

Life Projects of High School Young Students and School

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ABSTRACT – Life Projects of High School Young Students and School. This paper deals with the perception of high school students about the contribution that school experiences can bring to their life projects. We take as references philosopher Ortega y Gasset's concept of design, and that of purpose, as formulated by William Damon. Three hundred and five high school students from the city of São Paulo participated in this study. The qualitative approach (content analysis and formulation of categories) respected the participants' perceptions. The results show that 81% of students believe that the school contributes to their life projects mainly through activities in the classroom.

Keywords: Youngsters. Life Projects. School Meanings.

RESUMO – Projetos de Vida de Jovens Estudantes do Ensino Médio e a Escola. Este artigo trata da percepção de estudantes do Ensino Médio sobre a contribuição que as experiências escolares podem trazer aos seus projetos de vida. Toma-se por referência os conceitos de projeto do filósofo Ortega y Gasset e de *purpose*, formulado por Willian Damon. Participaram do estudo 305 estudantes do Ensino Médio da cidade de São Paulo. A abordagem qualitativa (análise de conteúdo e formulação de categorias) respeitou as percepções dos participantes. Os resultados demonstram que 81% dos estudantes consideram que a escola contribui para seus projetos de vida, principalmente por meio das atividades desenvolvidas em sala de aula.

Palavras-chave: Jovens. Projetos de Vida. Significados da Escola.

Life Projects

The possibility of choice, ultimate expression of our humanity, according to Ortega y Gasset (1983), associates each individual existence to a life project that guides it. Project, to the Spanish philosopher, comes close to vocation – a calling that attracts the person towards a given direction and implies an image of life that is individual and unique. The human being invents what he will become, he is what he makes of his circumstances; therefore, thus conceived, he is, in essence, project.

Ortega y Gasset (1983) stresses two elements essential to the idea of project understood as human essence: circumstances and vocation. Both are given to each individual. The former opens room for the freedom of individual choice; the latter brings with it the personal choice of either following it or not.

The circumstance is given, but it opens up a range of possibilities to the freedom of choice of each individual, and the option lies on that which relates to one's project. That, in its turn, is imagined in view of its circumstances that are inscribed within a sociohistorical and personal context: "To say that we live is the same as saying that we find ourselves in an atmosphere of definite possibilities. This atmosphere we generally call our 'circumstances'. [...] The world is the sum total of our vital possibilities" (Ortega y Gasset, 1983, p. 71)¹.

The idea of vital possibilities is relevant to the understanding of the importance that the school can take in the life of youngsters. For the subjects that attend it, this institution presents itself as a given circumstance of life capable of offering them a range of possibilities.

Damon (2008) starts from the idea of life projects and formulates the concept of vital projects – purpose. To the researcher and his team, vital project is a supreme concern that can be defined as the creation of a stable and organized frame that reveals the intention of accomplishing something whose meaning transcends the limits of the self and is also related to the world. It is a motivating reason that suffuses with meaning the goals that guide daily life. The author offers some points that allow us to better size up the amplitude and meaning of vital projects:

1. Amplitude and stability: vital projects can be understood as a kind of goal, but they are more stable and have a wider scope, whereas goals are more specific and immediate.
2. Personal meaning and self-transcendence – vital projects have personal meaning, but also an external component that translates into the wish to make a difference in the world, to contribute to subjects that transcend self-centered interests.
3. Something to be accomplished – vital projects are not guided towards a definite end, they are always targeted at an accomplishment, at a form of guidance to be followed through life. This guidance can be material or nonmaterial, external or internal, percepti-

ble or not, but it is a necessary characteristic, not in its concreteness, but in its sense of direction (Damon; Menon; Bronk, 2003).

The diversity of situations and interactions in which human beings take part may become sources of vital projects, once the subject identifies in these goals a meaning strong enough to guide his life, and once he commits himself to the objectives that transcend his self-interest.

Having a vital project can be seen as a human need for personal satisfaction and a way of participating actively in society, in the sense of transforming it. Recognizing oneself as a subject capable of contributing to causes that transcend self-interest and that, at the same time, bring meaning and satisfaction to personal life means that the fusion of individual and collective projects was carried out. To Fonseca (1989 apud Machado, 2004), life projects are as the realization of a vocation, of a calling born out of individual and social aspects, that is, it is the result of the conjunction of individual aspirations and collective interests.

Youngsters and Life Projects

Human life remains to be done in all its stages, therefore life projects are not exclusive to the new generations. In this study, however, we have elected youth as a stage particularly relevant to the identification and accomplishment of vital projects, because it represents a moment of choices related to professional life. Understanding the possibilities presented to youngsters implies in the vision we build of youth, and in the expectations and possibilities we see in it.

The concept of youth refers to a sociological category that comprises the age bracket between 15 and 24, and is defined by the process of preparation of individuals to be members of society, taking on the roles of adults in society, both at the family and professional levels (Silva; Lopes, 2009).

Sposito (1997) denominates youth the age segment going from 15 to 24, following the guidelines of works of the demography area, particularly those developed by Felícia Madeira. To Sheehy (2003), the age limits of youth today must take into account that puberty is beginning earlier and adolescence is being prolonged, particularly in the more economically privileged classes, up to the 30 years of age, with the postponement of the moment of leaving the parents' residence. These two limits for the youth age bracket highlight distinct markers: Sposito (1997) adopts age division as a criterion (15 to 24 years), and Sheehy (2003) considers puberty as a biological marker, and the taking on of new responsibilities as a social indicator for the end of youth.

The disposition of human existence into periods is intimately related to several fundamental aspects of social and cultural organization. Society and culture reserve to each stage of life different expectations: they associate them to possible social roles to be performed;

they offer possibilities and limitations to the actions of individuals and citizens; they dedicate specific institutions to catering for their specific needs.

To Eisenstadt (1969), age delimitations are basic in all societies to define human beings culturally and socially, to establish some of their relations and activities, and to the differential attribution of social roles. They are also related to identity and to the subjects' perception of themselves in terms of their own needs and psychological aspirations, of their place in society and of the ultimate meaning of life. The cultural definition of the time span of each age bracket is always related to a definition of human possibilities, limitations and obligations at each stage of life. Consequently, the situation of an age group can only be understood in relation to the others. When considered jointly, the different age groups give us a map of human possibilities and limitations.

The institutionalization of life as a function of chronological age, characteristic of modernity, is above all due to the transition from an economy based on the domestic unit to an economy based on the labor market. According to Gallatin (1978, p. 11), some psychologists (Bakan; Demos; Keniston; Musgrove; Muuss) agree with Ariès (1981) about the close relationship between the concept of adolescence and the modern industrial society that defines labor legislation and proposes extended schooling as a way of keeping youngsters out of the workforce and dependent on their parents; changes that become possible with the growing industrial production, sufficient to liberate the younger from working and allowing them to continue studying.

An interpretation of youth is then constructed as a preparatory/formative time between childhood and adult life, during which subjects still do not have the responsibility of adults, either social or technical. Said in a different way, it is a period of time given socially to individuals so that they can prepare themselves to enter adult society, a kind of social moratoria.

Conceiving of this period as transitory, based on the description of social life and of other forms of culture, meets obstacles in the definition of age groups oriented exclusively by universal biological processes. To Eisenstadt (1969), youth is a universal phenomenon and, even considering its biological nature, is always defined in cultural terms. Even if basic biological processes of maturation are probably similar in all human societies, the cultural definition of youth varies from one society to the next, with variable limits for ages and for the differences between them. Ethnography shows that all societies establish age divisions, but they do it in their own way, understanding that age is not a given of nature, neither an explanation factor of human behavior (Debert, 1998). The importance of age as a criterion to the attribution of roles in a society is intimately related to various fundamental aspects of social organization and cultural orientation.

Talking about youngsters in today's society implies considering a world in which little or nearly nothing is predetermined. Traditionally, it is considered that the transition to adult life culminates with exiting the parents' home, getting married, and entering the labor market, events that signal the independence of the youngster and the taking on of an adult's responsibilities. Between the early 20th century and late 1970s, this transition tended to happen, for the vast majority of people, at a predictable age (Sheehy, 2003). However, in view of the social transformations we have witnessed, these events no longer occur in a linear way, therefore it is no longer possible to predict the age at which they will occur. Apart from age limits and biological transformations, there is a group of factors and expectations regarding the new generations that contribute to the uncertainty about the future.

The period of transition between youth and adult life tends to be prolonged in contemporary society. During this stage, youngsters have the possibility to think about the future, to search for opportunities that will satisfy their interests and aspirations. This possibility is not always converted into concrete actions, since many youngsters seem lost and find difficulty in following a direction, setting up goals and acquiring the skills necessary to fulfil their aspirations. The commitment to the future through goals or life programs acquires great importance during this period, because it can contribute to help the current generation to find meaning in life and to seek paths to see their plans through. Faced with an unpredictable world, unstable and full of opportunities, having stable goals in life can be a way of guiding each individual's choices, looking for long-lasting meanings capable of transcending immediate and individualistic interests.

Being young within this new context is qualitatively different from what it was a few decades ago. The challenges regarding an uncertain and unpredictable future demand a new kind of formation. As pointed out by Mannheim (1968), the degree of change in a society interferes in the meaning attributed to youngsters and in the role education has to perform. Apart from that, finding vital projects depends on the universe of possibilities of each individual. The school is an integral part of this universe and gives to the students different experiences that can contribute to the identification and fulfilment of vital projects.

Youngsters, the School and Life Projects

The school occupies a central place in the social recognition of the juvenile category, since the preparatory and transitional character attributed to this stage of life is consolidated with the extension of the school education dedicated to prepare youngsters to adult society. The school signals to its students with future perspectives, which can develop a vision of the students' becoming, translated into the emphasis given to acquiring the diploma and to possible future projects. One tends

to deny the present of the youngster as a valid space of formation. Said differently, the emphasis does not lie on the meaning the school has for the youngster at the present moment, that is, in the relation he/she can establish between what is experienced inside the school and life outside it. The meaning attributed to schooling generally points the subjects towards the future. Even if projects are oriented towards the future, they are conceived and formulated in the present time, having as their basis experiences and opportunities lived and signified in the present time.

As long as school education was conceived and exercised as a privilege, reserved to the few, its main objective was the formation of an elite. The elite school congregated the students and family that shared similar values with respect to school education; the contents selected and developed in the classroom were part of the interests of this elite that saw in schooling, particularly in Secondary Education, a passport to the university. With the democratization of school education, new aspirations and wishes emerged in the student body, as well as different forms to interpret and signify their experiences.

Fanfani (2000) identifies three typical attitudes among youngsters in their search for the meaning that school has in their lives: (1) the first finds meaning for secondary education in obligation – there is a fraction of youngsters that see attendance to school as an imposition, that see no alternative other than attending the institution; (2) the second order of justifications, denominated by the author as instrumental reason, understands that one has to study in order to obtain future benefits, such as certification, entering the University, finding a good job, that is, there is no present meaning in secondary education; (3) lastly, the love of knowledge is mentioned as motivation and meaning of schooling.

For a long time, school was seen as a formative space for youngsters, capable of expanding their life experiences and inserting them into the labor market. Sposito (2005), in a study about the relations between youth and schooling in Brazil, observes that the relations between school and work are no longer the same, that is to say, basic schooling no longer guarantees entrance to the world of labor. In the same study, the author concludes that the new generation of youngsters, who have their access to Secondary Education guaranteed by the expansion of the system, recognizes that schooling is one of the possibilities to situate themselves in the world, bringing them closer to relevant contemporary issues. Thus, youngsters incorporate into their expectations and practices the school variable, recognizing, however, the limits of the impact of schooling to their insertion into the labor market.

The relationship of youngsters to the school was the object of a different study carried out by Sposito and Galvão (2004). The testimonies collected by the authors allowed them to characterize different types of association with the knowledge acquired at school. For some youngsters, it is just an instrumental knowledge necessary to acquire the diploma. This information is interpreted as a sign that future goals

may not be sufficient to give meaning to the contents learned in the present. For a different segment of youngsters, it was possible to find meaning in the school knowledges due to the importance they attributed to the school for their future. To the authors, in this case the construction of meaning takes place from the subjectivation of experiences that start to integrate the projects of each individual. For a third group of students, the relations between school disciplines and their daily lives are meaningful and valued positively because they understand that the experience in school affords personal implications; in other words, the youngsters displayed the need to transform knowledge into something personal in order to appropriate it effectively. This process of personal appropriation is interpreted by the authors as fundamental to overcome the distance that separates the recognition of the importance that studying has for the future and the lack of meaning felt by many of them in the present. Sposito and Galvão (2004) conclude that between teaching and learning we find a student that wishes for a personal, meaningful work that transcends the promise of a good future.

A research carried out by the Getúlio Vargas Foundation and published by the *Revista Ensino Superior* (Holanda, 2009) presented an analysis of the causes of school dropout in the view of the youngsters, using data from the National Household Sample Survey (Pnad). The work shows that 40% of youngsters between 15 and 17 left school for lack of interest. Within this universe of dropouts, 83% said they did not want to attend school. The other 27% pointed to the lack of income. These data reveal that low income is not the main reason for dropout. Many of these youngsters are outside school not because they belong to low-income communities and have to work, but because they have no interest in the experiences they have there. The researcher concluded that the youngster does not see importance in concluding Secondary Education. Therefore, ultimately, the weak or absent meaning found with respect to school experiences leads students to abandon it.

The four studies mentioned here point to the importance of the meaning of school in the students' lives. Going into higher education or entering the labor market are no longer sufficient motivations, either because of the diversity of the population catered for (with the democratization of access to school not everyone wishes for a higher education), or because of the changes in the labor market and the demand for higher qualification.

The articulation between the school experiences and life projects of the students results in the attribution of meaning given to these experiences. Machado (2009, p. 29) expresses this relation thus: "[...] the justification of disciplinary contents to be studied must be grounded in more meaningful elements for the students, and nothing is more adequate for that than to refer to the life projects of each one of them".

Our humanity is constituted through the capacity to choose goals that guide our life trajectories. Forming the human being, therefore,

implies considering their projects, understood as a construction resulting from choices based on values and representing an orientation, a life course. The school experience is a constitutive element of human formation; in this sense, it seems fitting to reflect upon the relation between these experiences and the life projects of the youngsters.

In the conception presented by Dayrell (2001), a project is developed and constructed as a function of the educative process always within the context of the educative field or of a field of possibilities, that is, within the concrete socio-cultural-historical context in which the individuals are immersed, and that circumscribes their possibilities of experiences. With that, the author believes that every student has, in one way or another, a reason to be at school, and he or she elaborates this, in a wider or more restricted form, within the context of a plan for the future.

The relation between the school and vital projects is also part of the studies by Damon. A study carried out by the author (Damon, 2003) shows that in North American schools there is a preoccupation in guiding pupils' career choices and to stimulate them to proceed with their studies at higher education level, but that the notion of purpose is virtually absent among students. In the author's interpretation, when students are faced with one of the most important decisions of their lives – what to do with their lives and careers – they rely basically on their own resources and devices. To Damon (2003), the school must show students the relevance of studies to their lives, and orient them about the possibilities related to what they want to experience, where they want to work and what life they want to lead.

Objectives of the Research

The objective of the study was to identify the meaning that students from Secondary Education in the city of São Paulo attributed to school experiences in the light of their life projects.

Methodology

The research was conducted with 305 students from the first and second years of Secondary Education in the city of São Paulo, studying in four schools of the public (56%) and private (44%) systems, with 43% being male and 57% female students. The problem that guided the research was: What is the perception of students in Secondary Education about the contribution of their school experiences to their life projects?

The study is characterized as a qualitative research, insofar as the approach to the problem emphasizes the students' perceptions of the contributions of their school experiences to their life projects, recognizing therefore the indissoluble relation between the objective world and the subject. According to Bogdan and Binklen (1994), the qualitative

approach is characterized by trying to understand social phenomena within the sociohistorical context in which the object is immersed, trying to understand the data based on the perspective of the subjects under study. One of its main features is precisely the search for the meanings attributed by the subjects to the object investigated.

It is worth noting that the adoption of this approach did not prevent us from making use of quantification and techniques that allowed us to systematize the data. Demo (1998) considers that qualitative and quantitative studies are not antagonistic forms that exclude each other, but that they establish between them a dialectic relation (a unity of contraries). To that author, a qualitative research focuses on qualitative aspects of reality, without overlooking quantitative aspects – the same reasoning applies to the inverse statement.

The questionnaire comprised ten open questions about the students' perception of the contribution of the school to their projects, based on the following experiences: (1) school disciplines; (2) access to information (lectures), to sociability (outings), to culture (cultural exhibits) and to sports (tournaments); (3) experiences related to active participation in events of student representation, solidarity campaigns, discussion and decision-making referring to life at school; (4) report of the school experience meaningful to their life projects. In this article, we present only the questions related to the meanings attributed to school in general and the report of a meaningful school experience.

Procedures

The research project and the survey instrument were submitted to and approved by the Committee on Ethics in Research of the School of Education of the University of São Paulo. The access to students was made through their schools. Meetings were conducted with school principals, pedagogic coordinators and School Councils in each institution with the purpose of presenting the project and the survey instrument. After approval from all institutional levels, we began applying the instrument.

The questionnaire, comprised of 28 questions, had in its first part questions related to the identification of life projects. The second part targeted the relation between schools and life projects. The questions analyzed in the present article are found in an appendix to this work (Appendix A). The instrument was made available in a virtual platform, Survey Monkey, which allows formulating open and closed questions with different formats, which can then be accessed through a link. Application of the questionnaires was carried out by the researcher during a class in the computer laboratory of the school. Firstly, we informed the students of the objectives of the research, of their rights as participants, of the guarantee of anonymity in the treatment of the data, and we suggested they answered the questions as sincerely as possible, since there

were no *right or wrong* answers. The process required approximately 30 minutes. The complete work, a doctorate dissertation (Klein, 2011), was forwarded to each of the schools so as to share with the participants the results obtained in the study.

Data Analysis

The questions devoted to the relation between school experiences and life projects were open questions, and the categories of analysis were constructed based on the answers of the participants, in other words, we did not work with predetermined categories. Thus, we extracted from the answers of each subject recurring elements that allowed us to group them into categories that respected the associations and interpretations of the participants.

Results

When asking students about the contribution of the school to their life projects, we obtained the following answers: 81% said that the school contributes to their life projects, and 19% believed it does not. The vast majority of students, therefore, establish a positive relation between the school and their life projects.

The next question asked participants to justify their answers, which led us to the construction of eight categories of analysis. Table 1 presents the distribution of participants across the categories, considering the universe of those who answered affirmatively to the previous question.

Table 1 – Justification of the Contribution of School to Life Projects

Categories	Frequency	%
Future	58	23
Social life and responsibility	38	16
University entrance exams/continuity of studies	25	10
Preparation for labor market	20	8
Valuation of content	19	8
Identification of what he/she wants in life	20	8
Good health	5	2
Daily life	3	1
No justification	60	24
TOTAL	248	100

Source: Created by the authors based on the research data.

The data in Table 1 show that 23% of the students who believed in the contribution of school to their life projects considered that this contribution is due to a preparation for the future, mentioned vaguely as the purpose of the school. It is noticed that there is little relation between definite or specified future plans and the contributions of the school. It is a contribution to a generic future, as a blank page to be filled. Secondly, we have 16% of students that believe that the school prepares them for social life and the responsibilities of adulthood. These youngsters understand that the school affords the social experience and understanding of the world, shows how to fight for their rights, how to be responsible, that it stimulates the facing of problems, teamwork and that it educates for citizenship. With 10% of the participants, we have the category of university entrance exams/continuity of studies that collects the answers of those who believe that school knowledge is important for success in university entrance exams. With 8% of participants each, we have three categories: preparation for the labor market (valuing the education focused on work, either by the contents taught, or by the experiences that allow contact with the world of work); valuing of contents (the knowledge transmitted by the school is valuable in itself); and identification of what one wants in life (the school contributes to identify what one wants in life). Lastly, we have the categories of good health, with 2% of participants, that associate the contribution of school, particularly of physical activities, to be in good health and shape; and the daily life category, with just 1% of participants, who believe that school activities contribute to life experience, to daily life, teaching what is useful. Twenty-four percent of participants did not justify the contributions of the school to their life projects.

Next, we asked students to describe a school situation that had contributed to their life projects, and asked them why it was important. The reports gave origin to the nine categories of analysis presented in Table 2.

Table 2 – The School Situations That Contributed to Life Projects

Categories	Frequency	%
Classroom	68	22
Cultural entertainment	45	15
Theme projects	42	14
Student representation	21	7
Social projects	15	5
Outings	12	4
Everything	12	4
Interpersonal relationships	10	3
Self-learning	5	2
Did not report	75	25
Total	305	100

Source: Created by the authors based on the research data.

Data from Table 2 reveal that the school situation that gathers the largest number of respondents is that of the classroom, with 22%. This category is defined by activities that take place in the classroom, related to a discipline, such as classes, seminars, and debates. They are didactic activities that make no direct mention to contents or to specific disciplines, but to activities, demonstrating the importance attributed to the teaching processes and not just to contents. Next, we have the category of cultural entertainment (activities involving parties, sports competitions, theatre and dance) with 15% of the students. The category theme projects (projects focused on developing sensibility to a specific theme, extrapolating the classroom and involving the school as a whole) gathers 14% of respondents. It includes presentations, lectures, science fair, and student newsletters.

In fourth place, we find experiences related to student representation, activities that involve organization and struggling for student rights, spaces of dialogue with the school management/coordination, and participation in the student association, with 7% of students. In fifth place, social projects (campaigns or voluntary actions focused on the community or on a specific social cause), gathering 5% of students. Next, we have outings, with 4%, comprising activities that take place outside the school and may involve contact with businesses or other institutions.

With 3% of participants, we have the category of interpersonal relationships (relationships and interactions with colleagues, teachers and other members of the school). The category self-learning, with 2%, covers various situations in which subjects learned something by themselves, including here situations of cheating in exams, need for organization and the discovery of the pleasure of learning. Lastly, with 4% of respondents, the category everything, defined by the attribution of value to everything that happens at school, a generalist view of school activities that does not distinguish the meaning of each one of them.

Another information that deserves mentioning is the percentage of students that did not report a situation, 25%, some of them because they could not remember any such experience and others because they said that they never experienced a situation relevant to their life projects. It is a sizeable percentage exposing the weak link established between the school experiences and the meaning attributed to them.

We asked participants if any of the disciplines of their school curriculum contributed to their life projects. The answers are shown in Table 3.

Table 3 – Contribution of School Disciplines

Disciplines	Frequency	%
Foreign language	235	77
Portuguese language	207	68
Mathematics	188	62
History	129	42
Geography	121	40
Biology	120	39
Sociology	116	38
Physics	106	35
Chemistry	100	33
Physical education	102	33
Philosophy	96	31
Arts	81	27
None of them	4	1
Total	305	100%

Source: Created by the authors based on the research data.

We asked the participants to justify the contribution of the disciplines of the school curriculum to their life projects. The answers were categorized, and can be seen in Table 4.

Table 4 – Justification for the Contribution of School Disciplines

Categories	Frequency	%
Relation to what they want in life	70	23
Preparation for university exams and higher education	65	21
Intellectual formation	44	14
Future use	23	8
Professional contribution	24	8
Understanding and reflection on reality	11	4
Integral formation	12	4
Personal growth	9	3
Valuation of knowledge	9	3
Preparation for life	7	2
Pleasure	7	2
Improve the world	3	1
Daily use	4	1
None	4	1
Did not justify	13	4
Total	305	100

Source: Created by the authors based on the research data.

The data on Table 4 show the curriculum disciplines that contribute to the students' life projects to the extent that they prepare them for university entrance exams and to undertake higher education (21%), and some of them are associated to what they want in life (23%). Intellectual formation, a category that values specific abilities related to talking about different subjects, having cultured command of the language, and understanding phenomena and interpreting them, has 14% of total answers. The category of professional contribution, defined by the belief that curriculum subjects help obtaining a job and achieving professional success also appears near the top of the table with 8% of respondents.

The category related to the future use of knowledge also achieved 8% of participants. With 4% of total answers, we find the category of understanding and reflection on reality, defined by the possibility of understanding reality and reflecting upon the world, thereby contributing to social relations. The category integral formation, referred to intellectual, moral and physical development, was valued by 4% of students.

With 3% of participants, we find the categories valuation of knowledge, in which intrinsic importance is attributed to school disciplines, and the category of personal growth, defined by the belief that curriculum disciplines help students to be someone in life, to be better persons.

With 2% of the total answers, we have the categories of preparation for life, defined by the generic belief that disciplines somehow prepare people for life, and the pleasure that is related to the affinity to some disciplines.

Lastly, with 1% of participants, we find the categories of improving the world, defined by the idea that disciplines can contribute to stimulate actions that help to build a better world; and daily use, which refers to the use of the knowledges in daily life, in the present time. There are also 1% of participants that understand that there is no contribution from school experiences to their life projects.

Discussion of Data

With respect to the justification for the contribution of school to life projects, the future is mentioned by 23% of students. Similarly, the mention to university entrance exams and/or continuity of studies is a justification that is projected onto the future without establishing links with immediate or daily life experience. These data reaffirm the discourse usually associating the function of school with a perspective of the becoming. Possibly, these youngsters cannot establish a relation between what they experience at school and their daily lives and/or with their plans and projects. Experience allows the human being to understand elements that can project themselves well beyond what is observed consciously; for that, it is necessary that relations established by the subject be brought to the level of consciousness. This process

happens through communication, capable of linking the results of the group experience with the immediate experiences of the individual (Dewey, 1959). However, the organization of school contents follows a logic order that aims at promoting knowledge as an end in itself, hiding the relations between school disciplines and daily life.

Another justification relates to social life and to the understanding of the world that the school affords (fighting for rights, being responsible, facing problems, working in teams and educating for citizenship). These data point towards a wider conception of the functions of the school, highlighting their formative function under an ethical perspective.

Another point to be highlighted is the valuation that students make of the formation for citizenship. Citizenship must be understood in a wider sense, transcending the right to have rights, and implies a formation that contributes to the promotion of those rights. The concept of citizenship in the contemporary discourses of the social sciences is not limited to the level of formal political participation, but is extended to the social and interpersonal levels. The modern conceptions of citizenship believe that participation is a possible catalyst for a person to become free, autonomous and participative (Oser; Veugelers, 2008). Thus, education for citizenship is not limited to learning about politics, but refers also to the ability to live a social and political life. Widening the concept of citizenship to the personal level means, in a democratic society, to give youngsters ample room for dialogic relations and participation in social processes, simulating the adoption of self-transcendent life projects.

The relation between school and labor market is one of the functions of secondary education; however, schooling is no longer a guarantee of jobs or social progression. Still, some students signify schooling through its preparation for work.

The discovery of what one wants in life associates the school to the identification of a life project. Damon (2008) points out that many youngsters live without knowing what they want in life; this demonstrates that the process of identification and adoption of a life project does not follow naturally from life, but is the result of relations in experiences that can lead to such discovery. Since the school is an institution that must be part of the life of every member of the new generations for many years, the fact that it is seen as an institution that contributes to the identification of what one wants in life reveals its potential with respect to life projects.

We believe it is important to emphasize the diversity of school experiences that subjects recognize and signify when they have their life projects in mind. Beyond the instructional contents or classes, subjects find in school various and meaningful experiences. The same school situation can have multiple meanings; therefore, we can say that the

school does not have a unique meaning to the students. School experiences and meanings combine in different ways and can influence the life projects in distinct manners.

The meanings attributed to theme and social projects and to student representation, situations highlighted by the participants as meaningful for the life projects, reveal that such experiences are a path to the fusion between individual projects and collective interests. Students understand that participation in projects and student representation are important for their life projects as they allow the understanding of, and action before, society.

The theme and/or social projects mentioned by the participants were often developed through the adoption of contemporary themes, such as environment, cultural diversity, and solidarity actions. The meanings attributed to theme and/or social projects indicate the commitment and social responsibility that these experiences afford, apart from revealing their potential with respect to the formation of values, allowing the fusion between individual projects and collective interests.

The importance attributed to Portuguese language and mathematics reinforces, on the one hand the conception of school as an institution focused on the teaching of basic content necessary to social life: reading, writing and counting. On the other hand, the high value attributed to foreign languages may indicate the demands of contemporary society which, faced with a globalized world, transform the command of a foreign language into an ever present need, not just for professional life, but also as a means of access to the production of knowledge and dissemination of information, apart from the undeniable presence of the English language, in the most diverse contexts of daily life, such as movies and electronic equipment, as a language that allows communication with people from many parts of the world. Lastly, the need of communicating and interacting in the contemporary world can explain the valuation of a foreign language by the participants.

The data demonstrate that the valued school disciplines are those in which students relate to their life projects or objectives. The ideas of Dewey (1978) about the importance of continuity of school experiences can be extended to the understanding of this category. The nature of the true educative experience involves continuity and interaction between the person who learns and what is learned. The character of continuity of the experiences given by the present development, with possibilities of future unfolding, is an extremely important aspect in the context of the identification and accomplishment of vital projects. Once projects are targeted at the future, they imply a perspective in which the subject is capable of conjugating the present moment with the openness to the new, having the future plans in mind.

Considerations

The research allows reflection about the role of school in the life of students. Listening to the perception and the value that students attribute to school experiences can contribute to the construction of a more meaningful curriculum articulated to the plans of the youngsters. Here we refer again to the ideas of Ortega y Gasset (1983), to whom the world is the vital possibilities each individual has. Thus, expanding the possibilities and experiences at school can contribute significantly to the identification of life projects.

The place occupied by students at school continues to be chiefly that of the classroom. The experiences that happen within this space (development of curriculum contents, seminars and debates) are identified by the vast majority of participants as important to life projects.

If, on the one hand, the valuation of curriculum disciplines and activities in the classroom allows us to say that, despite all criticism made to the lack of relation between what is taught at school and daily life, the students managed to find meaning in what they live, on the other hand, we cannot fail to recognize that the activities that favor the protagonism of students (participation in projects and activities of cultural entertainment) are important to an education that aims at autonomy, the development of responsibility and the commitment to subjects that involve collective interests. Experiences of this nature still occupy a secondary position in the students' formation.

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Note

1 “[...] tanto vale decir que vivimos como decir que nos encontramos en un ambiente de posibilidades determinadas, a este ámbito suele llamarse las circunstancias. Mundo es el repertorio de nuestras posibilidades vitales” (Ortega y Gasset, 1983, p. 71).

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Appendix A – Summary of the Questionnaire

This questionnaire is an abridged version of the one that was employed in the research, because the complete instrument comprised 28 questions, and can be consulted in the dissertation entitled *Projetos de vida e escola: a percepção de estudantes do ensino médio sobre a contribuição das experiências escolares aos seus projetos de vida* (Klein, 2011).

1. Please mark the appropriate alternative. I agree to take part in the research.

() Yes () No

2. What is your sex?

3. What is your age?

3. Characterization of participants

4. Thinking about the school activities in which you take part, do they contribute to your life project?

() Yes () No

5. If you answered yes in the previous question, explain why the school experiences contribute to your life project.

6. If you answered no in the previous question, explain why school experiences do not contribute to your life project.

7. Thinking about the disciplines you have at school, which ones contribute to your life project?

Life Projects of High School Young Students and School

Portuguese	Mathematics	Physics
Chemistry	Biology	Foreign language (English, Spanish)
Physical Education	Arts	Sociology
Philosophy	History	Geography
None	Others	Which ones?

8. Thinking about the disciplines that contribute to your life project, please explain why you consider them as important, and how they contribute to your life project.

9. Describe a situation you participated in your school that you consider being important to your life project. Please give details.