

# Reforma do Ensino Médio: contexto, implicações e retrocessos iluminados pelo positivismo no silenciamento das diferenças

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#### **RESUMO**

O artigo procura refletir sobre a Reforma do Ensino Médio brasileiro enquanto política pública de educação consolidada pelo presidente interino Michel Temer em um contexto de busca do progresso econômico e sob a perspectiva neoliberal. A presença do neoliberalismo nas políticas públicas educacionais remonta da retomada da democracia após o período ditatorial (1964-1984), justificada pela necessidade de adequar o ensino brasileiro àquilo preconizado pelos órgãos e instituições internacionais. O contexto da reforma é retomado com o objetivo de elucidar como se desenvolveu a articulação entre educação e proposta neoliberal com matiz positivista, bem como quais formações subjetivas almejavam-se com esta. Optou-se por uma leitura crítica do PL 6.840/2013, dos planos de governo de Dilma Rousseff e Aécio Neves na campanha presidencial de 2014; da MP 746/2016 e da Lei 13.415/2017.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Reforma do Ensino Médio. Educação. Neoliberalismo.

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#### **ABSTRACT**

The aim of this article is to reflect on the Brazilian Secondary Education Reform as a public education policy consolidated by interim president Michel Temer in a context of seeking economic progress and from a neoliberal perspective. The presence of neoliberalism in public education policies dates back from the return to democracy after the dictatorial period (1964-1984), justified by the need to adapt Brazilian education to what was advocated by international bodies and institutions. The context of the reform is revisited to elucidate how the articulation between education and the positivist neoliberal proposal developed, as well as what subjective formations were intended. We opted for a critical reading of Draft Law # 6.840/2013, the government plans of Dilma Rousseff and Aécio Neves in the 2014 presidential campaign; Provisional Measure # 746/2016 and Law # 13.415/2017.

KEYWORDS: Secondary Education Reform. Education. Neoliberalism.



## Reforma de la Enseñanza Media: contexto, implicaciones y retrocesos a la luz del positivismo en el silenciamiento de las diferencias

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#### **RESUMEN**

El artículo busca analizar la Reforma de la Enseñanza Media brasileña como política pública de educación consolidada por el presidente interino Michel Temer en un contexto de búsqueda de progreso económico y desde una perspectiva neoliberal. La presencia del neoliberalismo en las políticas públicas de educación se remonta al retorno a la democracia después del período dictatorial (1964-1984), justificado por la necesidad de adecuar la educación brasileña a lo que preconizaban organismos e instituciones internacionales. Se revisa el contexto de la reforma para dilucidar cómo se desarrolló la articulación entre la educación y la propuesta positivista neoliberal, así como a qué formaciones subjetivas apuntaba. Optamos por una lectura crítica del Proyecto de Ley 6.840/2013, los planes de gobierno de Dilma Rousseff y Aécio Neves en la campaña presidencial de 2014; la MP 746/2016 y la Ley 13.415/2017.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Reforma de la Enseñanza Media. Educación. Neoliberalismo.



#### Introduction

Thinking about educational policies presents a significant challenge for research in the field of education, as it involves key issues such as teacher training, curriculum design, school management, and the community in which the school is located. Changes to any of these aspects imply a restructuring of the organization of schools a restructuring that is often driven by the interests of specific political groups within a given historical context. We believe that change is necessary. However, the lack of articulation with teachers, students, and school administrators, as well as the disconnection from the actual educational context in Brazil, has frequently led to reforms based on misconceptions, ultimately failing to achieve their goals and leaving behind remnants that persist for years.

Another important issue is that such policies and changes are often framed as government programs that is, with a predefined period of validity limited to the duration of a political mandate. This generates gaps following changes in administration, reinforcing the discontinuity of what was originally proposed as a gradual improvement process rather than a long-term State policy. These constant restarts generate tensions and foster disbelief within schools, as they increase the likelihood that education professionals will not believe in the reforms and, consequently, will not commit to implementing them, precisely because they know such reforms are temporary and will most likely be discontinued.

In this sense, this paper aims to carry out a critical analysis of the context in which the current proposal for high school reform was developed, reflecting on the historical factors that shaped it, the implications of its implementation, and offering reflections on how schools experience and internalize these reforms, as well as the potential consequences for the role of schools in Brazil.

#### **Education in Neoliberal Contexts**

Debates surrounding the need for reform of Brazilian upper secondary education require a reflection that considers this issue within the broader scope of the neoliberal socioeconomic changes implemented in Brazil since the 1990s. These changes have promoted the demand for a more flexible high school model, one that aims to prepare individuals to better adapt to a society marked by insecurity particularly in relation to the labor market (Moehlecke, 2012).

Still within the administration of then-President Fernando Henrique Cardoso whose political actions were endorsed under the scrutiny of the World Bank public policies were expected to align with the neoliberal agenda. The greater the alignment, the more favorable the conditions for the



release of funding. As highlighted by Pinto (2002), privatizing interests advanced in tandem with the educational reforms that took place during the 1990s. Of particular note is the Law of Guidelines and Bases for National Education (Brasil, 1996).

Public education policies emerge, in part, from popular demands but, above all, from the ideologies and political influences that define an educational ideal and seek, through legal means, to implement it within the concrete realities of each country. Such implementation typically sets short-, medium-, and long-term goals, and attempts to secure agreements among various political parties in order to be enforced. Since the final decades of the twentieth century a period when neoliberalism has manifested as the new globalized face of capitalism there has been a notable focus on public education policies. As Jacomeli states:

[...] in the capitalist societal project, the school curriculum serves as an effective means for disseminating ideologies that support the implementation of a dominant worldview. In many of the crises that capitalism has faced or is facing, education is elevated to the State's foremost sphere of attention, in an attempt to reorder that very society (2010, p. 77).

The OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) plays an important role in this context. This international organization promotes comparisons of economic policies among various countries and, since 2000, has coordinated the administration of PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) in more than 70 countries, establishing a global ranking of nations with the highest-performing education systems.

By creating an educational metric through an international assessment tool, a single standard of schooling is imposed one that, from an international perspective, is deemed essential for regional development at the expense of local specificities (sociocultural, demographic, and related to gender and class).

However, this notion of development is closely tied to neoliberal capitalism and the interests of the corporate sector. According to Silva and Ortigão, "in Brazil, the direct effects of PISA are still somewhat unclear, as they intersect with other neoliberal reformist policies that shape curricular practices through regulatory mechanisms, particularly with the establishment of external evaluation systems" (2022, p. 115).

These forms of curriculum standardization across the entire country disregard the countless particularities of each region, thereby massifying and homogenizing which forms of knowledge are to be taught. As a result, schools will produce future adults shaped by this single system of citizenship



Secondary Education Reform: context, implications and setbacks under the light of positivism in the silencing of differences formation an uncritical one which we understand here as a reinforcement of the State's positivist character.

Based on the results of this type of neoliberal assessment, numerous reform proposals emerge, often aiming to empty the potential for an emancipatory education. These proposals tend to offer terminological changes without making meaningful progress on the educational issues that genuinely require transformation (Santomé, 2013). Reform ideas are presented as miraculous alternatives that would supposedly place the education systems of underdeveloped or developing countries on the same level of quality as those of economically advanced nations. However, it is important to recall that the very notion of quality must be rethought, considering that, as Ferreira affirms, "quality education is intrinsically linked to the transformation of reality, to the full construction of citizenship, and to the guarantee of human rights" (2017, p. 297).

José Mendonça Filho, then Minister of Education under the Michel Temer administration and current rapporteur of the new High School reform<sup>4</sup>, stated that the 2015 PISA results achieved during his tenure at the Ministry confirmed the failure of Brazilian education. In a superficial manner, he criticized important educational policies with emancipatory and multicultural aims, such as the Science Without Borders program, which enabled Brazilian university students to take courses abroad through financial aid for their "sandwich degrees," and the More Education program, which aimed to extend the school day to provide more comprehensive learning in Portuguese language and mathematics. According to him, the criticism of the High School Reform "is the result of misinformation, corporatist pressure, and political and ideological disagreement"<sup>5</sup>.

By discrediting expert criticism of the High School Reform despite the undeniable precarization and the diminishing of the school's role as a space of care, promotion of diversity, and appreciation of critical thinking Mendonça Filho sought to delegitimize scholars and educators by reducing their critiques to mere political-ideological disagreement. Clearly, his primary interest was to meet the demands of the neoliberal market and corporate sectors in education, particularly within a broader context of sweeping reforms of the Brazilian State that severely depleted its role in ensuring social protection through privatizing interventionist policies.

This new social, political, and economic project, grounded in neoliberalism, manifested through a new and aggressive neoliberal offensive, and education has become central to the

<sup>5</sup> Available at <a href="https://epoca.globo.com/educacao/noticia/2016/12/mendonca-filho-pisa-mostra-o-fracasso-retumbante-da-nossa-educacao.html">https://epoca.globo.com/educacao/noticia/2016/12/mendonca-filho-pisa-mostra-o-fracasso-retumbante-da-nossa-educacao.html</a> access 11 jul. 2024

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Available at <a href="https://www.camara.leg.br/noticias/1081896-camara-aprova-mudancas-na-reforma-do-ensino-medio">https://www.camara.leg.br/noticias/1081896-camara-aprova-mudancas-na-reforma-do-ensino-medio</a> access 11 jul. 2024



realization of this project" (Borges, 2020, p. 20). In light of this, Gallo (2012, 2015) draws attention to the governmentalization of the Brazilian State, particularly after the end of the civil-military dictatorship and the introduction of the notion of citizenship in official documents. According to the author, it is at this point that public policies begin to focus on shaping individuals, using citizenship formation as their point of departure. Nevertheless, he also argues that official educational documents place particular emphasis on early childhood as a fundamental foundation for this formation.

To reform, therefore, becomes a slogan that gains traction, and by suggesting continuity implying the improvement of a preexisting reality it manages to garner support from a wide range of political sectors. However, the word itself becomes a euphemism, used to perpetuate certain practices that associate schools with the labor market and, in current contexts, to subject them to corporate interests. We agree with Santomé when he states:

Educational reforms are often the mask used to conceal hidden agendas and intentions that governments are unwilling to acknowledge publicly. Yet their true motivations and effects become clearly visible in the allocation of public institutional resources for the implementation of such reforms; in the subjects and content presented as innovations or reinforced; in the transformations of teacher training models; in the teaching materials promoted; in the support and cooperation networks offered to in-service teachers; as well as in the new responsibilities assigned to school administrators and educational inspection services (Santomé, 2013, p. 180-181).

Reformist enthusiasm does not always take into account that public education policies in recent decades have failed to engage young people or motivate them to study, largely because they were not included in the process of developing these new educational policies. By choosing to follow statistics and data that point to the failure of the education system without listening to the voices of the youth who actually attend school these policies tend to fall short of any goals other than those set by major corporate groups, which demand labor from the very outset of policy design.

A considerable portion of Brazilian youth is indeed interested in school, but they often perceive it as a space for various activities not necessarily aligned with the purposes to which the institution anachronistically still claims to be committed (Santomé, 2013). For this reason:

it is not merely a matter of changing the high school curriculum, but of connecting knowledge to the complex and diverse realities of young people, and of integrating teachers' work into collective pedagogical practices that are genuinely committed to deepening scientific and cultural complexity (Ferreira, 2017, p. 297).

Because the changes proposed by the High School Reform fail to recognize the school as a space for fostering critical thinking and social emancipation focusing instead on serving neoliberal



Secondary Education Reform: context, implications and setbacks under the light of positivism in the silencing of differences interests in the precarization of labor and work relations they consequently generate crises of hopelessness among young people, who do not feel engaged in their own educational processes.

The resistance shown by students reveals the extent to which the school continues to function as a space for the production of docile bodies (Foucault, 1999). Reforms implemented without consulting those who will actually experience them the primary stakeholders in the quality of education risk becoming nothing more than a consensual maneuver by neoliberal politics to subordinate education to current market demands.

However, what meets the needs of the market today may not do so in the future. As a result, we may end up with a "poorly educated" population, incapable of engaging with the present moment, due to the uncritical positivist nature of reforms promoted by specific sectors of Brazilian society particularly those aligned with neoliberal and privatization lobbies in the National Congress.

Thus, when educational reforms respond more to market demands than to pedagogical needs, they inevitably produce students/workers alienated from their own realities—standing in stark contrast to the vision of Professor Paulo Freire, the Patron of Brazilian Education. For Freire, the school should be a privileged space for the collective construction of critical consciousness, for respect toward differences, and for the emancipation of individuals (Freire, 1979, 1998, 2002). Nevertheless, the elected representatives of Brazilian society directly attack Freire's emancipatory legacy by attributing the country's educational challenges to a supposed application of Freirean pedagogy in Brazilian schools.

We also observe a shift in the understanding of knowledge itself. From the perspective of globalized neoliberal capitalism, knowledge is increasingly tied to economic productivity and serves as a support for the operations of multinational corporations. Knowledge is no longer understood as a common good but rather as an essential tool for fulfilling the demands of the market, which now acts as a sort of grand administrator of democratic societies (Santomé, 2011). In the face of the State's subservience to the market, it is the latter that comes to dictate the direction of nations. As Marrach observes, the objectives of neoliberalism in relation to education can be summarized in three main points:

Linking school education to preparation for work and academic research to the imperatives of the market or the needs of free enterprise; making the school a means of transmitting its doctrinal principles; making the school a market for the products of the Cultural Industry and Information Technology. (2009, p. 234-235).



These neoliberal objectives are closely tied to a positivist view of education—one that seeks access to a single, unquestionable truth through experience, an experience produced by the neoliberal State itself. This governmentalization of the State from a neoliberal perspective manifests through corporate lobbying, the drafting of new legislation influenced by the "owners of capital," and the involvement of private institutions interested in the benefits resulting from these new regulatory frameworks. An example of this can be seen in the appointment of Secretaries of Education linked to private capital enterprises, as in the cases of the state governments of Paraná and São Paulo in this decade, with their adoption of digital education systems.

Moreover, the persistence of a colonialist logic within the Brazilian State hinders access to and retention in schools for a significant portion of the population, consequently making it difficult to grasp the structural problems that have been present throughout the country's historical development. As marginalized groups are excluded from a critical educational process, Silva points out that "within capitalist society, knowledge has become a component of a bureaucratic structure, an instrument for the domination of the exploited classes, in which thinking and decision-making are privileges reserved for an elite" (2010, p. 80). Furthermore, by distancing those subalternized by capital especially Black and Brown populations from the school environment, the institution itself ceases to be heterogeneous and diverse, thereby creating even greater challenges for it to become a space that welcomes alternative ways of life. In doing so, the school instead becomes a privileged site for the mass production of neoliberal subjectivity.

Also aligned with positivist ideals is the notion of knowledge as having an immediate, utilitarian purpose. To know is to learn in order to apply immediately. Thus, knowledge becomes the foundation for technocratic proposals that call into question the role of the teacher, who is reduced to a well-trained instructor responsible only for delivering what has already been predefined and organized for example, through standardized teaching materials. This is a key mechanism for perpetuating the neoliberal "machine for grinding futures.

### The Background of the High School Reform

Brazil's alignment with the neoliberal system is not a recent development. With the election of Fernando Collor de Mello (1990–1992), the Brazilian State began to seek closer ties with neoliberal countries. After Collor's impeachment, Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995–2003) came to power. His administration was marked by a close relationship with U.S. interests, both geopolitically and economically.



The administration of Fernando Henrique Cardoso (FHC) promoted a formal separation between upper secondary education and vocational education, seeking to adapt schooling to the changes taking place in the world of work in response to the capitalist crisis of the 1970s. During his government, the National Curriculum Parameters (PCNs) and the National Curriculum Guidelines (DCNs) were established.

Gadotti (1992) emphasizes that public policy proposals are fields of contention, and as such, various interests are directly or indirectly present in their formulation. Specifically regarding public debt, he argues that by tying education funding to State indebtedness, education will always be subordinated to the interests of capital.

This issue is evident in the proposal of the first National Education Plan (PNE), which was hierarchical and top-down in nature. It clearly lacked active participation from teachers, schools, and organized civil society, both in its conception and implementation. In this regard, Morais, Santos, and Paiva (2021) observe that the PNE aligned with the interests of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the World Bank.

It is thus evident that the strong relationship between global neoliberalism and the FHC government had significant repercussions on public spending, to the detriment of more meaningful investment in education. As a consequence, public education became increasingly precarious, while new private schools allegedly of higher quality began to proliferate across the country.

Later, during the Lula administration, although the existing neoliberal pact remained in place, the discussion around secondary education and vocational education took on different contours compared to the previous administration. Nevertheless, the public policy proposals developed during his mandates faced resistance even from sectors within the Ministry of Education and Culture itself (Ferretti, 2017).

Saviani (2007) criticizes the fact that, between the lines of many of these public policies, privatizing sectors of education and the social arms of banking institutions were embedded—revealing the close relationship between educational public policies and social inclusion through the financialization of society during the Lula administration.

Without major difficulty, Lula succeeded in electing economist and former guerrilla fighter Dilma Vana Rousseff as his successor to the presidency of Brazil. With the slogan "A rich country is a country without poverty," the key marks of her first term in education were the continuation of her



predecessor's achievements, particularly the expansion of universities and federal institutes into the countryside, as well as the increase in daycare and school enrollment.

In 2013, based on the results of large-scale national and international assessments that indicated the declining quality of upper secondary education, and following discussions held by CEENSI (Special Commission for the Study and Proposal of High School Reform), a change to Law 9394/96 the Law of Guidelines and Bases of National Education (LDBEN) was proposed.[2] Reference to these results reflects a positivist perspective on research, one that places excessive trust in the quantitative, the measurable, the standardized.

According to Minayo, "for positivists, social analysis is considered objective only if carried out using standardized, supposedly neutral instruments. The language of variables offers the possibility of expressing generalizations with precision and objectivity" (2001, p. 23). It seems to us that when the government focuses exclusively on data presented in tables, the subjective processes inherent to education are neglected. Silva (1999) reminds us that, in contemporary times, the traditional curriculum can no longer sustain itself in the face of the multiple demands presented by youth, especially when issues such as markers of difference are identified in schools and there is resistance to listening to them.

The then Bill No. 6,840/2013, related to the High School Reform, stated in its justification:

The need for curricular readjustment in upper secondary education, in order to make it more appealing to young people and facilitate their entry into the labor market without this implying school dropout was, without a doubt, the most debated issue in CEENSI meetings. The consensus was that the current high school curriculum is outdated, excessively burdensome, overloaded with content, formal, standardized, and filled with too many mandatory subjects in a structure that fails to acknowledge students' individual and geographical differences. It is necessary to expand the formative possibilities of high school, so as to make it more suited to the needs of today's youth, thereby attracting them to school (PL 6.840/2013, p. 8).

However, according to the High School Observatory at the Federal University of Paraná, "Bill No. 6,840/2013 revives the curricular model of the military dictatorship era, with an efficiency-driven and market-oriented bias." Underlying the justification is a supposed solution to the problem of high school dropout, attributed to the prospect of entry into the labor market. The official discourse of the reform adopts this *salvationist* tone seemingly addressing regional diversity and opening paths for the appreciation of young people's specificities.

Despite the existence of the National Curriculum Guidelines for Upper Secondary Education initially proposed in 1998 and later revised in 2011, alongside the National Pact for the Strengthening of High School the CEENSI report insists on characterizing Brazilian high school as outdated, overly



Secondary Education Reform: context, implications and setbacks under the light of positivism in the silencing of differences content-driven, and rigid. But in what sense are these guidelines considered outdated? Are they failing to meet the needs of students, or the interests of the market as the tutor of the neoliberal State?

The text of Bill No. 6,840/2013 proposed the following changes to the LDBEN: (1) an increase in the daily schedule of daytime high school to seven hours, aiming to universalize access to full-time education; (2) nighttime high school would be limited to students over 18 years of age, with a total duration of 4,200 hours and the possibility of completing up to 1,000 hours externally; (3) curricular organization would be structured into four areas of knowledge: language, mathematics, natural sciences, and human sciences; (4) the inclusion of cross-cutting themes such as drug and alcohol abuse prevention, environmental education, traffic education, sex education, culture of peace, entrepreneurship, basic notions of the Federal Constitution, basic knowledge of the Consumer Protection Code, the importance of exercising citizenship, ethics in politics, political participation, and democracy; (5) the final year of high school would emphasize career orientation, based on the student's choice among the four mentioned areas and vocational training; (6) access to higher education would be based on evaluations and processes aligned with the student's chosen educational track; and (7) teacher training would be organized by areas of knowledge.

Each of the proposed changes would directly violate students' rights and undermine the democratic organization of the school, revealing signs of regression, arbitrary decisions, a lack of understanding of curricular organization, and a disconnection from the lived realities of thousands of young people who both work and study. According to the Law of Guidelines and Bases of National Education, upper secondary education, as a stage of basic education, has

the responsibility to: consolidate and deepen the knowledge acquired in primary education as preparation for further studies; provide a basic foundation for work and citizenship, fostering intellectual autonomy and critical thinking by integrating theory and practice (Ferreira, 2017, p. 297).

The emphasis on vocational training would contradict what is established in the LDBEN regarding the possibility of professional upper secondary education. The selection for higher education based on formative track options echoed an experience already implemented in the 1940s with the Organic Laws of the Capanema Reform, which clearly aimed to differentiate access to education based on social class. Ferretti states that "the Organic Laws institutionalized the duality between the education offered to the middle and upper classes and that offered to the working classes a distinction that has shaped and continues to shape Brazilian education." (2016, p. 74).



During the second round of the 2014 presidential campaign, both Dilma Rousseff and Aécio Neves addressed the reform of upper secondary education in their political platforms, highlighting a growing concern with curricular issues. Dilma, running for re-election under the Workers' Party (PT), emphasized the idea of Technical Education (PRONATEC) as a pathway to scientific and technological knowledge that would enable the comprehensive development of youth (PT, 2014). Aécio, the candidate from the Brazilian Social Democracy Party (PSDB), in turn, proposed the implementation of the *Escola Jovem* ("Youth School"), characterized by a flexible high school model focused on differentiated deepening in more technical and scientific areas, social sciences and humanities, or practical training for professions in partnership with the productive sector (PSDB, 2014).

In the televised debates, both candidates' proposals made clear that a high school reform was imminent; the motivations underlying each candidate's plan also pointed to an increasing concession of education to the neoliberal imperatives of preparing youth for the labor market.

### The Implementation of the Reform under Michel Temer's "Aegis"

With the parliamentary coup against democratically elected President Dilma Rousseff initiated on December 2, 2015, and finalized in May 2016 the slogan "Educating Nation" (Pátria Educadora) gave way to "Order and Progress," presented by Michel Temer, the vice president who assumed the presidency on an interim basis. By reviving the motto "Order and Progress," the government reinstated the positivist ideal that reason must govern the minds in order to ensure access to progress, which, in turn, can only be achieved through the preservation of order.

One of the first measures adopted by interim president Michel Temer was Constitutional Amendment Proposal No. 241, which restricted the use of public funds, leading to a notable reduction in allocations for education, health, and social programs. He also launched the Investment Partnerships Program, aimed at reducing bureaucracy and limiting state intervention in various concessions to private companies this being considered a key driver of economic growth. Thus, within a neoliberal framework, yet another stage was consolidated namely, reduced state interference in the market and economy, with increased permissiveness toward the influence of corporate interests on national public policies.

It was in this context of economic recovery that interim president Michel Temer proposed Provisional Measure No. 746/2016, which established a policy to promote the implementation of full-time high schools. The text of the measure proposed the following changes to upper secondary education: (1) the gradual extension of the school day to up to 1,400 hours per year; (2) the



Secondary Education Reform: context, implications and setbacks under the light of positivism in the silencing of differences organization of high school into the following areas of knowledge: Languages, Mathematics, Natural Sciences, Human Sciences, and Technical and Vocational Education; (3) an emphasis on a curriculum that would contribute to the construction of students' life projects; (4) a common national curricular base, not to exceed 1,200 hours, alongside a diversified component.

The proposal made no mention of Sociology, Philosophy, Arts, or Physical Education as part of the high school core curriculum. In addition, the text altered sections of the LDBEN related to Afro-Brazilian and Indigenous cultures, as well as Special Education.

When it comes to public educational policy, omitting humanities disciplines constitutes a serious offense to the democratic rule of law. As Lima and Maciel argue, "it reveals a pragmatic and reductionist view of education on the part of the current government, violating a fundamental aspect of human development linked to the notion of comprehensive education" (Lima & Maciel, 2018, p. 13). By limiting access to the arts and disciplines that foster critical thinking, particularly for the children of the working class, Provisional Measure No. 746/2016 clearly sought to steer Brazilian society further toward alienation under capital.

In contrast, disciplines perceived as technical and more oriented toward the labor market gained prominence during this period. Justifications for this shift argued that schools should be more focused on preparing youth for entry into the job market standing in opposition to the educational vision promoted during the Lula and Dilma administrations.

Despite numerous criticisms and multifaceted reactions from educators centered on its authoritarian nature, the amendments made, the emphasis on areas of poor performance in large-scale assessments, and the removal of subjects that promote reflection on reality the Provisional Measure was adopted. It bore clear signs of regression in relation to democratic achievements, particularly those enshrined in the 1988 Constitution, which had proposed equal access to education for all.

Despite the resistance to the Provisional Measure, it was converted into Law No. 13,415/2017 on February 16, 2017, also known as the "revised LDB," with the following proposals for upper secondary education: (1) the progressive increase of instructional hours until reaching 1,400 hours per year; (2) a common national curriculum base and a diversified component; (3) inclusion of studies and practices in Physical Education, Arts, Sociology, and Philosophy; (4) development of students' life projects; (5) formative itineraries based on the following areas: Languages and Their Technologies; Mathematics and Its Technologies; Natural Sciences and Their Technologies; Applied Human and Social Sciences; Technical and Vocational Education; (6) emphasis on Portuguese,



Mathematics, and English, which became the only mandatory subjects throughout all three years of high school.

Among the points listed, we draw particular attention to those concerning the National Common Curricular Base (BNCC), the subjects deemed mandatory in the revised LDB, and teacher training.

The political context in which the National Common Curricular Base (BNCC) was enacted significantly influenced its objectives and the worldview it sought to promote within the Brazilian State. The so-called "BNCC competencies" respond more to the demands of capitalism than to the necessary holistic development of humanity that could be fostered by educational institutions. This becomes evident in the emphasis placed on entrepreneurship (Brazil, 2018, pp. 466, 479, 568) and its inclusion in Specific Competency 5, within the formative itinerary for the area of Applied Human and Social Sciences in upper secondary education (p. 577).

The consequence of the lack of critical engagement in the BNCC was reflected in Brazil's ranking 49th out of 64 member countries in assessments of student creativity<sup>6</sup> as well as in the precarious labor conditions faced by young people who see no prospects for the future or for salary improvement even after obtaining a university degree<sup>7</sup>.

Regarding the mandatory subjects in the revised LDB, the problem becomes evident with the change in instructional hours and the new structuring into areas of knowledge. Although integration is a positive step toward analyzing content through a transdisciplinary lens, the then-president of the Bicameral Commission of the National Education Council, César Callegari (2018), issued a "letter to the members of the National Education Council" resigning from his position and stating that:

contrary to everything that had been envisioned, the new High School Law establishes that these rights will be reduced and limited to what can be delivered in, at most, 1,800 hours. In other words: only what fits within approximately 60% of the current school workload. (...) By neglecting the conceptual domains specific to each discipline, the Ministry of Education's proposal not only hinders an interdisciplinary and contextualized understanding of the world, but may also lead to the formation of a generation of poorly qualified, uncritical, and easily manipulated youth—incapable of creativity and condemned to the simplest and most tedious jobs, which are increasingly rare and poorly paid. Is this the future we want for the country?

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Available at <a href="https://agenciabrasil.ebc.com.br/educacao/noticia/2024-06/ocde-avalia-pensamento-criativo-de-estudantes-em-64-paises">https://agenciabrasil.ebc.com.br/educacao/noticia/2024-06/ocde-avalia-pensamento-criativo-de-estudantes-em-64-paises</a> access 13 jul. 2024

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Disponível em <a href="https://www.dieese.org.br/boletimempregoempauta/2023/boletimEmpregoemPauta26.html">https://www.dieese.org.br/boletimempregoempauta/2023/boletimEmpregoemPauta26.html</a> acesso 13 jul. 2024

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Available at <a href="https://www.epsjv.fiocruz.br/carta-aos-conselheiros-do-conselho-nacional-de-educacao-cesar-callegari-renuncia-a-presidencia-da">https://www.epsjv.fiocruz.br/carta-aos-conselheiros-do-conselho-nacional-de-educacao-cesar-callegari-renuncia-a-presidencia-da</a> access 13 jul. 2024



His indignation stems from the lack of dialogue with professionals working in basic education schools across the country and from the exclusion of students in the drafting process. This arbitrariness reflected the erosion already taking place within the democratic rule of law in the National Congress, and the extent to which corporate actors those who commodify education were already influencing public policy through lobbying efforts.

Ultimately, in line with these privatizing interests, the *National Common Base for the Initial Training of Basic Education Teachers* (*BNC-Formação*) epitomizes the issues raised here. In an initial analysis, Rodrigues, Pereira, and Mohr (2020) found that the authors responsible for drafting the preliminary version of the document (Brazil, 2019) were more closely linked to corporate groups than to professional educators already indicating the direction BNC-Formação would take. However, what alarmed us most was the assertion that "in today's world, it is no longer possible to establish absolute truths, whether scientific, cultural, ethical, or political" (Brazil, 2020, p. 51). This relativization of the concept of truth and scientific knowledge contributes to turning the school into a space not intended for the debate and construction of knowledge, but rather into one where scientific knowledge is no longer protected by the very knowledge it claims to cultivate.

It is also important to highlight that the so-called formative itineraries are a trap, as they will always depend on what each school is able to offer rather than on students' actual interests. Thus, the much-heralded "life project" will ultimately be determined by the educational reality available to the student, not by their aspirations. Given the historically low investment in teacher recruitment, schools will be more likely to constrain young people's futures than to promote their emancipation.

During the civil-business-military dictatorship, with the reform of primary and secondary education through Law No. 5,692/71, what was then called "secondary education" ( $2^{o}$  grau) acquired a vocational character, grounded in technicist methodologies and a segregating perspective—since only a few would go on to higher education, while the majority would be funneled into technical courses.

What is now being implemented through the revised LDB echoes that earlier reform, which left lasting educational deficits in the Brazilian population. The distinction between a high school track aimed at university education and another aimed at the labor market undermines the ideals of an education that embraces the human being in their totality and wholeness. Cunha (2017) hypothesizes that the High School Reform reinstates a "containment" function previously attributed to this educational stage an idea that remains highly relevant today, in light of the crisis of higher education expansion and the government's restrictions on investment in this sector.





Physical Education, Arts, Philosophy, and Sociology were not proposed as formal subjects and, therefore, were left open to the possibility of having their content diluted into other subjects. Given the lack of qualified professionals, they would also risk being excluded from the educational process altogether.

It is also important to note the terminological variation present in the law regarding the notion of *teaching*, which is applied to Portuguese and Mathematics, as opposed to *Studies and Applied Practices* a designation reserved for other subjects.

With the 1971 Education Reform, Philosophy and Sociology were made optional and replaced by Moral and Civic Education, characterized by strong patriotic and military overtones. The National Education Council Opinion No. 38/2006 opened possibilities for a discussion about the content to be addressed in each subject, and at the time, some Brazilian states reintegrated them into the curriculum, at least in one of the years of upper secondary education. Officially, they returned to the curriculum as mandatory subjects for all three years of high school in 2008. Transforming them into *studies and practices* in 2017 means treating them as cross-cutting themes, stripping them of their identity as academic disciplines and denying the importance of philosophy's millennia-old knowledge and sociology's century-old contributions.

This stance reaffirms a view of the human being as someone who does not need to reflect or critically engage with their own reality neglecting the importance of critical thinking in human development. From a positivist perspective, enlightened reason is equated with scientific reason, now shaped to fit the mold of the flexible future worker. Ignoring the contributions of the humanities appears inconsistent with the notion of holistic student development proposed by the Law.

The issue of *notório saber* (notable knowledge) as a substitute in the absence of qualified teachers is also worth noting. According to Law No. 13,415/2017, there is no clear concern with training professionals specifically to work in upper secondary education. This aligns with the provision in Article 7, § 8, which states that "teacher education curricula shall be based on the National Common Curricular Base (BNCC)." In doing so, the broader formative aspect of teacher training programs is stripped away, reducing them to merely technicist and reproductive functions.

## The Gagging of Education

Law No. 13,415/2017 seems to embrace the concerns of groups such as *Escola Sem Partido* (School Without Political Parties), which fear that subjects like Philosophy and Sociology might "indoctrinate" students. Furthermore, it reveals aspects of a positivist agenda, which argues that the study of the humanities is unnecessary, since what guarantees personal success is precisely the



Secondary Education Reform: context, implications and setbacks under the light of positivism in the silencing of differences application of rationality to concrete contexts. The emphasis on technique suggests an opposition to reflection: one must simply learn to repeat, quantify, and reproduce not to think, reflect, or understand critically.

According to Nagib, the founder of the *Escola Sem Partido movement* (ESP).

It is a well-known fact that teachers and textbook authors have been using their classes and publications to try to win students over to certain political and ideological currents, and to lead them to adopt standards of judgment and moral conduct—especially sexual morality that are incompatible with those taught to them by their parents or guardians<sup>9</sup>.

Nagib's understanding of the school is clearly mistaken and biased, given the cultural, social, identity-based, ethno-racial, gender, and class plurality that exists within Brazil's public education institutions. We understand that his interest in controlling schools stems precisely from the heterogeneity found within them. The more plural and diverse a school is, the more democratic it becomes. Conversely, the more standardized and restricted it is, the more easily it can be controlled and, as a consequence, the more docile bodies it will produce.

It is precisely through the absence of critical thinking and the militarization of public discourse that the *Escola Sem Partido* movement gained national visibility. Relying on alarmist rhetoric according to which "children and young people are at risk of being indoctrinated at school" a campaign was launched to devalue the school as an institution that mediates the State's role in social formation.

Although Brazil's Supreme Federal Court ruled the movement's proposals unconstitutional, their effects were already being felt in schools. Parents, organized in WhatsApp groups, began to influence the content taught by teachers. If a particular topic or approach conflicted with a student's family culture, the teacher would be threatened, and sanctions (Piubel, 2020) were imposed on their teaching practice and professional activity. As a result, self-censorship became widespread in many schools, as a means of safeguarding both careers and lives.

The systematic discursive attacks on schools were intended to socially disqualify them precisely because, when used as intended, these public institutions are fertile spaces for broad and meaningful debate. Or, in times of persecution, they become ideal settings for imposing a single worldview something characteristic of totalitarian regimes.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Available at http://escolasempartido.org/anteprojeto-lei-federal/ access 10 nov. 2022



In a political context in which weapons were valued over books, truth was relativized, and only one model of family was accepted disregarding the multiple possible configurations of family structures schools came to be seen as places where children and adolescents in formation were allegedly exposed to risks. Thus, the High School Reform, by reducing the number of "humanities" subjects traditionally linked to reflection served not only the interests of neoliberalism but also of the global wave of neoconservatism.

This reveals the importance of analyzing public policy reforms from a macropolitical perspective, recognizing the influence of multiple regimes of truth (Foucault, 2010). If the school is a space for the formation of citizenship, we must ask: what kind of citizenship is actually being formed in these schools, and whose interests lie behind the sponsors of these policy reforms?

After all, if these reforms are supported by powerful lobbies, if the new National Common Curricular Base has removed the themes of gender and sexuality from its official documents, and if it disregarded the collective debates held during educational conferences, then what is being forged is a specific national ideal one that becomes evident in the suppression of humanities subjects and the prioritization of career-oriented educational tracks for the labor market.

The issues of agrarian reform, quilombola communities, Indigenous territories, cultural support for LGBTQIA+ productions, and all the traumas incubated during Bolsonaro's four years in office will have even greater impact in the coming decade particularly because this politics of insensitivity was anchored in moral panic narratives (Acosta, 2023) capable of shaping an entire generation.

In this sense,

The adoption of an ultraconservative economic policy following the 2016 coup d'état radicalized under the Bolsonaro government through a neofascist ideological orientation revives and deepens social apartheid. The "new high school" is a constitutive part of the maintenance and intensification of this social apartheid and consolidates the counter-reforms that tear apart the 1988 Constitution by advancing a policy aimed at liquidating the Brazilian people's common assets; dismantling the public sphere and each of the social and inclusion policies designed to reduce social inequality, hunger, and poverty; and annihilating scientific research—through drastic cuts to funding in the short term, and in the long term, by dismantling basic education and public universities (Frigotto, 2021, p. 136).

These facts make it urgent not only to revoke the New High School Reform<sup>10</sup>, ut also to build educational public policies that are developed from the ground up that is, with the active participation

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> As a matter of record, the completion of this article coincided with the approval of the high school reform by the National Congress and, therefore, it was not analyzed here, as it falls outside the scope of this study.



Secondary Education Reform: context, implications and setbacks under the light of positivism in the silencing of differences of students, teachers, and educational administrators so that the school may once again become a fertile space for the protection of childhood and youth.

Acosta (2024) proposes a radical reinterpretation of the BNCC with the aim of opposing bourgeois interests and those of the merchants of education. According to the author, since the document has already been drafted and enacted, the State's ability to limit teachers' interpretations is largely ineffective, and the perspectives adopted in the classroom can (and should) go in directions contrary to those expected by the State.

This capture of the State by neoliberalism found echoes as it intersected with neoconservatism. In order to further intensify the shift that the National Congress has been making over the last few elections toward the far right, neoliberalism was allowed to be reinforced by neoconservatism and we also identify that this political-economic system has aligned itself with neofascism.

Enzo Traverso (2019) prefers the term *post-fascism* over *neofascism*, as he understands post-fascism as a "particular regime of historicity early 21st century which explains its erratic, unstable, and contradictory ideological content, in which antithetical political philosophies coexist" (2019, p. 15). While neofascism sought to consolidate the policies and ideologies of classical fascism, post-fascism takes advantage of this more fluid form to occupy all the gaps within the State. As an example, we may cite the anti-immigration and white supremacist campaigns promoted by far-right parties in Europe and the United States, while at the same time they participate in summits with Latin American world leaders.

It is important to contextualize how the control of schools is occurring simultaneously in Brazil and other countries in order to grasp the full extent of post-fascism's contemporary presence. By making use of democracy through the direct election of far-right politicians they claim that democracy is not at risk, since elections continue to be held normally and in accordance with the rules of the countries in question.

Education today has been deliberately placed under scrutiny so that the school responsible for the formation of children and adolescents (that is, future adults) can be discredited as an agent of social transformation, ultimately leading students to feel increasingly precarious and hopeless about improving their lives through education.





#### **Final considerations**

The new curricular framework proposed by the Michel Temer and Jair Bolsonaro administrations through the High School Reform is veiled by diffuse interests related to the production of docile bodies, social control, and the formation of labor alienated from the realities of the job market. From this perspective, education deviates from the previously proposed focus on holistic human development, giving way to an educational model centered on the sequential training of individuals for specific roles in the labor market.

This line of argument gains further popular support in the context of widespread unemployment in the country, where the school is increasingly perceived as a direct pathway to employment and, as such, appears to offer a partial solution to a pressing social issue. However, the creation and implementation of this reform do not involve those directly affected by it. Instead, they are imposed from above through non-consultative public policies.

At the same time, there is little public discussion about the challenges facing the reform some of which are substantial from the perspective of improving education. One such challenge is teacher education, which, although essential in the context of the reform, is obscured by claims of pedagogical and managerial autonomy. In reality, there is little investment in this area, resulting in the disconnection of schools from research contrary to the approaches adopted in countries that directly invest in education.

It is therefore urgent to reflect on the long-term implications of these changes, particularly in light of the absence of fixed funding, the shortage of teachers, inadequate training, and the disconnect between reforms and the actual contexts in which schools operate. What has been proposed are generic models of schooling grounded in a positivist perspective.

These facts lead us to believe that repealing the New High School Reform is urgent if the country is to genuinely engage in a dialogue about the role and function of schools in shaping society, as well as to develop new public policies for higher education—especially those focused on teacher training.



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