

ARTICLE

**YOUTH AND ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION: ON THE NON-PLACE OF THE  
PREPARATORY COURSE STUDENT**

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**ABSTRACT:** The text aims to understand the challenges and perspectives of young people from working-class backgrounds about the transition to higher education. It is based on fieldwork carried out in Brasília/Federal District in 2018 that draws on the application of more than two hundred questionnaires in community-based preparatory courses and interviews with twenty youngsters. The results indicate the existence of a non-place of a preparatory course student characterized by the absence of links between individuals and educational or work institutions. There is a friction between logics of action that contradictorily meet and combine in the statements of the interviewees: sometimes they perceive higher education as a vocation to be claimed through effort, sometimes as one among other opportunities to “chase after.” On one hand, meritocratic perspectives stimulate them to invest in options of programs, careers, and institutions that are more daring, allegedly related to their personal vocation; on the other hand, the successive failures in the transition attempts or the previous difficulties in their school trajectories force them to opt for more pragmatic paths, reproducing logics of “knowing how to get by” that mark their experiences beyond the educational field. This discussion elucidates how the expansion process of higher education has responded to a change in the way that access to education itself is understood.

**Keywords:** higher education, inequalities, meritocracy, sociology of youth.

## **JUVENTUDE E ACESSO AO ENSINO SUPERIOR: SOBRE O NÃO LUGAR DE VESTIBULANDO<sup>12</sup>**

**RESUMO:** O texto objetiva entender os desafios e as perspectivas de jovens de camadas populares sobre a transição para o ensino superior. Baseia-se em um trabalho de campo realizado em Brasília/Distrito Federal no ano de 2018 que contou com a aplicação de mais de 200 questionários em cursinhos pré-vestibulares comunitários e entrevistas com 20 vestibulandos. Os resultados indicam a existência de um não lugar de vestibulando caracterizado pela ausência de vínculos entre os indivíduos e as instituições de ensino ou de trabalho. Há uma fricção entre lógicas de ação que se encontram e se combinam contraditoriamente nas falas dos jovens: ora percebe-se o ensino superior como uma vocação a ser reivindicada pelo esforço, ora como uma entre outras oportunidades para se “correr atrás”. Por um lado, perspectivas meritocráticas estimulam os jovens a investirem em opções de cursos, carreiras e instituições mais ousadas, alegadamente relacionadas à sua vocação pessoal; por outro lado, os sucessivos fracassos nas tentativas de transição ou as dificuldades prévias em suas trajetórias escolares os forçam a optarem por caminhos mais pragmáticos, reproduzindo lógicas de “viração” que marcam suas experiências para além do campo educacional. Essa discussão elucidada de que forma o processo de expansão do ensino superior respondeu por uma alteração na maneira pela qual o próprio acesso à educação é entendido.

**Palavras-chave:** educação superior, desigualdades, meritocracia, sociologia da juventude.

## **JÓVENES Y ACCESO A LA EDUCACIÓN SUPERIOR: SOBRE EL NO LUGAR DEL ESTUDIANTE DEL CURSO PREPARATORIO**

**RESUMEN:** El texto pretende comprender los retos y las perspectivas de los jóvenes de los estratos populares sobre la transición a la educación superior. Se basa en un trabajo de campo realizado en Brasilia/Distrito Federal en el año 2018 que contó con la aplicación de más de doscientos cuestionarios en cursos preuniversitarios comunitarios y entrevistas con veinte postulantes. Los resultados indican la existencia de un no-lugar de postulante caracterizado por la ausencia de vínculos entre los individuos y las instituciones educativas o laborales. Hay una fricción entre lógicas de acción que se encuentran y combinan contradictoriamente en los discursos de los jóvenes: a veces perciben la educación superior como una vocación que hay que reclamar con esfuerzo, a veces como una entre otras oportunidades para “correr detrás”. Por un lado, las perspectivas meritocráticas estimulan a los jóvenes a invertir en opciones de cursos, carreras e instituciones más atrevidas, supuestamente relacionadas con su vocación personal; por otro lado, los sucesivos fracasos en los intentos de transición o las dificultades previas en sus trayectorias escolares les obligan a optar por caminos más pragmáticos, reproduciendo lógicas de “arreglarse” que marcan sus experiencias más allá del ámbito educativo. Este debate aclara cómo el proceso de expansión de la enseñanza superior respondió a un cambio en la forma de entender el acceso a la educación en sí.

**Palabras clave:** educación superior, desigualdades, meritocracia, sociología de la juventud.

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<sup>1</sup> The translation of this article into English was funded by Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico - CNPq/Brasil.

<sup>2</sup>The Publishers participating in the open peer review process: Suzana dos Santos Gomes e Juliana Batista dos Reis.

## INTRODUCTION

In a metaphor known in sociological literature, Souza (2012) coins the term “battlers” to refer to what the author calls the “new working class”, in contrast to the thesis after 2003 of the formation of a “new middle class” in Brazil. This, described by Neri (2021) originally in 2008, would come from the increase in average population income because of the reduction in unemployment, the appreciation of the minimum wage, and income transfer policies, among other measures that would have generated mutations in the structure of classes in the country. However, according to Ribeiro and Carvalhaes (2020), the rapid anachronism of the phrase “new middle class”, after the economic crisis of the mid-2010s,<sup>3</sup> suggests that the interpretation that the increase in the standard of living of the popular classes meant, at best, an increase in their spending power. The growth of unemployment, combined with growing informality, has led to a drop in average income and erosion of family purchasing power, adding to a distrust regarding the reason for being of public power, which manifests in positions of rejection of the political sphere (CARVALHO, 2018). If there is a consensus that the brief period of prosperity of the last 20 years did not build a “new middle class”, it is more difficult to characterize what emerged from this process. Is there a new working class in Brazil? If so, what is new and what is old among the battlers?

Without the intention of exhausting these questions, this research seeks to understand the educational dimension of the battlers. A large portion of young people who graduated from high school in recent decades constitute a new generation of students who achieve the status of university entrance exam candidates (FELICETTI; MOROSINI; CABRERA, 2019). These are young women and men who represent the increase in the population’s average level of education and the increase in demand for university education, for whom the undergraduate diploma is now acquired “as a possible destination, although by no means probable, nor naturalized” (BONALDI, 2015, p. 30). These are young people who experience the growth in the number of places available in higher education, the adoption of affirmative action policies, the expansion of the social security network, and the predominance of the tertiary sector in the economy, at the same time as they perceive unemployment resulting from the recent crisis, the devaluation of higher education diplomas and imminent threats to the continuity of inclusive measures. Young people are the greatest thermometer of their time, paraphrasing Leccardi (2005, p. 45), and the time we have lived in Brazil from 2015 onwards reveals the disputes surrounding the present and future of this youth.

In Brasília – the focus of this article –, this situation becomes even more intriguing, as it is a federative unit with a strong vocation for higher education. At a national level, the net enrolment rate<sup>4</sup> for the population aged 18 to 24 exceeded the 25% level after 2018. According to a report by the National Institute of Educational Studies and Research Anísio Teixeira (INEP- *Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais*, 2020), this same rate evolved, in the Federal District (DF), from 38% in 2012 to 42% in 2019. Furthermore, 89% of young people from Brasilia who graduated from high school in 2012 obtained a place in higher education within five years of completing basic education, a percentage which makes Brasília among the five large municipalities with the highest secondary-to-tertiary education

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<sup>3</sup> From 2015 on, the Brazilian economy faced recession for two consecutive years. This scenario fueled political mobilizations for the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff (2011-2016), which ushered in strong political instability. Then, the election of Jair Bolsonaro (2019-2022) kept the country in a tense political climate, aggravated by the serious impacts of the covid-19 pandemic.

<sup>4</sup> Proportion of young people aged 18 to 24 who are currently or have already completed a degree;

transition rates and in the leadership among metropolises (SENKEVICS, 2021). Therefore, when approaching young people from the federal capital in search of a place in higher education, we are talking about a population that experiences a space-time of greatest access opportunities in national history.

Far from dismissing a closer look at inequalities, this finding, on the contrary, makes the perception of the limits and contradictions of expanding access to undergraduate education in the country more intriguing. If, on the one hand, the debate on the democratization of access has been guided by the recognition of the elitist nature of higher education, the selectivity of public universities, and the socioeconomic filter exercised both by competitive entrance exams and by tuition fees in the private sector (SANTOS, 2018), on the other hand, it is still interesting to see how these barriers, filters and constraints find or not some weakness in a scenario that has never been so favorable to the entry of these young people, at least according to tough national parameters.

In this sense, this text aims to discuss how young people understand access to higher education based on their experiences in the transition from secondary to higher education. To do so, we based on qualitative data from questionnaires and interviews in a case study in DF answered by young high school graduates who, in 2018, were in the condition of university entrance exams. Most of these, mostly linked to community-based preparatory courses<sup>5</sup>, had already experienced frustrations in at least one admission attempt and/or even interruptions in their school career in primary and secondary education. The way these young people deal with these elements reveals a conflict between the logic of action that combines and strains the young people's perspectives. There is, on the one hand, a meritocratic view of believing in effort as the key to entering higher education; and, on the other hand, a pragmatic orientation that emphasizes the importance of "chasing after it"<sup>6</sup>, that is, knowing how to take advantage of opportunities that arise, even if this means sacrificing or even ignoring long-term plans. This tension is explored to illuminate how educational expansion may have changed the very way in which higher education is understood by young applicants.

## YOUTH EDUCATIONAL AND LABOR CONTEXT

The expansion of access to higher education together with the continued participation of young people in the market makes it important to revisit the theme of combining study and work, as recommended by Guimarães (2020). The sociologist observes that the youth literature has increasingly warned of the "difficulty of reducing transitions to linear and unidirectional sequences that would take young people from leaving school to entering the job market and leaving the family home" (p. 466). No matter how many links are established with the study environment and/or workplace, there are a myriad of intermittent conditions open to experimentation. Because they are more exposed than adults to different instances of socialization, the youth immediately show the mutations in how society produces

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<sup>5</sup> Community-based preparatory courses, or "community prep courses," are educational programs designed to assist students, often from underprivileged backgrounds, in preparing for university entrance exams. These courses aim to provide a low-cost or free alternative to expensive private tutoring, helping to level the educational playing field and foster social inclusion. They typically rely on volunteer teachers or those willing to work for minimal pay and are supported through donations, partnerships, and community engagement. In addition to academic instruction, these prep courses may also offer career guidance and psychological support to address the various challenges their students may face in accessing higher education.

<sup>6</sup> The Brazilian concept of "*correr atrás*" translates to "chasing after" or "pursuing" and conveys the idea of actively and persistently seeking out opportunities, solutions, or improvements in one's personal or professional life. It embodies a proactive and determined effort to achieve goals, overcome challenges, or advance one's current situation. In a work context, it might involve job hunting, acquiring new skills, or starting a business, while personally, it could mean striving to fulfill dreams or objectives, such as buying a home or earning a degree.

individuals (DAYRELL, 2007). We are particularly interested in how the expansion of higher education over the last three decades reshapes such experiences.

Naming young people as representatives of a first generation that reaches or struggles to reach university courses should not hide the costs and difficulties of this process. Without slipping into romanticization, the journey of each of them is painful and has an uncertain outcome. Family support, far from being given, is negotiated, as the experience of occupying this uncertain position between leaving high school and entering higher education “has no bearing on the family repertoire” (ABRAMO; VENTURI; CORROCHANO, 2020, p 536). For many fathers and mothers, this waiting time between the two levels of education is hardly understandable and, therefore, not very legitimized. Hence the pressure to enter the job market, reproducing choices that would have been made by the previous generation faced with the same impasses. This tension experienced by young people refers to the particularities of youth's insertion in the job market and, more specifically, to this insertion after the 2015-2016 economic crisis.

In a panoramic view from 1960 to 2010, Guimarães, Barone, and Brito (2015) argue that there was a reconfiguration of the labor market in Brazil: industrial and service activities became predominant over agricultural ones, in increasingly concentrated urban spaces; the economic active population had its profile changed with the massive participation of women; and the qualification of the workforce increased in parallel with the decline in the work of children and adolescents. These transformations in labor relations, in Brazil and other developing countries, were associated with a “huge contingent of workers who seemed to have no place in formal and regulated labor relations”, in the words of Abílio (2014, p. 57). This was evident in the pandemic scenario due to the difficulty in locating masses of workers to pay for emergency aid, as the protection network was designed for formal employees with minimum experience. However, long before the pandemic exposed such weaknesses, literature was already calling into question an understanding of labor relations centered on the notion of formality and which insisted on understanding the informal contingent as residual or temporary (ABÍLIO, 2014).

Between 1981 and 2010 – decades marked by re-democratization, currency stabilization, anti-poverty policies, gradual reduction in income inequalities, and low economic growth – the proportion of the workforce with some formal employment increased from 46% to 55%, both in registered salary contracts and individual contributions to social security (COMIN, 2015). This situation reinforces the impression that, for most Brazilian young people and adults, the reality of the job market has always been closer to instability than security, precariousness than protection, and, therefore, is crossed by “comings and goings and constantly trying to make a living” (CORROCHANO, 2014, p. 211). From this comes Telles' (2006) diagnosis that the “getting by”<sup>7</sup> is a constitutive feature of Brazilian society – a colloquial term that defines “the provisional nature of occupations that guarantee survival [...], 'gig' and occupations that are extremely vulnerable people that structure the lives of many people” (ABÍLIO, 2014, p. 14). Without employment contracts, or even without the guarantee of obtaining them shortly, what matters to many Brazilians is “chasing after it”, a mantra that is popularly said to represent the DNA of our people.

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<sup>7</sup> The concept of “getting by” (in Portuguese: *viruação*), in the context of sociology of work, refers to the various informal and often ad hoc strategies that individuals or families employ to sustain themselves economically when formal employment opportunities are scarce or insufficient. This may include odd jobs, street vending, temporary work, or any small-scale entrepreneurial activities that can be quickly adapted to the changing economic circumstances. “Getting by” captures the essence of survival through ingenuity and flexibility in the face of economic precarity.

These difficulties in secure, stable, and qualified insertion in the market are amplified when it comes to young people. Among the population aged 15 to 29, the economic recession triggered in recent years almost doubled the unemployment rate, which went from 15.1% to 24.9% between the first quarters of 2015 and 2017, respectively (CORSEUIL; FRANCA; POLOPONSKY, 2020). Once without a job, the probability of young people remaining in this condition increases, which results in an increase in long-term unemployment and discouragement, respectively, at around 38.0% and 4.5% after the height of the recession, in a scenario before the pandemic, whose consequences on youth are presumably negative.

What can we expect from this situation, worsened by the crisis, regarding the employment and educational situation of Brazilian youth? Two points deserve attention. The first is the increasing difficulty of exercising the labor market moratorium to some degree, that is, postponing entry into the market, generally for educational purposes (SPOSITO; TARÁBOLA, 2017). If, on the one hand, work should not be opposed to studying as if they were two exclusionary conditions, on the other hand, it also cannot be deduced that the deterioration of jobs is not a factor compromising school attendance and the cultivation of perspectives long-term (GUIMARÃES; BRITO; COMIN, 2020). As Corrochano (2014, p. 213) describes the figure of the “young worker” is not strange to Brazilian society; What's new is that this young person can now dream of studying – the paths are multiples and, often, it is the study that must be reconciled with work, and not the other way around (COMIN; BARBOSA, 2011).

On the other hand, this reflection should not nullify the criticism that the occupations of peripheral youth are the most precarious link in the production chain, a situation manifested in fragile work relations. This leads us to the second point regarding the effects of the crisis on youth: transformations in the job market have intensified the need to “get by” through the phenomenon of “uberization”.<sup>8</sup> The consequence of this is the erosion, in recent times, of the so-called “salary society”. More than the predominance of one type of employment relationship, the wage society must be understood as a form of social integration in which wage employment – with regular remuneration, working hours, labor rights, and social protection – gave the political and cultural contours of the full employment (ABÍLIO, 2014): everyone earns a salary, everyone has professions, everyone pays taxes, and everyone enjoys a safety net.

The provisional solution of distributive conflicts sponsored by the State in a market society demonstrates that even the timidness of income redistributions comes up against class conflicts and the economic imperatives of accumulation, so the phenomenon of the Euro-American welfare state presents as an exception, although it remains on our horizons as the rule. As an exception, it must be interpreted in the wake of Piketty (2014) as a historical accident, the product of specific historical circumstances that do not allude either to secular modernization trends or to the intrinsic logic of the current phase of global capitalism. The argument we intend to emphasize throughout the text is: that the extent of the “getting by” indicates a new social dynamic that is experienced by young people before any other group and has a strong impact on their prospects for access to higher education.

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<sup>8</sup> “Uberization names a new form of control, management and organization of work, in which workers become nano entrepreneurs of themselves [...] devoid of rights and guarantees, at the same time that they bear the risks and costs of their activity, self-manage and are subordinated to application companies [...] in ways that are more difficult to recognize and map” (ABÍLIO, 2019, p. 7).

## FIELDWORK

This text is based on empirical research developed by Senkevics (2021) in 2018 using questionnaires and interviews. The questionnaire, applied based on a non-probabilistic sample, aimed to survey the sociodemographic and educational characteristics of students on community pre-university courses in the DF, to select possible interviewees for the next stage of fieldwork. Visits to community prep courses were motivated by the fact that they are a space that brings together young people from working-class backgrounds engaged in the transition to higher education.

Three courses – identified as Alpha, Beta, and Gama<sup>9</sup> – were visited. In common, they depend on voluntary work by teachers and are free for those who attend. The first of them is in a central region of Brasília, well served by infrastructure and public transport, in the building of a private college, and offers four classes distributed as follows: one in the morning, two in the afternoon, and one in the evening. The Beta course is part of a social project aimed at youth from vulnerable territories. It is located close to the center of a large administrative region and has a single class at night. Finally, the Gama course is also located in a large administrative region, however, in a peripheral location, and its classes take place exclusively on Saturdays on the premises of a public school in the region. Across the three institutions, 208 questionnaires were answered.

The second stage of the research consisted of interviews following a semi-structured script with 20 young people selected from among those who responded to the questionnaire and agreed to participate, providing their contact details. Its objective was to investigate a set of questions about the difficulties of obtaining a place in higher education, such as: what efforts young people have made to make the transition; how long they have been pursuing entry; with what economic, social, and personal costs; and how their life perspectives have been shaped by the possibilities of success or failure. The interviews were conducted by the first author of the study, lasted an average of one hour, were recorded with the consent of the respondents, and were transcribed by a hired professional. Almost all interviews took place at the prep courses or in their surroundings – the exceptions were the interviews with Camila, which took place in an evangelical church, and with Tales, in a mall, to better accommodate their routines.

To select interviewees, we prioritized high school graduates who preferably had never entered higher education, although they had already tried to access it. Furthermore, the sample was diverse, choosing young people with experience in trying to enter and with different socioeconomic characteristics, school trajectories, and course aspirations. Chart 1 summarizes the main characteristics of the interviewees.

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<sup>9</sup> Names of institutions and individuals are fictitious for the purpose of confidentiality.

Chart 1 – Profile of young high school graduates interviewed – Federal District, 2018

Name	Prep course, shift	Gender	Skin color/race	Age	Year of completion of high school	Occupation	Residence
Alane	Alfa, afternoon	F	Brown	19	2017	Dance teacher	Brazlândia
André	Beta, evening	M	Brown	25	2015	Hawker	Ceilândia
Beatriz	Alfa, evening	F	White	20	2016	Administrative assistant	Cidade Ocidental
Camila	N/A	F	Brown	20	2016	-	Riacho Fundo II
Catarina	Alfa, morning	F	Brown	19	2016	Test supervisor	Sobradinho II
Douglas	Alfa, morning	M	Asian	19	2016	-	Asa Sul
Fabiana	Alfa, morning	F	White	23	2013	Private teacher	Varjão
Gabriel	Gama, Saturdays	M	Brown	19	2017	Election pamphlet	Ceilândia
Giulia	Alfa, afternoon	F	Brown	21	2016	Young apprentice	Itapoã
Graça	N/A	F	Brown	20	2017	Child monitor	Ceilândia
Ivan	Alfa, evening	M	Brown	21	2018	-	São Sebastião
Joana	Beta, evening	F	Brown	19	2017	-	Ceilândia
Jussara	Alfa, morning	F	Brown	20	2016	-	São Sebastião
Kátia	Alfa, afternoon	F	Brown	21	2016	-	Planaltina
Lavínia	Alfa, afternoon	F	Brown	21	2017	-	Itapoã
Luana	Beta, evening	F	Brown	21	2015	Store Attendant	Samambaia
Luciano	Alfa, afternoon	M	White	20	2017	Young apprentice	Paranoá
Mateus	Alfa, morning	M	White	20	2017	Test supervisor	São Sebastião
Paulo	Alfa, evening	M	Black	19	2017	-	Riacho Fundo II
Tales	N/A	M	Brown	20	2017	-	Paranoá

Source: Taken from Senkevics (2021).

Notes: Dashes (-) indicate non-exercise of paid activity. Acronyms and abbreviations: N/A - not applicable; F - female; M - male. All information was obtained through the respondent's self-declaration, through the questionnaire or interview.



There are important features that distinguish the profiles, trajectories, and perspectives of young people. However, some common elements can be highlighted. Almost all born to migrant parents with low education, most of the subjects are faced with anguish, fears, and expectations of what to do after completing basic education. When they work, they are in informal and admittedly temporary occupations; When they do not work, they sometimes negotiate a moratorium on entry into the market with their family, and sometimes they seek employment in a scenario of precariousness worsened by the crisis. Despite these difficulties, the young people interviewed make up a group that begins to find, in their circles of immediate relationships in the family, neighborhood, work, and school, concrete examples of those who managed to overcome the barriers of high school and university entrance exams.

Not surprisingly, most young people initially have relatively high ambitions to access graduation. Of the 20 interviewees, 14 indicated their intention to attend the University of Brasília (UnB), in various programs such as Medicine, Dentistry, Law, Economics, Performing Arts, and Pedagogy. Other young people aspiring to be doctors targeted institutions that seemed more accessible to them: the *Escola Superior de Ciências da Saúde* (ESCS) and the *Universidade Católica de Brasília* (hereinafter “Católica”), district and private establishments, respectively. Conditioned on obtaining a scholarship, two young people indicated their interest in attending *Universidade Paulista* (Unip) – a private college whose campus in DF was opened in 2000 – and, finally, one young man was willing to enroll in any degree course at any university.

### **BETWEEN MERIT AND “GET BY”**

Studying and planning are acts that permeate the experience of all interviewees. These are actions that imply individual attitudes of engagement with the explicit objective of being approved in the selection processes. Young people often declare how overwhelmed they feel, how much they must make sacrifices, and how alone they feel on this journey. However, they realize that there is an inescapable degree of protagonism in their actions. This is fertile ground for the cultivation of merit as a guiding principle of action, as can be seen in the following reports: “I really believe in meritocracy” (Douglas), “I just have to work hard until I succeed” (Paulo), “I’m trying hard enough” (Joana) and “if I have this dream, I have to fight for it” (Tales).

These notions are not disconnected from reality, as all these young people witness colleagues, friends, or family members going through the same experiences, with some succeeding and others not based on a set of observable factors, such as individual merit. After all, they make up a first generation that gives meaning to access or at least the dispute for it through struggle – “swimming against the current”, according to Luana. It is a fact that academic performance has an impact on the destiny of young people from popular classes, going so far as to compensate, to a certain extent, for socioeconomic disadvantages of origin and allowing these young people to have entry probabilities similar to those of young people from privileged backgrounds if they obtain excellence in the entrance exams (SENKEVICS; CARVALHAES; RIBEIRO, 2022). It is not enough, therefore, to infer that meritocracy is an ideology naturalized in youth as if it were exogenous to it; This ideology has a reason for being because it is empirically verified in the trajectories of the interviewees and their peers.

Not everyone, however, has the same ability to develop “grit” in search of success which seems unlikely. Fabiana, at 23 years old, after several years of studying and studying on her own, hears from some family members that “it is not possible for the son of a maid and a gardener to study Medicine” and that “if she had entered any course when she left school, she would already be graduating

and getting a job.” Like her, Joana and Mateus also suffered pressure to prioritize the public exam to the detriment of graduation; and Camila hears that it is more prudent to focus on a job. In other cases, it is not just about pressure coming from family members, but also a perception by the young person that it is possible to make better use of his time, by getting involved in some productive activity whose results are more tangible to him than remaining “in the limbo”, as Luciano described the uncertainties of the transition to higher education.

We can observe that in Ivan's speech, he mentioned that he was looking for work in the administrative area: “We send our resume, go after it and they said there will be an answer, but there never is.” Lavinia also faced difficulties in getting a job, regardless of the field. She reported that she had been looking for an internship or any other paid activity since she was 14 years old without success except for night work, which was unfeasible in terms of safety and travel. Gabriel did not hesitate to indicate that he would be willing to take on any occupation he could get. In the speech of these young people, confidence in meritocracy appears colored by the difficulties encountered and the selection processes have less centrality, since the priority is to provide a livelihood, whatever it may be and by any means, so the entrance exam is one among other alternatives that may arise in their lives.

In other words, the obstacles that the group of interviewees must deal with make them reflect, with greater or lesser emphasis, on whether it is worth insisting on the dream of accessing a degree. This insecurity is the point of tension between a meritocratic stance – of being obstinate, believing in oneself, making an effort, and being rewarded for the effort – and a pragmatic stance – of accepting the opportunities that arise through less demanding paths of study, negotiation, and planning; In this case, what is required is the pragmatism of choices that guarantee sustenance, with immediate return as well as courses and institutions that are easier to access.

An example of this is Gabriel's way of speaking, in doubt between the Administration and Law courses. The first is considered due to his experience in a bank branch; the second is at the encouragement of a television series. In practice, the tip of the scale would be whatever his performance allows. Regarding institutions, he also did not define priorities: “I wanted Católica or UnB because they are the best. But whatever comes, it's great.” To obtain a place, the boy reported that he would try any of the access policies: “I'll try Sisu, Prouni, Fies. [...] Whatever comes, is good.”. Ivan was another young man who was very open to possibilities, and reported that he never complained about the opportunities, who even showed gratitude for attending a course, even though he had to wake up very early on Saturdays.

In the semester following the interview, we discovered that the boy entered Information Technology Management at Unip with a scholarship. Like him, André also showed satisfaction with what he achieved: the Pedagogy course at a mass private college, replacing his original aspiration of Social Communication at UnB. Can it be concluded that both were successful in the middle-upper transition? Yes, considering that the metric of success, for them, at that time was visibly lower than that expressed by young people who were not satisfied with “any course” at “any university”, accepting to remain “in limbo” until they reached the expected result – case of Fabiana, Joana, Mateus, Catarina, Paulo, and others. For them, entering the desired career appeared as a right that they had and for which it was worth fighting. It was not about embracing any opportunity that arose, as not all of them would lead to the course most aligned with their alleged vocation within a prestigious university.

How far does this obstinacy go? In the interviews, they were asked how willing they were to try. Most of the time, the answers were similar: “until I succeed” (Lavinia), “until I enter” (Joana), and

“until I pass” (Paulo). However, often, these responses were soon relativized, giving way to alternative plans that, in practice, imply a lowering of initial aspirations, that is, a readjustment of expectations, when objective conditions are transformed into subjective hopes (NOGUEIRA; NOGUEIRA, 2016). In short, a set of factors – age, family negotiations, financial obstacles, insufficient performance, and experiences of failure – culminate to reduce the bet on their efforts, forcing them to look for alternatives. Even young people who are initially persistent tend to become pragmatic over time. This metamorphosis of expectations and practices reiterates that there is an ongoing process of incorporation of social structures (BOURDIEU, 2015): the objective barriers of the entrance exam are transformed into subjective barriers of self-exclusion and the readjustment of dispositions, the consequences of which are to horizontally stratify the courses and higher education institutions, that is, repeatedly assigning students from popular classes to the most accessible and, equally, least valued portions of the educational system (MONT'ALVÃO, 2016; CARVALHAES; RIBEIRO, 2019).

Thus, in this context of mass access to higher education, what can be seen in the speeches of young people is the friction between guiding principles of action, sometimes supported by the meritocratic values that the entrance exam encourages in schools and society, sometimes referred to as pragmatism of the “managing” that historically marks the school and professional experiences of the popular classes. These tensions say less about young people's willingness to try and more about their contexts and horizons, leading us to the next point, which deals with how young people understand responsibility for the successes or failures they have or will collect.

## **RESPONSIBILITY, BLAME AND FAILURE**

In the classic *Educação e Desenvolvimento Social no Brasil*, Cunha (1975) states that meritocracy is one of the pillars of so-called open societies, in which individuals have, in theory, the possibility of socially ascending due to their efforts, assured by liberal values of a republican state. From a theoretical point of view, the entrance exam fits perfectly into this category, as the competition it raises is dependent on the grade the candidate obtains in tests. However, due to its selective and exclusionary nature, the entrance exam leads to the production of a mass of losers, which must be understood as the by-product of the competition that feeds it. Out of mere modesty, the use of terms such as “losers” or “failures” is avoided, while at the same time exalting victory as if it had no counterpart.

The fact is that almost all the young people interviewed in this research are, to some extent, struggling with their failure. These are young people who have never had the opportunity to enroll in a degree course or to attend one, or they take the university entrance exam late because they face obstacles in completing basic schooling. How they perceive failure – and how they understand their responsibility in creating it – is a fundamental question to understand how they view the transition and the value they attribute to merit.

The first question to be answered is: is there an individualization of failure? In sociological theory, critical approaches to meritocratic ideology have highlighted that one of the consequences of educational expansion is the individual taking responsibility for not having managed to obtain a certain diploma, in a process of blaming the victim for their failure (SANDEL, 2021). Bourdieu and Champagne (2015, p. 248) argue that, based on the expansion of educational opportunities, school failure is increasingly experienced as a “catastrophe” in popular circles, as, if they fail, they are excluded from “more stigmatizing and more total than it was in the past: more stigmatizing, to the extent that apparently,

they had 'their chance' and to the extent that the definition of social identity tends to be done, in an increasingly complete way, by the school institution.”

The act of attributing responsibility for achieving success or failure to their actions is one consequence of many of the young people interviewed betting on their efforts as a means of being rewarded with a place in higher education. For example, Catarina understands the delay in gaining admission to graduation: “I didn't see anyone to blame but me. I couldn't blame my parents or my teachers; The only person I had to blame was myself.” In the same way, Mateus states that “I saw that whoever passed [the entrance exam] studied more than me and deserved more”. For these young people, the responsibility lies with themselves and cannot be attributed to the family, school, or prep course.

However, if, on the one hand, a meritocratic vision followed by self-responsibility is present in youth from the lower strata, on the other hand, this perspective does not seem sufficient to interpret the fieldwork. In most interviews, there is co-responsibility, in which the portion of responsibility that the individual attributes to himself is added to a portion shared with the school. This hybrid blaming is manifested in complaints directed at the school institution regarding the unpreparedness of its training and insufficient information about the selection processes. Not focusing on the entrance exam means not preparing them for the transition. This is exactly the opposite of what prep courses represent as an educational institution and as an instance of socialization (SENKEVICS; CARVALHO, 2023).

Not surprisingly, young people claim that the experience at the prep course is radically different from that experienced at school, both in terms of curriculum and teaching. There is criticism of the emptying of meaning in public education in favor of a vision that schools should prepare for selection processes. This complaint corroborates that some of the students demand a school with at least one explicit social function: ensuring approval in the entrance exam. Catarina sums it up like this: “With all the terrible educational system we have, we still must take tests. [...] Even if the school goes against this, at the end of the day, we still have entrance exams and Enem [National High School Exam- *Exame Nacional do Ensino Médio*] to take. And they don't prepare us.”

However, the interviewees fail to mention that they also bear some blame for the final product. Thus, alongside the denunciation of the school's insufficiencies, self-criticism and regrets are expressed such as “I didn't dedicate myself much” (Jussara), “I didn't dedicate myself enough” (Fabiana), “my lack of attitude” (Luciano) and “Now I'm much more diligent than I was a while ago” (Kátia). In this sense, criticism of the educational system and the school institution is not solely and simply because they did not learn the content necessary to take the tests or did not obtain sufficient information about the exams and careers. Above all, they recognize that the school process did not cultivate a student attitude in line with what is expected of a college student; They did not, therefore, become autonomous students. Given this, critical comments towards school are confused with a profound review of oneself: stop being naive, stop procrastinating, and stop playing around.

This research is not the first to raise criticisms that young people make of their educational trajectory and, particularly, of the school institution. This debate is at the heart of a broader complaint against the emptying of meaning in school, especially in secondary education (ARROYO, 2014). Because it is understood as a transitional stage, the non-place of the university entrance exam ends up extrapolating to the non-place that high school occupies in the lives of young people and the educational system. What is the ultimate goal of secondary education Access to university? To the job market? What preparation will the young person have when completing this stage? From the statements reproduced throughout the text, it can be deduced that there is little.

Making the school co-responsible for the failure in the secondary-to-tertiary education transition is a sign that a dimension of right is perceived, whether it is the right to a quality basic education, which prepares them for what comes after school, or access to the course that they aspire to in higher education – even through affirmative action programs, which are also understood as an earned right. In this sense, there is an association between an entrance exam attitude, merit, and educational rights. Because they are intricate, criticism of the school is not implied in the acceptance of failure. However, if the focus on merit carries the burden of responsibility, what weight does it carry for a young person who does not consider “passing the entrance exam” a central element of their life?

Of all those interviewed, the only one who did not criticize his past – whether it be his attitude as a student, the quality of the school or even, as some did, his social condition – was Gabriel. Despite having studied in schools that he recognizes as low quality and living in one of the poorest regions of the DF that he characterizes as violent and “horrible”, Gabriel did not point out anything that could have been different in his life: “I don’t think I have anything to complain about.” There is discomfort with the situation he lives in, but this discomfort coexists with resignation: “I didn’t look for it, I never chased for it”. Even if there is a feeling that something could have been different, this perception does not result in co-responsibility with the school or the educational system and falls exclusively on the young person. This interviewee seems to see less of a dimension of the right to higher education and to mobilize meritocratic values around study, discipline, and success less intensely. If one does not understand higher education as either a right or a reward for effort, how does one view access to this level? This leads us to the next section.

## **THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF A NON-PLACE**

Expanding higher education has the direct consequence of incorporating masses of people who previously did not attend it. It is difficult to imagine that the inclusion of new audiences does not generate, in addition to pedagogical challenges for educational institutions, divergences in the way access is understood. As admission to colleges and universities descends the social pyramid, reaching social strata hitherto never considered, the very importance of higher education is given new meaning. The value of diplomas, the prospect of pursuing a career, the perception of a right, the experience of transition, frustrated attempts to enter, and other elements that permeate the experience of those applying for admission are read with new perspectives.

By mobilizing the ideology of merit in the interpretation of their school trajectories, the interviewees are using a symbolic apparatus inherent to our model of society, although expanded and updated in recent times. Throughout their school life, the student is tested by exams and markings in class diaries; through internal and external assessments of the school environment; and the entrance exams. Outside of school, he continues to be evaluated at work, in relationships, and on social networks. Being evaluated and, consequently, rewarded or punished for their attitudes and judged for their results make up the gears of our society, with such depth that this logic starts to govern different (or perhaps all) spheres of life. It is not surprising, therefore, that this social organization raises a subjectivity that calls on the individual to be a “self-entrepreneur”: it is necessary to be rational, effective, engaged, and productive, as Dardot and Laval (2016) suggest.

Therefore, the perception that effort must be rewarded is not only perfectly understandable but also to some extent justifiable: performance on the Enem is an important predictive factor for access

to higher education (SENKEVICS; CARVALHAES; RIBEIRO, 2022). In practice, what these young people are seeking is to compensate for socioeconomic gaps through effort. The process of becoming a university entrance exam candidate is essentially meritocratic, and it could not be any different when what is at stake is performance in a test. The young people in whose speech this perspective predominated had ambitious plans: Law at UnB, Medicine at Católica; and vocational aspirations in certain courses at certain institutions. His future horizons were long-term and were guided by both the search for personal fulfillment and professional growth and career consolidation. Underlying these notions is the implicit search for stability, security, and prosperity. Therefore, the transition experience must be temporary and followed, if dedication is great enough, by success. From no place to a place in the sun.

However, this does not seem to be the only possible outcome. In a recent analysis, Guimarães, Brito, and Comin (2020) organized a typology of youth trajectories based on the results of a nationally representative survey. Among the six categories described, one of them is very similar to the young people interviewed here: “The newcomers” (GUIMARÃES; BRITO; COMIN, 2020, p. 482) comprise more than a fifth of the youth; are around 20 years old, and have little professional experience; they are struggling with the beginning of their working life and the university entrance exam; and are devoid of employment relationships and school certificates (vocational or higher education). The authors argue that:

[...] Leaving school at this age does not mean abandoning studies forever; Many will seek higher education at another point in their lives, but the range of possible choices at the beginning of their professional careers will certainly be conditioned by this educational deficit. (GUIMARÃES; BRITO; COMIN, 2020, p. 490)

A limited range of choices is a common denominator for all interviewees. If, on the one hand, there are young people who at least initially try to broaden their range of possibilities, on the other hand, there are those who initially seem to be operating within a short horizon. The harshness of everyday life – the imperative of guaranteeing some livelihood, the pressure to carry out paid work, and the difficulties in accessing higher education – is reinforced, in the same movement, by a bumpy school trajectory and the corrosion of the foundations on which alternative futures to the present experience could be constructed. The need to “get by” seems to undermine the possibilities of thinking about the future.

In this sense, the widespread “get by” in Brazilian society, aggravated by the deterioration of jobs after the economic crisis, erodes the very notion of “career” and, with it, a long-term life perspective. By undermining these two elements, it also compromises the importance of higher education, since it is balanced, on the one hand, by planning a professional career and, on the other, by a high opportunity cost. How to plan if the important thing is to get a job, in any area? How can you be personally fulfilled if what matters is “going to college”, regardless of the program or institution? How can you dedicate yourself to your studies if the guarantee of a living is a daily necessity? How can you obtain social mobility if the market only offers you precarious jobs and universities, an almost insurmountable barrier? How can we escape the non-place of transition if the alternative is the non-place of “get by”?

Far from being something exotic to the Brazilian reality, the need to “chase up” is part of the urban landscape of our cities. What can be considered emergent, then? On the one hand, this

widespread “get by” finds opportunities for expansion in scenarios of growing unemployment, increased poverty, and work deregulation, in which there is greater pressure for workers to engage in their enterprise (ABÍLIO, 2020); on the other hand, there is a naturalization of an entrepreneurial discourse in conjunction with the precariousness of work relationships. “Entrepreneurship values informal activities, those excluded from the business world and formal employment”, observe Tommasi and Corrochano (2020, p. 363) argue that the “virtues” of surviving in adversity are symbolically mobilized by the ideology of entrepreneurship, which tends to qualify the “get by” as potentially creative, bold, and innovative.

The implications of the deepening of this structural phenomenon go far beyond insertion into the job market. They concern the social position that young people occupy after or during the completion of basic school and, therefore, affect college entrance students in full, affecting the place of post-completion of secondary education, the transition to higher education and beyond it, and the impasses surrounding the transition to adult life. After all, what is “limbo” if not the absence of bonds, whatever they may be, and the guarantees of building them in the short or medium term? In line with Cardoso (2013, p. 296), we think that the tensions involving such young people, on the one hand, reflect large-scale youth unemployment and the occurrence of young people who complete or drop out of school and do not find opportunities to enter the labor market; on the other hand, they point to young people who can work, but who hope for a better occupation in the future and, in the meantime, seek to qualify professionally. Entering the market at around 18 years of age is not guaranteed, especially in the recessive context. Overcoming the entrance exam barrier is also uncertain. What we see, therefore, is that this border – often blurred – between unemployment, discouragement, “get by” and moratorium affects young people in transition like those interviewed, pioneers of their generation in juggling work and higher education.

## FINAL REMARKS

We carried out field research based on visits to community prep courses in the Federal District, Brazil, to understand the perspectives of young people from working classes on the transition to higher education. Throughout the text, we seek to demonstrate that the democratization of higher education, with the incorporation of increasingly representative contingents of the population, has increased the tension between a meritocratic logic, of rewarding effort, and a pragmatic logic, of chasing opportunities. They meet and combine contradictorily in the speeches of young people: both those who from the starting point no longer plan a long-term career and move in the transition between high school and higher education using the grammar of change – any diploma is worth it, in any area – as well as those who try a specific career, insist and plan for the long term. The latter emphasizes a meritocratic logic in that they believe that with a lot of effort, they will succeed, but successive failures can push them towards more flexible options and pragmatic choices.

These young battlers – to use Souza’s (2012) formulation – are not new to Brazil; higher education is what is new for them. It is no coincidence that the incorporation of youth masses into it has come up against certain limits in recent years, perhaps because we have reached the core of these social relations, that is, the structural limits of Brazilian society.

In short, in the clash between meritocratic and pragmatic principles of action, the former points to the tradition of higher education, to the selective logic of access, and the long-term plans of professional careers – increasingly threatened by the new configurations of the work, little by little more

unstable, precarious, and insecure, even for those with a higher education degree. It's a logic that allows us to look to the future but through the rearview mirror. A future based on an idea of access and rights, which depends on individual efforts to compensate for gaps in their class of origin and which aims to reap the uncertain fruits of an unequal market, with gradually devalued diplomas and persistent, if not increasing informality. If these perspectives seem uncertain and unlikely, it is even more difficult to understand how college students move and what forces they respond to when they realize they have “no future”.

To conclude, the pragmatic stance reflects a condition already present at the base of the social pyramid, but which has extended to the rest of society: the widespread “get by” and the erosion of the notions of career and salary. By presenting as university entrance candidates, young people from popular backgrounds make visible the fragility of their social positions, this time in a transition for which they had never been considered until then. Therefore, the non-place that affects them is not that of transition, limbo, or waiting time; it is broader, it is a non-place of life, of a sphere of rights repeatedly denied, of the impossibility of building a long-term future perspective. These are young people who are acting within the possible logic of a model of society in ruins, of the search for opportunities in a paradoxical period in which the greatest coverage of access to higher education in the country's history was achieved and, at the same time, they rose the adversities in obtaining a formal job with a career perspective.

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**Submitted on:** 10/31/2022

**Approved:** 08/30/2023

## **CONTRIBUTION OF THE AUTHORS:**

Author 1 - Development of fieldwork, data analysis, text writing, and review of the final writing.

Author 2 - Project advisor, data analysis and text writing.

## **DECLARATION OF CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest with this article.

## **DECLARATION OF APPROVAL BY THE ETHICS COMMITTEE**

The Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education of the University of São Paulo analyzed the materials presented relating to this research, authored by the doctoral student Adriano Souza Senkevics, supervised by Prof. Dr. Marília Pinto de Carvalho. It considered, on August 2, 2018, that the research complies with all the requirements and determinations of CNS Resolution 510/2016 on Ethics in Research with Human Beings.