/ethnicity and gender.

For organizational purposes of this section, we established three groups: one of them consists of authors more in tune with an educational philosophy inspired by Marxism, with the polytechnic and omnilateral school (Nosella, 2011; Krawczyk, 2014; Frigotto, & Ciavatta, 2011; Ramos, 2011; Silva Júnior et al., 2011). Another group is made up of authors that base their work more on the perspectives of young people, trying to understand why they do not see any meaning in high school. In general, they are not against different types of high schools, since all of them are quality institutions (Reis, 2011; Senicato, & Ometto, 2014; Silva et al., 2013; Leão, Dayrell, & Reis, 2011; Oliveira, & Tomazetti, 2012). Our third group is composed of Silva (2014), Oliveira (2014), and Asinelli-Luz and Cunha (2011) — a Foucaultian study, a race/ethnicity study, and a gender study, respectively. It should be noted that despite many divergences amongst them, all of these authors pose themselves explicitly against the commodification of high school, and argue in favor of free public and quality high schools for all.

Let us start with the first group. Nosella (2011) follows Marxist educational principles, advocating for an omnilateral school for all. It is a high school with a “[...] high quality, broad cultural spectrum, non-welfare” (Nosella, 2011, p. 1064). This author is radically against a professional teaching method because it would prevent young people from living their typical years of indecision about what job they want to have in the future.

Following the ideas of Marxist authors, Nosella (2011) holds that the high school shall be a time for developing one’s autonomy in which the young people move from the realm of necessity and enters the realm of freedom. This author presents a background of public high school policies in Brazil, showing that with the Brazilian democratization of education, high school lost its ability to develop leadership, becoming low quality and a place to produce cheap labor in the interest of capitalism. In other words, in its vocational version high school now creates submissive professionals and practical operators.

Nosella (2011) stresses that a central questions is how high school can be a training process for autonomy and freedom if it is only accessible to the elite. Therefore, the transformation of society, with

the aim of making it more just and equal, remains a necessary political struggle. This involves advocating for a “[...] unitary, non-vocational high school for all” (Nosella, 2011, p. 1062).

Recent public policies directed at high school in Brazil have been based on the idea that private or for-profit schools are the model to be followed in public schools. Krawczyk (2014) shows that, in the current context, the business world has the most influence on public high school. She examines several experiments conducted in different Brazilian states, pointing out that the schools used as a model for high school are full-time high school institutions with shared management (public schools managed by a company). Regardless of the reasons presented for full-time school, it is important to recognize that extending the time of a student’s presence in high school does not guarantee a better learning process or a higher quality school. It might mean more training for youngsters of the working class so that they become *better* workers when the job market needs them. Here we find the private sector’s recent interest in interfering significantly with the high school curriculum. As the author points out, the shared-management public high school has meant the “[...] adoption of a set of techniques and tools [...] brought from the business world, systematized and transformed into knowledge that can be applied to education” (Krawczyk, 2014, p. 31). It is the development of business culture inside public high schools, teaching young people to become flexible and adaptable to new demands in a world already provided, where there is no room for critical reflection nor for social transformation. Public schools become a space in which a business worldview is perceived as efficient and desirable for all facets of life.

The author also stresses that selecting students has been a recurrent practice in the schools that are partners with the private sector, and both students and teachers who do not adapt to the demands of such schools are transferred to other public schools. In this way, one hopes the public school system serves as a mechanism of selecting the best students, those in which it is worth investing, instead of spending resources on so-called ‘invalids’.

Similarly, Frigotto and Ciavatta (2011) write that, even in the Lula da Silva e Dilma Rousseff administrations, given the social base that elected them, concerns about high school were not related to articulating knowledge, culture, and work nor universalizing such perspectives for all young people through a free public education. On the contrary, the adopted policies have transferred public resources to the private sector, as it is, for instance,

in the National Program for Access to Technical Education and Employment (Pronatec), which was implemented by the first Rousseff administration. Thus, it is clear that “[...] increasingly high school policies, in all modalities and in the directives guiding their pedagogical perspectives, have been ruled by the dominance of business thinking” (Frigotto, & Ciavatta, 2011, p. 633).

According to Frigotto and Ciavatta (2011), this situation becomes even more serious because, as a result of the dependent capitalist model we have in Brazil, a universal quality high school is not necessary. In this case it would be enough to offer superficial training for young people in short technical courses for them to perform simple tasks. Intellectual development, for the authors, remains a privilege of the elites.

Ramos (2011) also examines recent policies for high school and, in the same vein as Frigotto and Ciavatta (2011), he advocates an omnilateral and polytechnic training associated with work, science, and culture where work is an educational principle. While she recognizes that some principles of current high school policies are reminiscent of an approach to education elaborated by thinkers engaged in this kind of education, she argues that policies for high school, with an emphasis on full-time and innovative high schools, tend to benefit the interests of capital rather than labor, now that we live in a society in which the business class is hegemonic both in civil and political society.

According to Ramos (2011), one may stress that at least two of the interconnected factors influencing these policies deviate from omnilateral and polytechnic training: the first concerns advocating for high school aimed at the interests of young people, and the second states that it is in the best interests of youth to become professionalized in the shortest time possible. The author says advocating for a high school directed to the interests of young people neglects the fact that one of the main roles of education is to effectively show youngsters which interests are important. According to the author’s perspective, this would involve convincing them that intellectual formation (access to scientific knowledge) is critical for their development, including their professional development. In the same vein as Frigotto and Ciavatta (2011), Ramos (2011) holds that what still predominates is a compensatory vocational high school. With it, access to socially and historically produced knowledge, which is not denied to the elites, often remains denied to the working class.

Silva Júnior et al., (2011) agree with this view, criticizing the current high school policies that

follow the logic of financial capital. Just like other authors cited above, they point out the division between vocational high school and preparatory high school as a consequence of class society. Vocational high school fulfills its role of “[...] forming workers able to multifunction and suitable to the business thinking and interests” (Silva Júnior et al., 2011, p. 840).

According to these authors, this is a process of inclusion that does not break with the logic of social and capital reproduction. They show how preparatory education has served young people of the upper classes and is geared toward research and scientific knowledge, whereas in vocational education, especially in Pronatec and Proeja (National Program for the Integration of Vocational Education with Basic Education in the Education of Youth and Adults Mode), these people, instead of pursuing higher education, end up assuming modest careers in the job market that do not demand more complex knowledge.

According to these authors, this situation becomes even more problematic when we take into account that most K-12 teachers are come from public schools, themselves having faced a greater level of difficulty in general and having studied in private universities that also follow the logic of capita. For Silva Júnior et al. (2011), these teachers end up working in public schools, exacerbating the problems surrounding the world of education. Along with this process of privatization of education, a second process exists whereby the collective force in producing the lives of young people is substituted by the idea of individual merit: “[...] success and the fact of getting a job are seen as an individual process, expressed by individual competencies also materialized” (Silva Júnior et al., 2011, p. 859). With it, the offer of a private, precariously vocational and reductionist education is not put into question, for one is convinced that being successful depends more on the individual taking advantage of opportunities than the (collective) process of education.

In addition to these authors who follow Marxist ideals of education, we present a set of thinkers who are more focused on trying to understand the reasons why young people do or do not see any meaning in high school and analyze their perspectives on youth. Though some of them use Marxist ideas, they do not support a unified high school, admitting different types, obviously all with a high level of quality.

Reis (2012) examines the experiences of young people from less-favored (but not extremely poor) strata of society at a public school in Sao Paulo considered by the community and the state to be a

high-quality school. She reports on the difficulties of these young people: even though the students have a high level of interest in studying and see meaning in school and its importance in their lives, they experience hardships related to the fact that high school does not systematically correlate with what these people know. As a result, the knowledge provided by the school has little to no meaning for them.

Because these young people come from other places with different cultural practices, their biggest challenges are to overcome prejudice and shame and find forms of integration. It means their intellectual development does not end up taking place according to their parents' and their own expectations. What we want to emphasize is that these people, besides bearing the stigma of failure in school because their performance is lower than expected, feel accountable by their own failure.

However, according to Reis (2012), the point is that the school assumes these young people know things which they in fact, do not know. This point is reinforced by research that has shown that teachers who are able to relate what these young people know are seen by their students as good teachers that *really* teach. The aforementioned author reminds us that it is not a matter of reinforcing the dualistic logic of an intellectual school for elite young people and a school that prepares students for labor geared to economically disadvantaged young people. Rather, it is about envisioning a high school that effectively makes sense for these people.

Senicato and Ometto (2014) also points out that, in the current context, it is common to hold students (including high school students) accountable for the failure and/or lack of quality of the school as assessed by local, state or nationwide external evaluations. In general, young people from less-favored strata are seen as having adaptive problems, incapable of accepting rules, having cultural delays (because they come from groups ‘with no culture’) and social-cultural deficits: “[...] when they do not respond the way it is expected, stigmatization takes place through pointing out their origin, blaming their school's failure on socio-cultural deficits” (Senicato, & Ometto, 2014, p. 260).

In Silva et al. (2013) we find reflections that help us understand the reasons why young people do or do not see any meaning in high school. These authors present data that show high school faces a paradox: while there is a high drop-out and failure rate (35.55% in 2007 and 2009), a discourse also exists which emphasizes the relevance of this level of education to young people. For the authors, it makes sense to talk about youth in the plural, all of whom

are constructed socially and historically amid tensions and struggles. In addition, they remind us that today's youth live in a context where "[...] it is the individual's responsibility, not that of the economic and social structure, to be employable, breaking with the idea of qualification as an attribute which was socially and historically built" (Silva et al., 2013, p. 407).

To know the reasons why young people remain in high school, Silva et al. (2013) conducted a study with young people at two kinds of technical high schools from the state of Parana: schools for agricultural sciences and schools focused on technology. In the first case, they studied two institutions: the one with the highest retention rate, and the one with the lowest rate of retention. In both schools the students have a positive view of themselves, related to their vocational training; they expect to have a bright professional career and to get into higher education; they also have good views of the school environment, the campus and the friendships among students.

Ultimately, according to the authors, it can be said these young people remain in school because for them it has a positive meaning. With regard to the technological schools, there is a great demand and, at the same time, a large number of dropouts. This is because the expectations young people have of school, as a safe place for getting a good job with a high salary (caused by a *heated market* and the lack of skilled workers) are demystified by the school itself and its former students, given that most of them do not work in the field and others are unemployed. As such, they tend to consider this period as a lost year (since it lasts four years) and end up moving to three-year high schools with the intention of getting into college. The authors remind us that the students of these schools do not need to reconcile studying with working. This shows they do not belong to the lower strata of our society and that their possibilities of going to college are real. This makes them find meaning in a three-year high school, since having completed high school is a prerequisite for admission to higher education.

Leão et al. (2011), through research conducted with high school youth from the state of Para, bring these young people's life plans and their views about how high school supports their ability to materialize these projects to the center of debate. The authors highlight that, in the current context, young people think about their life plans in the near future, unlike in the past, when they used to plan their lives in the long run. Leão et al. (2011) also show that young workers are more concerned about improving their professional occupation, while those who do not

work think more about continuing their studies in higher education.

The majority of young people adapt their life plans to the situations life presents. In general, they are not long-term plans and have no rigid rules. The authors above mentioned say these students do not see much of a role for high school in contributing to their life plans. However, they did have a lot of expectations for school when starting their high school years, which would suggest that high school should be more connected to the daily life of these students. Since many of them wish to improve their professional status through the completion of high school, the authors also say that these years in school should be offered through different models. According to them, in the current context young people are held accountable for teaching themselves but they are not provided the material conditions necessary to live the years of their youth, which jeopardizes their life plans.

For Oliveira and Tomazetti (2012), the high school crisis of meaning is due to the fact that today's youth are subjectivated by society and consumer culture. In society and consumer culture, the important thing is having instant and immediate pleasure. As such, the idea of studying for a period of three years or more with the promise of a better future does not convince them because, as a consequence of consumer culture and a society which demands immediate gratification, they are not willing to give up moments of pleasure and the intense desires they feel all the time. Thus, high school time and space becomes boring, unbearable, tedious, and ultimately meaningless, since in a consumer society and culture the primary goal is to consume. According to the authors, more and more students consider high school to be a place for fun, play and teasing, instead of a time for meaningful knowledge.

Finally, we present the findings of Foucaultian studies, race/ethnicity studies and gender studies, contributing to the debate while bringing in new tensions and clashes. Inspired by Foucault's work, Silva (2014) examines polytechnic education in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, implemented in 2011. According to Silva (2014), in spite of presenting elements of polytechnic education under a Marxian inspiration (such as the mention to the axis of culture, science, technology, and work), this approach demonstrated a convergence with the interests of post-industrial society.

According to Silva (2014), this is very clear in the approach in question because it does not privilege historically accumulated knowledge, as polytechnic education authors hold, and because it does not

challenge students themselves to “[...] produce their formative paths based on their interests and the opportunities the knowledge economy may have to offer them” (Silva, 2014, p. 131).

This approach is in accordance with an individualistic culture; young people are taken as permanent self-formed persons who choose their training paths. The intellectual work, though singled out in the present approach as well, also is in tune with neo-liberal society, for it is centered in the students’ interests, as well as research activities, internships, experiences, and the development of projects, entrusting students with the responsibility for their own education. Silva (2014) holds that grounding education in the interests of young people ends up producing a customized curriculum (do it their way), and a customized school, which follows the commercial logic present in the education of our current context. So, in spite of being committed to transformation, the proposal of polytechnic high school lays inside the logic of a post-industrial society, which assigns the individual the responsibility for his or her own education.

Ethnic and racial studies, especially those related to black issues, also struggle for a transformation in high school. In short, one may say they fight for the implementation of Law 10.639/2003 (Lei n. 10.639, 2003), which states that all educational institutions, at all levels, must include African history and culture in their curricula. In this sense, Oliveira (2014) analyzes the transformations desired by the field of ethnic and racial studies in relation to high school, and he always links it to black social movements.

This is a transformation in high school that seeks to question the hegemony of European knowledge, its epistemology, and European people way of life as superior to others’. Ethnic and racial studies propose including African history and culture, which hold another epistemological and pedagogical approach, thereby demanding changes in teachers’ training, too. This change is intended to overcome the myth of racial democracy in Brazil and end discrimination and racism against black young people. It is also a matter of overcoming the institutional racism so prevalent in the Brazilian society. So, for ethnic and racial studies “[...] Eurocentrism becomes the problem, not the solution” (Oliveira, 2014, p. 92). It is therefore necessary to question the Eurocentric foundation of the Brazilian way of thinking, which systematically puts black people in a subordinate position.

We also have gender studies, which also suggest changes in high school. Its discussion involves a non-sexist education and activities combating homophobia, which is present amongst high school

students, too. In the same way as we did with ethnic and racial studies, we briefly present the demands of this field, using Asinelli-Luz and Cunha’s (2011) writings. These authors say that there exists a high level of violence against homosexual young people, especially males, and the analysis of the data available at the National Institute for Educational Studies and Research ‘Anísio Teixeira’ or INEP (Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais Anísio Teixeira) shows that this violence takes place among high school young people with negative effects on school performance.

Like ethnic and racial movements, gender movements (feminist, lesbian, gay, homosexual, bisexual, transvestite, transgender...) propose curricular changes, with the inclusion of sex education, and a permanent struggle to deconstruct heteronormativity, which is a source of prejudice and gender discrimination. To that end, they suggest changes in teacher training that make teachers recognize sexual and gender diversity and ensure that they know how to confront homophobia as well as sexism, machismo, patriarchy, by showing gender identity to be a historic and cultural construct so that teachers do not reduce it to its biological dimensions.

Just like ethnic and racial studies, which link the quality of high school education to the quality of ethnic and racial relationships, theorists and movements associated with gender say high school quality “[...] should not focus only on positive change in academic performance indicators, but also on the reduction of discrimination suffered by certain groups” (Asinelli-Luz, & Cunha, 2011, p. 95).

As we have seen, there are many tensions and clashes in the context of young people’s education. In the next section, based on field research, some questions presented by such discussions and tensions will be reaffirmed, but some *certainties* and *pieces of evidence* will become less tangible.

### **Young people at a private high school: what they think of themselves and of others in public school**

In this section, we present some results of research carried out with high school young people at a private institution located in the metropolitan area of Porto Alegre, the capital of Rio Grande do Sul state, in southern Brazil. It took place over one year, using methods widely legitimized in the field of education (private interviews, discussion groups, systematic class observation and observation of the school context, which included its break time, time of entry and exit, field diary, and questionnaires<sup>1</sup>),

<sup>1</sup> It is recorded that research was not submitted to the Ethics Committee, but all ethical procedures during the research were followed.

which is why we do not think it is necessary to describe them thoroughly.

Private interviews were conducted with high school students, taking into consideration that the questions and answers “[...] are embedded in discourses of their time, the situation experienced by them, the truths established for social groups of its members” (Silveira, 2002, p. 130). Discussion groups with students were also held because they privilege “[...] interactions and a greater insertion of the researcher in the universe of the subjects, therefore reducing the risks of wrong interpretations about the factors studied” (Weller, 2006, p. 241). In all, three discussion groups were held with high school students, each lasting about 40 minutes. The topics suggested during discussion groups were the school where they study, cultural values, today's young people and the expectations they have in relation to their academic trajectory.

Observations of classes and the other school spaces took place during one year without the intention of interference in the school routine. We tried to be what Bogdan and Biklen (1994) called *complete observers*, taking notes in a field diary: “[...] observation allows personal and close contact between the researcher and the phenomenon studied, which presents a number of advantages” (Lüdke, & André, 1986, p. 27). In the beginning of the study, a questionnaire was distributed. With the exception of this questionnaire, which was carried out by the school (with questions formulated by the author), all other research methods were carried out by the researcher himself. In the analysis of the questionnaire answers, we also chose to conduct a quantitative analysis. It is necessary to stress though that the data collected refer to the particular school, so one should not generalize the results to other schools; they are useful to reinforce how students of this school see it.

We chose not to report the year in which the research was conducted in order to preserve the anonymity of both the school and the students. This decision does not affect the analysis, since the private schools have increasingly been trying to prepare young people for getting into higher education, which, as we shall see, helps them to see themselves in a certain way while constructing specific ways of seeing each other—in the case of our study, mainly the young people of poorer strata, notably public school students.

Furthermore, in order to preserve young people's identities, besides the concerns already mentioned, we will not quote long lines, citing only small manifestations recurring during the study, even though interviews and discussion groups were

recorded with due school authorization. As already stated, the students said what they said not because it arose from a supposed inner self, but because they are produced by contexts where individualism is emphasized (Reis, 2012; Silva et al., 2013; Silva Júnior et al., 2011; Silva, 2014), giving the young people responsibility for their success or failure. According to Bauman (2003, p. 48), in the present context “[...] firm commitments to act together seem to promise more losses than gains”, although the individual fight may provoke pain and suffering.

Based on Bauman (1999, 2003, 2008, 2013), it is worth stressing that the individualism and the ensuing accountability of each person resulting from the building of our lives from our choices may sound like a song for young people ‘from above’, but as a deafening noise for the ones from below. For the individual who does not have material resources to live his or her life, individual choice becomes a fight, an extra weight, of their infamous and undeserved conditions of life, carried on their shoulders. Besides being proud of their successful condition and linking it with their choices, dedication, and effort, the young people ‘from above’ tend to see the ones ‘from below’ as students who do not take advantage of opportunities, prefer watching low-quality TV shows to reading books, or prefer living on scholarships and alms given by the government for education. They tend to see these students as people who do not consume, travel, or have culture.

As already said, this is a school recognized as being of high quality because its graduates get into extremely competitive federal universities and get high evaluations on the National High School Exam (ENEM). This factor is the one students point out the most as the reason for choosing this school. In the year our research was conducted, the school had 233 students enrolled in high school, distributed among eight classes of 26 to 35 students.

We distributed a questionnaire with closed and open questions, the results of which we now analyze. Of the 233 students, 215 returned the questionnaire, which represents 92% of them all. Of students who answered the question about the reason they study at that school, 167 (77.6%) said it is because of its high quality, 26 (12.09%) said because their parents/siblings/relatives studied there, and the others pointed out other reasons (it is close to home, they needed a different school, because it had openings, or school exchange). If we consider that the students who single out parents/siblings/relatives in their answers did so because they took into consideration the positive experience they had and, therefore, the high quality

teaching methods, then we have 89.69% of students who study there because of the quality factor.

Another issue we were interested in knowing was whether the students perceived any difference between the values and interests of their family and those that the school taught. Regarding this questioning, 162 (75.34%) of them said No, 51 (23.72%) said Yes, two of them (0.93%) did not answer. It should be noted that, amongst the ones who said Yes (there is some difference), according to their justifications there is not necessarily an antagonism, but a matter of emphasis; some answered the family cares more about affectivity and that the school cares more about knowledge; others said school cares more about passing students to get into university and the family cares more about formation in general.

In a way, this convergence between what families expect and what school teaches explains the large number of young people who said they never or almost never face difficulties in their studies, beyond the fact that they are full-time students dedicated to school tasks. Of the 215 students that answered the questionnaire, 152 (70.69%) said they rarely face difficulties in their studies, 47 (21.86%) said they never face difficulties in their studies; only 11 of them (5.11%) said they almost always have some difficulty, and two (0.93) said they always have difficulties at school. Two students did not answer the question.

Besides being a place for knowledge aimed at preparing students to get into higher education institutions, we shall note that these young people see the school as a place for friendship and positive coexistence. In this sense, we note that 75 (34.88%) of the 215 students who answered the questionnaire said they always feel good at school, 119 (55.34%) almost always feel good, 18 (8.37%) rarely feel good and only three of them (1.39%) never feel good there. Regarding the issue of the school as a place for friendship and positive coexistence, 139 of them (64.65%) said they have many friends at school, 74 (34.88%) said they have some friends, and only one student (0.46%) answered he has no friends at school.

We consider it important to bring up this issue of coexistence and friendship because sometimes we might be led to think public school young people care more about coexistence and friendship, thereby putting learning on the back burner, whereas private school students only care about knowledge. However, our research suggests that these factors are not disconnected. Our study stresses that private school students learn because there is a convergence of family interests (a quality education) and young

people's interests (the access to better universities) with students' status, characterized by the relevance of friend groups and positive coexistence. In this sense, we may say that our research findings are close to the ideas of authors who hold it is important for high school to be connected to young people's interests (Reis, 2011; Senicato, & Ometto, 2014; Silva et al., 2013; Leão et al., 2011; Oliveira, & Tomazetti, 2012) so that learning is greater.

In addition, the content taught in the school has a lot to do with the reality of the students, because, as some authors of ethnic, racial and gender studies say, K-12 content is the content predominant in hegemonic, white, Western, heterosexual, male, middle/upper class culture. In the context of neo-liberalism, the school "[...] is part of a project committed to the search for a framework which homogenizes cultures, values, knowledge, and practices, in a social context deeply marked by the predominance of positivist epistemology" (Esteban, 2008, p. 8).

In this sense, we bring forward a situation observed in one of the classrooms of the school involved in the research. The school has systematically applied bi-weekly multiple-choice tests intending to prepare its students for getting into university. When the teacher handed out students' tests, he noted that most of the students committed a mistake on a particular question; its correct answer was that the maid had bought 200 kg of mortadella. Even after finding the answer of 200 kg through their calculations, the students checked 200 grams as the *correct* answer. They complained and even joked saying poor students would have answered this question correctly. We will not consider now the discrimination presented in such behavior. We want to emphasize how much these private school students are used to seeing, in a *natural* way, the relation between what they learn and their cultural universe, to the point that they mark the wrong answer when this relation is broken up.

If we have been concerned so far with showing how these young people feel at school, the quality of the school and its success as a major player in their preparation for getting into higher education institutions, we are now going to deal with issues that call into question this supposed quality. We think this is important to help in the deconstruction of the idea that the private schools shall be a quality reference for public schools; an idea which is very present today, in particular in the press and in society in general, and of course in private schools. Perhaps it is also useful to call into question the notion according to which the private schools are



preparatory, general training schools, where historically and socially produced knowledge is all around, allowing for a quality training for its students.

Based on the data collection tools we used, we can say that these young people are led to think that to be successful in their lives it depends only on them, which, according to the respondents, involves getting into a high-quality public university and into important majors. We note that for students high school was meaningful. However, this meaning, according to our research, is due to more than the differentiated way teachers work with the students in classrooms; it has to do in large part with the students' certainty they will be successful if they strive to take advantage of high school in order to get a place in higher education.

The young people involved in the study conducted, especially those who excelled in performance, did not usually do group work and were encouraged by their teachers not to. When asked why they held this attitude, students said bluntly they would not strengthen their competitors, especially when they realized some classmates would compete for the same major and university.

In the discussion groups, when there was any divergence in their positions regarding some issue, whether it was daily life in general, such as the quality of TV shows, or a question directly related to everyone's life, such as passing a competitive exam for getting into a high-quality university, there was invariably an agreement when someone recalled: "It depends on each one; everyone is responsible for what they want in life; if you try hard, you'll do it; everyone watches the TV channel they want". With these ideas, the characteristics these students considered as theirs and led them to make the best choices also came up: "we have culture to know how to choose; we study at a high-quality private school; we have money" (to go to the theater or movie theater, to pay for television, to know about different cultures, to buy books, magazines, journals, etc.).

At the same time as they talk about themselves and their status, which, according to them, results from the effort their parents made to grow in their lives (in the interviews and group discussions, many students recalled their parents were workers and that today they are businesspeople), the respondents say the other students are 'poor', 'uncultured', 'do not strive', 'prefer living on scholarships and alms', 'study at low-quality public schools', 'do not have resources to travel', 'do not have morals', 'reproduce like animals', 'do not know to choose quality TV shows to watch', 'when they have money, they

spend it all on cachaça', 'do not invest in culture', and 'want to get everything easily'.

What we noted, both in the debates conducted by their teachers and the group discussions we coordinated, is that invariably the poor student was held accountable by his or her status or by his or her family's status, which, being uncultured, 'reproduced itself like animals'. There have also been recurrent criticisms to welfare policies that, according to these young students, only contribute to 'poor people making more children' and 'to increasing their laziness'.

When talking about themselves, these young people constantly reach out to what they are not, stressing their place in society. They feel the need to point out other students in order to legitimize their way of life: "We need each other, even if we take risks, because otherwise, we could not justify what we are, our laws, institutions, rules, ethics, moral, and the aesthetics of our discourses and practices" (Duschatzky, & Skliar, 2001, p. 124). Ultimately, when it privileges access to higher education and emphasizes the effort every young person shall make individually to achieve their goals, the context of the school ends up contributing to private school students thinking that "[...] poverty belongs to the poor; violence belongs to violent people; the problem of learning belongs to the student; school deficiency belongs to the individual; and exclusion belongs to the excluded" (Duschatzky, & Skliar, 2001, p. 124).

Bauman (1999) uses a metaphor that helps us to understand the reasons why young people of privileged social status have such a need to talk about other poor young people. According to the author, today's world is designed for people to exist like tourists, a subject that goes around to have new experiences; it is a subject that possesses the resources needed to live out this freedom as a *blessing*. But there are very few tourists; most people are vagabonds, people with no possessions, who live their freedom with a curse. For this implies blaming oneself and being blamed by one's own status, in the way these *tourist* young people of our study have shown. Vagabonds are relevant mainly to show how it is repugnant to not be a tourist —'that is a horror', 'oh my God', 'what's going to happen to the university?' (in reference to social quotas), 'what an injustice' (referring to getting into university via the quota system). All of these phrases were used by the students participating in the research. "The vagabonds are the waste of the world, which in liquid consumer societies is dedicated to providing tourist services unavailable to the vagabonds" (Bauman, 1999, p. 101). Therefore, these young

people feel the need to talk about vagabonds in order to remind themselves that they should not question their efforts to continue living as tourists.

The young people involved in our study assign poor students and their families a set of abject characteristics (they say these people are immoral, lazy, uncultured, scholarship usurper, ignorant) because they are part of the neo-liberal society and are being prepared by a school that encourages individualism and meritocracy. Their discourse expresses clashes and power struggles by which they hold their tourist status, condemning vagabonds to their status of vagabonds and convincing them they are responsible for their situation: “[...] a particular cultural identity cannot be defined only according to its positive presence and content. All terms of the identity depend on the establishment of limits — defining what they are in relation to what they are not” (Hall, 2003, p. 85).

In relation to the emphasis given to consumer power, which seems to comprise everything important in the lives of the young people (travel, pay TV, theater, culture, books, good friendships, etc.), we shall say that it also has to do with the current time in which they are being trained. As Bauman (2008) says, today people are produced to be consumers, and, somehow, everyone shall become a sellable commodity. Young people are the evidence consumerism will not end. In our society, they are produced to consume and are evaluated by other young people and society in general by what they consume. They are identified according to what they consume, they are evaluated by what they consume and they evaluate others negatively because they do not consume the same things: “[...] the main reason encouraging them to get engaged in a ceaseless consumption activity is getting out of this invisibility and gray and monotonous immateriality, standing out from the mass of indistinguishable objects floating with equal specific gravity” (Bauman, 2008, p. 21). In this sense, for the ones that are excluded from consumption, not to buy is a stigma and means living a life without accomplishments; ultimately, it means lack of “[...] humanity and any other ground for self-respect and respect of the others around” (Bauman, 2013, p. 83). As the young people who consume said, the poor ‘reproduce like animals’.

### Final considerations

As we finish the present article, we want to highlight how important it is to look at the different youths in high school. In the Brazilian context, it

remains critical to consider social inequality. In this sense, Marxist-inspired studies remain not only relevant but also they continue to be necessary for us to think about a quality high school for every young person (Nosella, 2011; Krawczyk, 2014; Frigotto, & Ciavatta, 2011; Ramos, 2011; Silva Júnior et al., 2011).

This inequality is evidenced in the current context by a differentiated access to consumption, as shown by the students of the school involved in the study. As Bauman (2008) points out, we are trained to live for consumption, and not to consume for living our lives. However, if we recognize that, in the current context, every young person is affected by consumer society on one hand, we must avoid, on the other, making hasty generalizations as if all young people were affected in the same way by our society. Without disregarding the fascination that consumer society has not only on young people, but also on children and adults, our research shows, along with Bauman’s (1999, 2003, 2008, 2013) contributions —when he shows that the ideal of consumerism, even though it affects everybody, has different meanings for the young people *from above* (the youths who participated in our research) and the ones *from below*—, that often the young people *from below* —those who do not have or have little consumer power and, perhaps, because they know their school has little to contribute for them to increase their consumer power— have difficulties in seeing meaning in high school. For youths *from above*, from middle/upper class, high school has, with teachers who teach the same content and in a similar way to that of public school teachers —as it was possible to attest during our one-year research—, a meaning because these students, consumers *de facto*, know their consumer power will increase via education. This holds true because all of them, invariably, will continue to study in higher education, and it will not take place in some university among many others, but in a university whose quality is recognized.

As such, we are not suggesting that high schools shall seek to prepare students for getting into higher education, let alone that they must serve to increase consumer power. What we say is that high school has, in fact, a meaning (even though it might be questioned from a republican viewpoint) for middle/upper class young people, whereas for young students from lower classes to see this meaning is something much more difficult. However, having public schools following the business-school model means taking the youths *from below* as responsible for their condition.

The private school focused on our research makes sense for middle/upper class young people not so much due to the way it works, nor to the quality of its teachers or infrastructure, but because the ones who attend it are effectively part of an audience in which being successful is already guaranteed, not by merit, commitment, and dedication, as many of them think, but by the social place where they find themselves. In addition, as ethnic/racial and gender studies show us (Asinelli-Luz, & Cunha, 2011; Pereira, 2011), private schools make sense because the content taught here relates directly to young people's culture; in other words, it is white, male, heterosexual, Christian, Eurocentric content. More than that, private schools are successful in their goals because we live in an extremely unequal society. Even if young people *from below* had access to these schools, they would barely succeed in being a part of the lowest strata, and they would learn that the young people *from above* —as ones who participated in the research conducted think— are there because their efforts and merit, or because of their parents', while the ones *from below* are where they are due to their own indolence and laziness, or to that of their families.

The research carried out has contributed to the reflection on whether the private school, today touted by the press and several public actors as a reference of quality, serves young people from less-favored social and cultural strata. If we have in mind the construction of a more democratic, fair, equal, non-racist, and non-sexist society, we will not have reasons to pursue this notion of quality. This way, we hope to have contributed to the defense of a quality public high school, which has nothing to do with the quality of the private sector, nor with the supposed quality ascertained by large-scale evaluations made by the government, as in the case of ENEM.

The quality we advocate is not obvious, but rather it results from a collective construction of cultural and social groups concerned with offering a high school capable of articulating young people's interests with the interests of a radically democratic society, hence a society against the interests of the market, out of its interests, beyond them.

In this article, we made reference to the struggle for a polytechnic high school; the struggle for a high school not linked to the training of mere consumers; the struggle for a non-racist high school; the struggle for a non-homophobic and non-sexist high school; the struggle for a high school linked to the interests of different youths, etc. These different struggles show a concern with high school youngsters and that the high school that is being

offered needs to undergo changes. In this way, one may realize that the meaning of high school is surrounded by disputes and tensions.

It is necessary to continue reflecting about the meaning high school shall have; that is, we need to keep thinking about what we want young people in high school to become. In the dispute over meanings, the presence of the market has been a constant. However, as our research has shown, and as several authors argue, the market cannot be the reference for the education offered to our youth. Even if the market is winning some battles, as long as we recognize its ability to deconstruct what we have constructed as human beings, it is always possible to create another high school and, so, other youths and societies. It was this possibility that motivated the production of this article.

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## NOTA:

Eu, José Licínio Backes, declaro que sou responsável pela concepção, análise e interpretação dos dados, redação e revisão crítica do conteúdo do manuscrito e aprovo a versão final a ser publicada na revista.