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HIGH SCHOOL: CREATING A MORAL PROJECT TO MANAGE THE FUTURE OF YOUNG PEOPLE

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Abstract

In the present article I focus on discourses that contribute to making the syntagma *life project* meaningful to regulate the future of young people through moral education. In a theoretical-discursive and deconstructionist approach, based mainly on the notions of sedimentation and translation/supplementation, I argue that the discourse of the *life project* tries to establish the impossible social harmony, associated with neoliberal rationality articulated with ultraconservative demands. I argue that these records point to an impossible society without antagonisms and suffering in a future to be programmed. I conclude by defending the importance of leaving the future to the future-to-come and questioning the normativity of the high school curriculum proposal through the life project curriculum component.

LIFE PROJECT • HIGH SCHOOL • CURRICULUM

ENSINO MÉDIO: CRIANDO UM PROJETO MORAL PARA GERENCIAR O FUTURO DOS JOVENS

Resumo

Focalizo discursos que têm contribuído para que o sintagma *projeto de vida* carregue sentidos na tentativa de regulação do futuro dos jovens, por meio da educação moral. Em uma abordagem teórico-discursiva e desconstrucionista, operando centralmente com as noções de sedimentação e tradução/suplementação, argumento que o discurso do *projeto de vida* tenta instituir a impossível harmonia social, associada à racionalidade neoliberal articulada a demandas ultraconservadoras. Discuto que tais registros acenam a uma impossível sociedade sem antagonismos e sofrimentos em um futuro a ser programado. Concluo, defendendo a importância de se deixar o porvir ao por vir e questionando a normatividade da proposta curricular para o ensino médio por intermédio do componente curricular projeto de vida.

PROJETO DE VIDA • ENSINO MÉDIO • CURRÍCULO

ESCUELA SECUNDARIA: CREANDO UN PROYECTO MORAL PARA GESTIONAR EL FUTURO DE LOS JÓVENES

Resumen

Me centro en discursos que han contribuido para que el sintagma *proyecto de vida* cargue significados en el intento de regulación del futuro de los jóvenes, a través de la educación moral. En un enfoque teórico-discursivo y deconstruccionista, operando centralmente con las nociones de sedimentación y traducción/suplementación, argumento que el discurso del *proyecto de vida* intenta establecer la imposible armonía social, asociada con la racionalidad neoliberal articulada con demandas ultraconservadoras. Sostengo que tales registros apuntan a una sociedad imposible sin antagonismos y sufrimiento en un futuro por programar. Concluyo defendiendo la importancia de dejar el futuro al futuro y cuestionando la normatividad de la propuesta curricular para la educación secundaria a través del componente curricular proyecto de vida.

PROYECTO DE VIDA • ESCUELA SECUNDARIA • CURRÍCULO

COURS MOYEN: UN PROJET MORAL POUR GÉRER L'AVENIR DES JEUNES

Résumé

Je me concentre sur des discours qui contribuent à ce que le syntagme *projet de vie* colporte des sens dans le but de régler l'avenir de jeunes par l'éducation morale. Par moyen d'une approche théorique discursive et déconstructionniste, et mettant en jeu et au centre les notions de sédimentation et de traduction/suppléance, j'argumente que le discours du *projet de vie* essaie d'instituer l'impossible harmonie sociale, rattachée à la rationalité néolibérale articulée à des demandes ultra-conservatrices. Je discute que ces registres mettent en avant une infaisable société sans conflits et sans souffrance à un avenir à être agencé. Je conclus soutenant l'importance de laisser l'avenir à l'à-venir et mettant en cause la normativité de la proposition curriculaire pour le cours moyen par l'intermédiaire du composant curriculaire projet de vie.

PROJET DE VIE • ÉCOLE SECONDAIRE • CURRICULUM

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DUE TO THE POLITICAL MOVEMENTS INTENSIFIED IN RECENT MONTHS, OPPOSITION TO the high school reform has been highlighted, in a wide chain of demands that have become equivalent (Laclau, 2011), but never equal. I would venture to say that this movement is broader than that established in opposition to the curricular centralization established by the Base Nacional Comum Curricular [National Common Curriculum Base] (BNCC). To some extent, such breadth is the result of disciplinary communities that feel threatened by the organization of the curriculum via formative itineraries and question the production of inequalities in a reform that renounces universalization, proposing a very fragile basis for diversity. Such communities joined the anti-reform movement, which, in turn, spread throughout the social fabric, mobilizing artists, cultural producers and society at large.

I am also opposed to this reform, but I advocate that such opposition cannot be separated from the criticism of the curricular centrality established through the BNCC and the consequent submission of curriculum policy to evaluation results. When establishing such centrality, curriculum is subject to the intention of measuring and comparing knowledge/learning standards to achieve the measurement and comparison of people who supposedly would or would not *master* such knowledge (Popkewitz & Lindblad, 2016; C. Silva & M. Oliveira, 2023; Pereira, 2023), operating with knowledge as if it were a commodified object to be captured, recorded and distributed.

In contrast to the reform, several works highlight the difficulties related to its implementation (Cássio & Goulart, 2022; Lopes et al., 2024; Tartuce et al., 2018). Such difficulties, in turn, have paved the way for many states to adhere to the proposals of private and philanthropic institutions, presented as solutions to what is identified as deficiencies in the initial training of teachers and the exhausting routine of their workday (Araujo & Lopes, 2021, 2023). Such adherence does not occur without conflicts and resignifications (Lopes & Silva, 2021; Queiroz & Azevedo, 2022), which further blur the lines between public and private relationships. The conflicts associated with the implementation of the reform are accentuated, as this norm was established in a political context of ultra-conservative hegemony. Years later, with this hegemony disarticulated – but leaving its traces in social relations –, we have to deal with the difficulty of defining directions and acting in other political articulations.

One of the main obstacles to the repeal of the reform, not always explicitly stated, is the investments made in its implementation. In May 2018, loan agreements were signed between the country and the World Bank, worth US\$ 250 million, within the scope of the Projeto de Apoio à Implementação do Novo Ensino Médio (NEM) [New Secondary Education Implementation Support Project], through a commitment to implement this project and accountability of these values by the new federal government (Fernandes, 2022). Among the entities supervising this implementation is the Associação dos Membros dos Tribunais de Contas do Brasil [Association of Members of the Brazilian Courts of Accounts], formed through Rede Integrar¹ – project developed by the Tribunal de Contas da União [Federal Court of Accounts] (TCU) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

In this context of confrontations, the project that instituted the changes in the reform (Projeto de Lei n. 5.230 de 2023 [Bill No. 5,230 of 2023], 2024) was approved, being the result of an agreement between the Minister of Education and the Bill's rapporteur in Congress. This agreement took place despite the strong movement to revoke current norms and with apparent

1 More information on the website: <https://sites.tcu.gov.br/integrar/index.html>

support from the state education secretaries, who, regardless of the outcome of this process, need to reorganize the activities of public high school networks for 2025.

In general, I advocate that this reform is being constituted by political decisions made in uncertain terrain, in the name of an educational change projected as necessary for shaping political subjectivities envisioned for the forthcoming future, articulating neoliberal and conservative demands. Following Ball (2014), Brown (2019) and Gómez Villar (2022), I refer to neoliberalism not as an economic system, but as a rationality that has been constituting us, as well as constituting our relationships with life. In the reform of high school, such relationships are more evident in the proposed *life project*, focus of this paper.

Under my coordination, research on this reform is still ongoing (Fernandes, 2024; Figueiredo, 2024; Lima, 2024; Lopes, 2023a) and is not exclusively dedicated to the text of legal regulations at the federal level. Added to these texts are the norms of the states (Fernandes & Lopes, 2024) and the wide circulation of the syntagma *life project* in teaching materials and methodological proposals – sold or offered for free on internet sites –, curricular guidance texts disseminated by private and philanthropic institutions and international institutions, such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and OECD, which make up curriculum policy networks. The research group operates with this set of texts as an undefined *corpus* that, in an unpredictable and incommensurable way, contributes to the sedimentation of meanings (Laclau, 1990), at the same time that such meanings are subjected to translation/iteration (Derrida, 2005; Siscar, 2013), impossible to be completely contained. The syntagma *life project*, as it is disseminated, incorporates other meanings, in an interrelationship between sameness and deferral, with its full meaning being postponed.

I question the attempt to view the fluctuation of meanings in the syntagma *life project* as being a matter of mistake or imprecision, focusing precisely on the investigation of how such fluctuations are always differential supplementations, effects of discursive political struggles, in given power relations, in an attempt to produce certain meanings for the links between the curriculum and the formation of young people's subjectivities.

With this broader perspective serving as an anchor for the argument presented here, I focus in this paper on discourses that have contributed to the syntagma *life project* carrying meanings, in a spectral way, that signal the attempt to regulate the future of young people by creating a moral project of managing their lives. In a discursive and deconstructionist theoretical approach, I argue that the *life project* discourse tries to establish the impossible social harmony. With this argument, I question any claim to define the identity/subjectivity of the other, even if this identity/subjectivity is based on the idea of a life focused on social well-being, or the happiness of the individual, since such records point to an impossible society without antagonisms and suffering in a future that cannot be programmed. I conclude this text by pointing out the importance of leaving the future to the future-to-come (*future à venir*) and questioning the normativity of the curricular proposal for high school through the life project curricular component.

Normativity for a future life project

In the process of political struggle against the reform of high school, attention is drawn to the fact that there is a lot of discussion about the curricular organization in formative itineraries, highlighting the risks of a rushed training (Silva et al., 2023) or an individualization of formative

paths (Silva, 2019), or even defending the importance of an integrated set of school subjects (Ferretti, 2018). Criticisms in this direction reverberate in posts on social networks and reports in the media. The questioning of *life projects*, however, does not seem to resonate with equal force in the media and even in academic works. There seems to be a certain acceptance or at least a silencing of such a proposal, if we compare it to the questioning directed at the organization through formative itineraries, despite the itineraries being defined in legislation as subject to life projects (Ministério da Educação [Ministry of Education] [MEC], 2018a).

Perhaps this apparent acceptance is associated with the valorization of the need for young people to have a project or a purpose – terms that are not synonymous but are often used interchangeably when providing guidance for young people’s lives. At this moment when the neither-nor generation² (“Geração nem-nem”..., 2023) and generation Z³ (Comportamento, atrasos..., 2024) generate concerns regarding the future of society, the discourse regarding the need to give youth a direction is more easily spread, without ceasing the dispute regarding the meanings of what is understood by *youth*, *direction* and *future*.

The fact that the syntagma *life project* has been circulating for a long time, even mobilizing meanings associated with progressive dynamics, may have contributed to its positivity. Records on the use of the syntagma *life project* already appear in documents guiding Brazilian education policies aimed at breaking with the culture of institutionalization of children and adolescents, strengthening “the paradigm of integral protection and preservation of family and community ties recommended by the Estatuto da Criança e do Adolescente [Children and Adolescent Statute]” (Ministério do Desenvolvimento Social e Combate à Fome [Ministry of Social Development and Fight Against Hunger] [MDS], 2006, p. 13, own translation), just as there are records of the use of the expression *life project* associated with progressive formative processes in rural social movements and in the relations between education and work, presented to the 1988 Constituent Assembly (Alves & Oliveira, 2020).

Perhaps for this reason, in the debates that led to the substitute Bill, the main point of tension was the proposed workload for mandatory subjects. The amendment presented to the articles concerning the life project only guaranteed the inclusion of the world of work as an *element of opportunities for constructing* such projects (Parecer às emendas de plenário..., 2024).

Despite my criticism of the formative itineraries (Lopes, 2019) and the great difficulty faced by education networks when putting into practice such curricular organization (Queiroz & Azevedo, 2022; Ferreira & Santos, 2024; Lopes et al., 2024; Silva et al., 2022), I consider the introduction of life projects and their central position in the reform (Fernandes & Lopes, 2024) as one of the most problematic points of the current curricular proposal for high school. More than focusing on the insertion of young people into the market or reducing life to training for the precarious job market, subjecting education to the economy, in terms of neoliberalism incorporated by public-private relations, as many tend to assert (Barbosa & Alves, 2023; Braggio & Silva, 2023; Costa & Caetano, 2021; Jakimiu, 2022), I argue that this reform aims at a moral education to manage the subjectivities of the future driven by the *life project* curricular component. In other words, it can be affirmed that more central than training for the work/job market is the intention to expand

2 The term “neither-nor generation” refers to a demographic group characterized by individuals who are neither fully employed nor enrolled in educational programs. According to the Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística [Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics] (IBGE), in Brazil, one in five young Brazilians neither studies nor works.

3 The generation Z is a group known for its intimacy with technology, suffers from delays and dependence on parents.

“the perception of possibilities for the future” considered “fundamental to guarantee success in building one’s Life Project” (MEC, 2019a, p. 13, own translation). As stated in the *Orientação pedagógica para o trabalho com o projeto de vida enquanto componente curricular [Pedagogical guidance for working with the life project as a curricular component]*, this component “should not be confused with professional choice, nor is it disconnected from the productive world, since it helps *young people to know themselves, understand their relationship with the world and envision what they expect for themselves in the future*” (MEC, 2019b, p. 2, own translation, emphasis added).

In the pedagogical focus of the entrepreneurship axis, the dimension of work is also mirrored in the personal trajectory, signaling that, through this axis, young people:

. . . are encouraged to create personal or productive ventures linked to their life projects, which *strengthen their role as protagonists of their own trajectory*. To this end, it seeks to develop autonomy, focus and determination *so that they can plan and achieve personal goals or create ventures* aimed at generating income through the offering of products and services, with or without the use of technology. (Portaria n. 1.432, 2018, p. 4, own translation, emphasis added).

At the same time, it is highlighted that this curricular component “is capable of encouraging, motivating and awakening the curiosity of students in order to guide them towards the construction and achievement of their dreams” (MEC, 2019b, p. 3, own translation). The life project is “a trajectory in which the student, upon knowing him/herself, is able to situate him/herself in the world, recognize the different possibilities and then develop a project for him/herself” (MEC, 2019b, p. 4, own translation). Knowledge of oneself and others is inserted into a planning that aims to “look at Life as a great Project” (MEC, 2019b, p. 10, own translation).

There is constant reference to the challenges of the 21st century and, in the general competencies of basic education, it is highlighted that schools must:

Value the diversity of knowledge and cultural experiences and appropriate knowledge and experiences that allow them to understand specific relationships in the world of work and make decisions aligned with the exercise of citizenship and their life project, with freedom, autonomy, critical awareness and responsibility. (MEC, 2018a, p. 11, own translation).

Corroborating this comprehensive vision of life project, it is highlighted in the text in the Languages and their Technologies area of the BNCC for high school that:

In the scope considered here, the construction of life projects involves reflections/definitions not only in terms of emotional life, family, study and work, but also health, well-being, relationship with the environment, spaces and times for leisure, practices of body cultures, cultural practices, aesthetic experiences, social participation, action at a local and global level, etc. (MEC, 2018a, p. 490, own translation).

As Macedo and Silva (2022) point out, through the life project, a set of behaviors are introduced into the school that provide solutions to historical and structural social problems at the individual level, through socio-emotional and interpersonal skills. At the same time, as S. Silva and G. Oliveira (2023, pp. 17-18, own translation) highlight:

Fantasies of “youth protagonism”, “market insertion”, “technological *virtue*” and “citizen participation” submissive to the current social order have operated to promote the

idealization of a rigid standard of production of meanings and subjectivities, enabling the concealment and denial of the significant flaws and contradictions of this pattern.

The life project thus becomes central to the very existence of an integral education/training (which may or may not include full-time) and the provision of formative itineraries. It is a syntagma of a regulatory device that seeks flexibility, freedom of choice for students, autonomy and focus on increasing young people's interest in school. Meanings linked to critical curricular proposals resonate in the training proposal for a life project – critical awareness, responsibility, citizenship, participation, solidarity, ethics, training for the world of work, commitment to sustainability and defense of the environment –, also contributing for its positivity. These signifiers are articulated, producing hybrid discourses, with meanings indicating that the students must be able to know themselves, care for themselves, appreciate themselves, be responsible, flexible, resilient, collaborative, analytical-critical, productive, empathetic for “dialogue, conflict resolution and cooperation” (MEC, 2018a, p. 10, own translation), exercising “determination, perseverance and self-confidence to carry out current and future projects” (MEC, 2018b, p. 23, own translation). Self-management becomes necessary to be successful in life, because, as Belleza (2023, p. 4, own translation) points out when questioning this curricular component, “a life without government, without direction, without a project, without self-management cannot be a good option at school”.

The self-management process deepens to the point where it is considered possible to operate with a *human happiness index* that considers *indicators* for each of the aspects of life: “psychological well-being, health, use of time, education, culture, environment, governance and life standard”⁴ (MEC, n.d., own translation). This happiness index is based on the understanding that “carrying out activities aimed at creating a life project proportionally affects the sensation of happiness. It can be affirmed that planning life means avoiding suffering” (MEC, n.d., own translation).

Since planned logic requires evaluation, it is also stated, in the same text, that the life project can count on continuous evaluations that identify the indices of: cooperation; communication; sharing/actions aimed at sharing; listening; pleasure; interaction; happiness. The goal of the life project curricular component reaffirms itself as a project of student subjectivation, to the point of assuming “the development of psychosocial technologies of moral control, adaptation and social adjustment” (S. Silva & G. Oliveira, 2023, p. 7, own translation), in an attempt to rationalize and make one's sensations productive and adjusted.

The emphasis of the reform on choosing itineraries, skills, goals and strategies for youth to graduate with a view to the desired future refers to the neoliberal record that freedom (and not social justice or democracy) is the central signifier at stake (Brown, 2019). The experience of freedom is one of the aspects culturally ensuring the hegemony of neoliberalism, linking market freedom with individual freedom to decide one's life and have autonomy from the State, living off one's labor and making work a way of life.

As Gómez Villar (2022) analyzes, based on Foucault, the fact that work invades life is not new. What is new in neoliberalism is that “life is put to produce, reproduces itself and extends itself in the undefined space of relationships between subjects and in networks of communicative action” (Gómez Villar, 2022, p. 4, own translation). In this sense, a new governmentality is established in

4 These are the domains that involve the Felicidade Interna Bruta [Gross National Happiness] (FIB) index. <https://portal.trt23.jus.br/trt23noticias/noticias/da-casa-noticias/29505>

which people regulate themselves. Life becomes subjective, and living becomes the management of one's own life.

In such an interpretation, trying to get students to organize their life projects is a way of directing young people to manage their own existence and their ways of being. Following Gómez Villar (2022), it is no longer necessary to train people to work in a company or set up their individual business. It is enough for these people to behave as such, to adopt their logic, their attitudes, their way of relating to the world, to themselves and to others, working for their happiness. "The individual, understood as an entrepreneur of him/herself, is the apex of capital as a machine of subjectivation" (Gómez Villar, 2022, own translation). It is from this perspective that self-entrepreneurship is established, aimed not only at meeting the structures of the economic process, but focusing on the conditions for the production of life in a volatile scenario and under constant risk in the present. It remains for these individuals to try to regulate their future.

There is an emptying of the political field, the marginalization of important educational discussions related to contemporary challenges, and the simultaneous induction to focus on moral and emotional aspects at the individual level. At the same time, the erasure of conflicts and antagonisms is engendered (Mouffe, 2018). Neoliberalism, as rationality (Brown, 2019), composes an imaginary that involves the State in an alignment with the demands of capital, instituting discourses that seek to reinforce the feeling that it has always been this way, that the forms of action are not contingent, but, on the contrary, they are both necessary and obligatory. As a government rationality, neoliberalism institutes a series of values, practices and imaginaries about the present and the future.

The established forms of regulation and governance are expressed in the new philanthropy of education (Ball, 2014), through which companies, and their private and philanthropic organizations and institutes, suggest and create demands for the development of diagnoses and corresponding solutions to educational problems (Araujo & Lopes, 2021, 2023; Gigante & Lopes, 2024; Shiroma, 2024). After all, the desired changes in subjectivities are, above all, undertaken via education policies. It is also these policies that play a role in achieving results, demonstrating at a national and international level the country's ability to achieve global objectives.

Such political networks continue to supplement the normativity for high school through texts and teaching materials that guide how to put the reform into practice. In the case of the life project curricular component, the leading role of the Instituto de Corresponsabilidade pela Educação [Institute of Co-responsibility for Education] (ICE) is highlighted (Macedo & Silva, 2022; Queiroz & Azevedo, 2022; S. Silva & G. Oliveira, 2023). As already highlighted in Fernandes and Lopes (2024), ICE developed pedagogical models for full-time high school, such as Escola da Escolha [School Choice] and Pedagogia da Presença [Pedagogy of Presence], which reference curricular proposals in the Brazilian states of Acre, Alagoas, Amapá, Espírito Santo, Goiás, Maranhão, Minas Gerais, Mato Grosso do Sul, Paraíba, Paraná and Pernambuco.

In 2021, Porvir and Instituto Iungo [Iungo Institute] also launched an exclusive lesson planner for the life project⁵ (MEC, n.d.), through which the logic of students identifying dreams, their history and interests aims to plan for tomorrow and manage goals to build their future without conflicts. Metaphors, such as "behavior traffic light" and "success equation", are mobilized for the personal development project which, as often reiterated, does not aim at

5 Lesson planner available at: <https://planejadordeaulas.org.br/>

financial success, but at entrepreneurial proactivity to “persevere in situations of stress, frustration, failure and adversity”.

Life projects were also incorporated into textbooks specifically aimed at the topic. As highlighted by Pontes (2022), many of the authors of the works presented to the Programa Nacional do Livro e do Material Didático [National Program of Books and Teaching Materials] (PNLD) 2021 carry out or carried out work for third sector institutions that are related to the educational sector, such as the Fundação Lemann [Lemann Foundation], Instituto Ayrton Senna [Ayrton Senna Institute], Instituto Singularidades [Singularidades Institute], Junior Achievement, Khan Academy, and the Serviço Brasileiro de Apoio às Micro e Pequenas Empresas [Brazilian Support Service for Micro and Small Enterprises] (SEBRAE), even when published by traditional publishers in the publishing market. The work also points out how the PNLD evaluators identified, in these same works, the absence of more effective discussions on issues of gender, sexuality, racial prejudice, homophobia, and other themes related to difference and identity antagonisms.

Silva’s (2023) results seem to corroborate this view by highlighting, after examining three didactic collections, the centrality of socio-emotional skills, aimed at students’ self-knowledge of their sensations and the way they deal with them. In some of these books (Medina & Wasserman, 2020), in attractive language that seeks to connect with current collective demands, such as environmental responsibility, cultural diversity and new technologies, young people are encouraged to carry out a diagnosis of themselves, in relationship with the environment in which they live, in order to plan their future. The need for a life with purpose is defended, to achieve goals that satisfy personal desires, with the collective as a reference. In this book, it is not enough to imagine the future, but to set goals for personal development and learning. The limitations of choices depending on the context in which one lives are highlighted, while at the same time it is highlighted that “not choosing means leaving your future in the hands of other people” (Medina & Wasserman, 2020, p. 74, own translation).

Faced with the fear and insecurity of young people regarding the future – unemployment, depression and hopelessness –, the conceived solution is to predefine how this future will be through planning the self-entrepreneurship. The attempt in the high school reform is to make life projects a formation for making good choices regarding the future (Sanz, 2019). Such choices, in the interpretation proposed here, are constituted by the sedimentation of discourses in tune with the formation of subjectivities associated with certain values supposed to be capable of regulating the desired future. The life project becomes the project of organizing students’ self so that they can manage their lives in a world without guarantees, yet one that aims to be governed in a certain direction through the actions of young people who will lead purposeful lives.

I am referring to sedimentation in the sense of Laclau (1990): discourses mobilized in a catachrestic process, where, in certain power relations, there is the erasure of the contingencies of their production and simultaneously of the power that enabled such erasure. Such discursive practices produce meanings, supposedly natural and crystallized, and subjectify social actors through a wide chain of equivalences and substitutions of signifiers that in their movement transform certain ideas into a conceptuality established as common sense. It is at this moment, Laclau (1990) concludes, that sedimentation becomes an objectivity, a mere presence.

As Brown (2019) discusses, neoliberalism, eager to move politics away from markets and enable morality and the market to govern and discipline individuals, contributed to moving politics away from all spheres of cultural and social life, demonizing the social and democracy. In this

process, the articulation between neoliberal demands and ultra-conservative demands develops with catastrophic effects that appear as an unprecedented Frankensteinian creation.

In an attempt to contribute to the questioning of self-entrepreneurship discourses associated with life projects, I seek to explore, in the next section, the sedimentation of discourses that operate for social well-being in the future, with the hypothesis that they favor the entry of Positive Psychology in curriculum theory. I advocate that future projects, in indeterminate flows and without a defined origin, in successive iterations of the syntagma *life project*, have constituted the curricular normativity for the formation of subjectivities that are socially adjusted and aimed at a harmonious society, without antagonisms and without conflicts.

Contributions to desedimentation of discourses in defense of life projects

As I have discussed previously (Lopes, 2015), there is always a set of sedimented practices that guide political decisions, even if we have to consider that decisions also modify sedimentations, preventing their ultimate closure. Normativity is the result of decisions guided by social sediments and by the communities created – subjectified – as a consequence of these same decisions. To the extent that I follow Derrida (1988) in the understanding that language is a system of structure-traces, there is always iteration and translation of any text, maintaining a minimal remainder of meaning that guarantees its recognition in different contexts.

Considering the post-structural register, there is no moment in which a presence external to language is found that provides the closure of signification: there is no property or object that supports the unattainable completion. There is only, simultaneously, sameness and change of meaning, constant translation without a source text. Language and its games make us immersed in a fluctuation of meanings in the signifier, subject to power relations that temporarily and precariously limit such fluctuation. It is in this understanding that the reactivation of discourses appears as a desedimentation, expressing the contingent and historical nature of what is attempted to be presented as objectivity (Laclau, 1990).

Investigating the discourses that seek to establish a meaning for the syntagma *life project*, or even for the syntagma *curricular project*, does not aim to establish a cause and effect relationship between the decisions that led to the production of curricular guidelines. Differently, I want to highlight the dissemination of differential meanings, aiming to contribute to investigations that try to understand how certain articulations favor the sedimentation of what is today called a life project in curricular proposals (Fernandes, 2024; Figueiredo, 2024).

The discourse that the secondary level of education lacks a greater relationship with the daily life of youth, whether for the benefit of learning or motivation, is not new and has sometimes been established through the defense of a link between the curriculum and the student life project. The opinion on the draft of the Resolution of the National Curriculum Guidelines was already pointing in that direction, stating it was supported by *numerous educational research studies* (Parecer CNE/CEB n. 5, 2011). Also in that same year, the Brazilian representation of UNESCO developed curricular prototypes, for high school and for high school integrated with professional education, which foresee, at the end of the course, a *life and society project*, in a curricular organization “which allows the preparation of the project to follow and rely on knowledge of the chosen professional qualification” (Organização das Nações Unidas para a Educação, a Ciência e a Cultura [Unesco], 2011, p. 18, own translation). The conception of this project was better explained in the document

of this same representation, published two years later, in which it is advocated, based on the curricular guidelines in force at the time and records from the historical-critical perspective, that high school needed a project that would overcome the duality between specific education and general education, shifting “*the focus of its objectives from the labor market to the human person, with work, science, culture and technology as inseparable dimensions*” (Regattieri & Castro, 2013, p. 39, own translation, emphasis added).

In these documents, the signifier *project* mobilizes meanings of interdisciplinarity, integrated curriculum, generating themes, articulating axes, integral (human) education/training, pointing out that

... the old pedagogical proposal of “teaching to learn” gains new momentum, transforming itself not only in a socioeconomic need, but also *in part of the students’ personal project*. Furthermore, it is stated that there is a growth in the informal sector of the economy, which *imposes on young people yet another task: that they “learn to undertake”, in addition to mastering a broad cultural repertoire*. (Regattieri & Castro, 2013, p. 7, own translation, emphasis added).

The signifier *project* takes on the character of a work-synthesis of a trajectory, with guidelines for the future profession, seeking a greater link between high school and professional education (Figueiredo, 2024), sometimes aiming at social adaptation, sometimes seeking to transform the social. In these first references, there is no indication that the life project is a curricular component and there are no references to Positive Psychology, developed at the Center on Adolescence at Stanford University (United States), coordinated by William Damon, who has been providing support to the Brazilian proposal for this curricular component, through his notion of a life with purpose.

In Psychology, internationally, this notion circulated associated with the theory of organizing models of thought, the purpose in life and the elements of a good life, with Martin Seligman and William Damon. In Brazil, it was part of integral education proposals that were in practice long before the high school reform began. Fodra and Nogueira (2017) report the experience with life projects in high schools of the Programa Ensino Integral [Full-time Education Program] (PEI), implemented by Secretaria da Educação do Estado de São Paulo [São Paulo State Department of Education], initially in 16 pilot high schools, in 2012, and, at the time of writing the paper, in 308 full-time schools, in the three stages of basic education. This proposal, even though it does not consider all aspects of the life project, included later in the high school reform, such as the mention of moral education and happiness, makes reference to the understanding that the “Life Project is simultaneously the focus to where all the school’s actions must converge and the methodology that will support the student in its construction” (Secretaria da Educação do Estado de São Paulo, 2012, p. 14, own translation) and considers “a necessary relationship between dreams and human achievements with the responsibility of avoiding, with educational actions, young people of an entire generation lose the ability to dream” (Secretaria da Educação do Estado de São Paulo, 2012, p. 18, own translation). In this sense, despite also relying on Damon, included in the bibliography, and mentioning the need to form values, referring to training for the future, it conceives the life project as motivation and records training for academic excellence and the possibility of the student becoming “competent to gradually understand the demands of the new world of work and prepared to acquire specific skills required for the development of his/her Life Project” (Secretaria da Educação do Estado de São Paulo, 2012, p. 15,

own translation). With such references, there is prioritization of content and skills in relation to the regulation of affects.

This insertion may have been enabled by the work of Valéria Araújo, PhD in Psychology and associate professor at the Universidade de São Paulo [University of São Paulo] (USP), with a thesis on organizing models of thought, and who also worked at the Secretaria da Educação do Estado de São Paulo [São Paulo State Department of Education] at the same period, teaching a course on curriculum management for coordinating teachers. According to the author, the proposal for moral education, inserted transversally in the curriculum, is aimed at the development and “maintenance of positive emotional states, cheerful, satisfied and happy people” (Araújo, 2000, p. 151, own translation) and counterpoints the exclusively rational vision of justice and the separation between cognitive and affective aspects at school, being associated with a possible set of values considered universally desirable and important for the community.

This association between the individual and the collective, the particular and the universal, is registered in many of the curricular documents based on Positive Psychology without a visible discussion about the connections between these poles, as if a happy society could be the result of just the sum of happy citizens, disregarding interrelationships, antagonisms and conflicts in different social contexts. As Clarke (2018) discusses, the neoliberal perspective, as the rationality that has been constituting us, disregards that, no matter how great the normative actions, the individual never fully adjusts to the social situation. This maladjustment expresses a deeper split between the universal and the particular: any attempt to identify the universal subject with a particular historical or cultural subject fails in the face of the subject’s constitutive emptiness. Denying this split, policies in the neoliberal register try to insert a rational logic into political processes, erasing contextual conflicts in the name of a social harmony conceived as necessary, whether for economic development, or for the rise of individuals adjusted to society, or for the articulations of these purposes. This is an impossible harmony, insofar as power is the very condition of (im)possibility of the social (Laclau, 1990).

This same movement of attempting to produce an adjusted society can be identified in another set of discourses that also seem to have been differentially sedimented in the current life project proposal making reference to social well-being. Such discourse is disseminated by international agencies around policies that claim to work towards ending inequalities, defending rights and environmental sustainability. The appreciation of a purpose in life associated with the idea of well-being is registered in documents from the OECD in this century. The general idea is that well-being is more than happiness: it refers to “good mental states, including all of the various evaluations, positive and negative, that people make of their lives and the affective reactions of people to their experiences” (OECD, 2013, p. 10), focusing on the possibility of measuring this well-being, which “requires a mix of *subjective and objective indicators*, and measures across a variety of other dimensions” (OECD, 2013, p. 185, emphasis added).

As highlighted by Lingard (2016), in 2008, the OECD introduced well-being and concerns about inequality and social cohesion, in addition to gross domestic product, as indicators of country growth. Thus, in its recognized actions seeking to measure the quality and quantity of countries’ human capital, producing “indicators of the presumed competitiveness of the national economy within the global economy” (Lingard, 2016, p. 614, own translation), the measure of the subjects’ ability to feel good and adequate to the environment in which they live seems to have been inserted.

Associated with the valorization of social well-being, references are made to the inclusion of *purpose* and *values*, with extensive concern about the reliability, validity and usefulness of measures of subjective well-being, which are somehow sedimented in current OECD documents linked to the 2030 Agenda (Silva & Fernandes, 2019). As studies on curriculum policies have been stating for years (Rizvi & Lingard, 2013; Ball, 2014), there is no reproduction of guidelines from international agencies in the context of defining texts, nor do we have reproduction of such guidelines in schools. However, such discourses are spectrally iterated, producing subjectivities and effects in different social contexts.

Among the reasons for the increasing use of the term *life project*, even in academic literature, seems to be the perception of a social scenario in constant transformation, which finds, in the idea of future life planning, a catalyst for sustainable development and a sense of purpose in life and belonging (OECD, 2013). Such diagnoses tend to corroborate the desire for education to face these challenges. Not through critical discussion about the present, aiming at other possibilities for the future-to-come. The solution is to form identities that are, simultaneously, resilient in relation to risks and difficulties and capable of producing social harmony in the future.

There is both a discourse of anticipating the future (Freitas & Coelho, 2019) and a discourse that seeks to invest in a learning compass in tune with a project of the future (Silva & Fernandes, 2019). The regulation of the future-to-come is reiterated, the urgency of training for a productive life, provided by the work and social action of happy and well-adjusted people, aiming at the well-being of the community. Such a record may have favored the equivalence between discourses of social well-being through a life with purpose and discourses of Positive Psychology: not being equal, both antagonize the discourse of a world at risk.

From a certain inflection point, worthy of further investigation regarding the contingencies and political articulations that led to such an inflection (Fernandes, 2024), such discourses enter education through the creation of Positive Education. According to Cintra and Guerra (2017), this term also began to circulate in 2008, following discussions by Martin Seligman and the team at Geelong Grammar School (GGS), an Australian school that was the first to implement Positive Psychology throughout the institution. Such Education advocates that “skills for well-being can and should be taught in schools alongside traditional skills for qualification and professional achievement” (Cintra & Guerra, 2017, p. 507, own translation), based on the idea that well-being development not only combats mental or physical health problems but also improves learning outcomes. In this paper in defense of Positive Psychology and Positive Education, the authors highlight the low penetration of the topic in the country at the time. There are indications, however, that, from then on, this diffusion expanded, as if Positive Psychology and Positive Education were the answer to the production of both happy people and indicators of social well-being.

The conclusion that students learn desired qualities through schooling and teachers facilitate student learning, as well as the concern to investigate whether the purpose of life can be used as a “bridge” between training and students’ future lives (Tirri et al., 2016) reverberated more widely in subsequent years. The mention of the presentation of the papers in this special issue of the *Journal of Education for Teaching (JET)* does not aim to establish an origin of this reverberation, but to record one of the moments of intensified dissemination of Positive Psychology in education, at the same time that its diffusion in Psychology also expanded (Grant, 2017). As highlighted in the same *JET* text:

Many of the authors of these articles are collaborators in a three-year, multinational research study, funded by The John Templeton Foundation, United States, on how educational experiences can help pupils find a strong sense of purpose for their lives. The countries involved are the United States, Brazil, South Korea, China, Spain and Finland. (Tirri et al., 2016, p. 528).

The John Templeton Foundation has clear links with religious conservatism and is part of the broad chain of equivalence between ultra-conservative demands in the world today (Bains, 2011), being dedicated to building educational experiences that can help students find a sense of purpose for their lives. This same institution has provided funding for the Institute for Unlimited Love.⁶ According to the texts published on the institutional website (e.g. Law, 2023), the catastrophes of the 20th century were generated by moral problems. The argument is directed at conservatives and religious people who consider that “crime and immorality is now spiralling out of control” because we “went *too far*”, in a “dramatic shift in the Liberal direction”. The author, Stephen Law,⁷ seeks to differentiate liberalism – considered defensible in the face of authoritarianism – from moral relativism, arguing that there is “empirical evidence to suggest that raising young people to think critically and independently provides our best defense against moral catastrophes”. Only in this way is it possible to “provide immunity to ideological indoctrination”, giving “young people the critical thinking skills and independence of mind needed to spot and resist indoctrination”. This argument connects the defense of a New Enlightenment, strong among some post-truth critics (Lopes, 2023b), with the formation of moral values that would have been lost over time.

What seems to be more recent is the capillarization of these discourses in curriculum policies for high school in Brazil, aiming at a given curricular architecture, a specific space-time for the construction of a life with purpose, focused on personal and collective well-being, through a moral education sedimented in the life project curricular component. Perhaps such sedimentation was favored by this syntagma already circulating in Brazil with other meanings and purposes, as I highlighted initially, but also focused on the formation of identities for the future of society. In any case, I advocate that such sedimentation is sustained by seeking to produce both the future-to-come adjusted to neoliberal rationality and the future-to-come that responds to conservative demands.

In the process of constituting a method of educating for happiness, capable of sustaining self-entrepreneurship, the signifier *life with purpose* was gradually metonymically replaced by the signifier *life project*, already in circulation, at the same time as the signifier *social well-being* is associated with *individual happiness*. If the focus of well-being seems to be aimed at the collective and the challenges of social development, Positive Psychology focuses on the individual and his/her crises, making the effect on the collective almost a natural consequence. I emphasize that such movements are not just linguistic, but express political articulations, discursive practices that constitute the educational imaginary.

As a result of this curricular architecture, textbooks are produced, pedagogical guidelines are developed, in the public and private systems, multiplying their effects in an unforeseen way and finding fertile ground to disseminate, especially since 2018, with the advancement of ultra-conservative movements that accelerated changes in high school through the Provisional Measure

6 About the Institute, see: <https://www.unlimitedloveinstitute.org/>

7 Philosopher from the University of Oxford, author of the book *The War for Children's Minds*, published in 2007.

that instituted the reform. It is not surprising, for example, that it is possible to identify the reference to the life project, focused on the goals of achieving happiness in professional and personal life, in religious currents, such as Canção Nova,⁸ a Catholic charismatic community founded by Father Jonas Abib, who supported Jair Bolsonaro's candidacy for the Brazilian presidency.

It is not up to me to argue about the effects of this psychological discourse within the scope of Psychology itself. I limit myself here to discuss how the return to a dissemination of Psychology, through Positive Psychology, in curriculum theory reinstates the project of instituting a rationality for curriculum theory and operates within the framework of establishing a fixed identity-based educational formation grounded in such rationality, as can be read in Silva and Danza (2022), based on the Positive Psychology. Such identities would embody the intended social transformation and, consequently, provide well-being in the future-to-come, through the management of the lives of young people, who will live in a world at risk, if they do not prepare themselves to have the behaviors, values, skills and abilities to make the world peaceful and productive, consistent with neoliberal rationality.

Conclusion: Leaving the future to the future-to-come

As I discussed previously, in defense of an empty normativity, open to power disputes (Lopes, 2015), education is conceived in different theories as shaping individuals and connects to normativity, often described as ethical (Homem, 2024) – or moral, as indicated here –, whether in an instrumental or comprehensive sense. I argue that such normativity is being produced today by the sedimentation of discourses of well-being and life with purpose, articulated with the discourses of Positive Psychology, in the name of moral education that produces subjectivities capable of projecting a future that is intended to be harmonious, through a *life project*.

Considering the radical contextualization of all policies, there is no guarantee that the curricular prescriptions attributed to the life project will be practiced exactly as they were standardized. According to preliminary research results from my group, the propositions for this curriculum component have been interpreted in various conflicting ways across states, with some interpretations appearing distant from the regulatory effects of the reform (Fernandes & Lopes, 2024; Lopes & Silva, 2021). Furthermore, they are/will be subjected to other displacements in schools, which deserve to be investigated to understand the supplements produced by the reiteration of the syntagma *life project* (Lima, 2024).

To the extent that attempts at ordering, tending to be hegemonic due to the expansion of discursive equivalences (Laclau, 2011), do not once and for all block translation and differ in curriculum policy, it is worth investing radically in the dissemination of other political meanings that allow to keep the power game that disputes the meaning of curricular normativity open. I reiterate, however, the importance of questioning proposals that tend to conceive the high school curriculum as a means of shaping young individuals capable of self-entrepreneurship, focused on a moral project supposed to be capable of building a conflict-free future. I think that such questioning, reactivating sedimentations, is also a possibility of entering the dispute for other meanings in policy (and in politics), betting on differential identifications.

8 See, for example, on Canção Nova website, the steps suggested to create a good life project: <https://formacao.cancaonova.com/atualidade/comportamento/conheca-os-passos-para-fazer-um-bom-projeto-de-vida/>

In this process, I have invested in investigating articulations between ultra-conservative and liberal demands that are enabling the discursive hegemonization of the moral education of youth. Through these articulations, ideas of project and social transformation are supplemented, focused on work/labor market, associated with the values of positive education and self-entrepreneurship, in an attempt to forge subjectivities adjusted to a given order that is so much more easily treated as positive as it relates to happiness and social well-being. According to the arguments developed here, such a positive vision attributed to the life project stems precisely from the erasure of antagonisms. I emphasize, as Mouffe (2018) highlights, that this erasure can be the catalyst for violence, since democratic policies must presuppose agonism and the confrontation of conflicts.

In the face of our daily afflictions, conflicts, despair and tragedies, however, more easily is working the fantasy (Clarke, 2018) by which the diagnosis of a future of horror to be blocked by a salvationist project for life is established. Even if it is a programmed, planned life, reduced to goals and indicators, devoid of differential singularities, devoid, in short, of the life to be lived in the unpredictability of relationships with others, leaving the future to the future-to-come.

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Data availability statement

The data underlying the research text are reported in the article.

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