Experiences of inequality: the meanings of schooling envisaged by poor youths

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Abstract

In this article I intend to discuss the meanings attributed to the experience of schooling by poor young people from the outskirts of Belo Horizonte who took part in a federal program of social inclusion – the Voluntary Civil Service Program (1996-2002) of the Ministry of Justice and Ministry for Work and Employment. The data and testimonies given were collected through participant observation and with the conduction of interviews with youngsters, parents, and professionals (managers, instructors, and coordinators). In one of its phases, I looked into the school experiences of the subjects studied, trying to capture the meanings created, their values and expectations about their schooling. These youngsters had grown up under the impact of increasing social and economic inequalities during the last decades in Brazil. At the same time that they reaped the benefits of the expansion of schooling opportunities for the new generations, they experienced the access to education in an uneven manner. Looking at the subjects of this study, I could see that most of them had had a troubled school trajectory. Although they had more schooling than their parents, they had gone through an uncertain path, full of difficulties, coming in and out of school. At the same time, and despite experiencing situations of social and economic exclusion, the meanings they attributed to schooling are multiple. Education remains as a value for these youngsters, despite the tense and ambiguous relation they maintain with the school institution. They demand a quality school, with clear rules and procedures, but also a school where they are respected and recognized as subjects with rights.

Keywords

Youth – Schooling – Social inclusion.

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Introduction

This article is the result of an investigation carried out with youngsters who live in the outskirts of the Metropolitan Region of Belo Horizonte (State of Minas Gerais, Brazil), and who have been part of a federal program of social inclusion entitled Voluntary Civil Service (SCV[1]), which started in 1996 inside the National Program for Human Rights, and was implemented through the joint action of the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry for Work. Developed until 2002, the VCS was targeted at young men and women around the age of 18. It was an specific action of the National Plan for Worker Qualification (PLANFOR), aiming at the inclusion of youngsters in situation of social risk, and was executed in a decentralized manner through the State Qualification Plans (PEQs[2]) and other partnerships.

The data were collected through participant observation and the conduction of interviews with youngsters and instructors. In a first phase of the research a questionnaire was applied about the socioeconomic profile of the youngsters and their families, covering all participants in the Program. In a second phase, thirteen youngsters, five parents, and eleven professionals (managers, instructors, and coordinators) were interviewed through a semi-structured questionnaire. A third phase of the study involved the application of a questionnaire to 27 former participants of the Program who had left it a year before. At a certain point of the study, I looked into the schooling of the subjects researched, and into their school experiences, trying to capture the meanings, values, and expectations they had with respect to their schooling.

The school classes researched were constituted through partnerships between an NGO and Catholic parishes coordinated by lay leaders selected from within the borough by the Social Pastoral Service of the Archdiocese of Belo Horizonte. The courses were housed in the parochial rooms of the boroughs, whose infrastructure consisted of a large room with toilettes, a blackboard, a table, desks, a video player and a TV set.

From a total of 63 pupils initially enrolled in the two classes, 53 finished the program, among which only 7 were female (13%). All these pupils came from low-income families, with parents unemployed or precariously employed or with little professional qualifications. From the youngsters researched, only 9 (17%) had never worked. Seventeen pupils (32%) had had their first job between the ages of 14 and 15, and 16 of them (30%) started to work with less than 14 years of age, largely under precarious conditions and without proper registration.

During the 1980s and 1990s, several reforms of basic education were implemented at different government levels in Brazil. Have these reforms promoted the right to education? Undoubtedly, they have increased the number of students and the years of schooling of the new generations, something that could lead to some optimism. However, in spite of this quantitative growth, the educational inequalities continue to reproduce and multiply. When looking at the subjects of this research, I observed that most of them had gone through a turbulent school trajectory, although they had more schooling than their parents. They had had an erratic trajectory, full of difficulties, made of comings and goings to and from the school. Among these youngsters, 24 (45%) declared that they did not study. Those that did study showed series/age gap and were enrolled at night in public schools. Among the youngsters researched, 55.5% had stopped between the 5th and the 8th grades, 37% had not completed secondary school, and 7.5% had finished secondary school. These data about schooling are relative to the 27 youngsters interviewed during the third stage of the research. At this stage, I found out that some youngsters had twisted the information by declaring their schooling as below the 8th grade, so that they fitted the target profile for the program.

An immediate reading of the research data would lead us to understand the experience of schooling of these youngsters as the result of a process of reproduction of social and economic inequalities of the capitalist society. Naturally, this issue relates to the work of Pierre Bourdieu, particularly in what concerns his concepts of cultural and social capital. While recognizing the importance of this author to the study of the schooling processes, we believe that his approach is based on a macro-sociological perspective of the relations between social classes. Thus, I chose not to employ the Bourdieusian framework in the present text. Without any intention of playing down the relevance of that perspective, I have opted to study the problem starting from the meanings created by the youngsters about their own schooling, understanding them as active subjects who, faced with social and cultural inequalities in their social environment, conceive and construct their own mode of relationship with the school universe.

We should therefore ask about the school experience of the youngsters researched: what did they have to say about their trajectory? What was the articulation between their social situations and their school experiences? Which factors determined the choices they made between giving up and moving ahead one more step at school?

Initially, data gathered about the schooling of the youngsters are presented, and some aspects about the relation between their school trajectories and their social/family environment are discussed against the backdrop of the theoretical contributions of some authors from the field of the Sociology of Education. Next, we analyze the testimonies of the youngsters, trying to understand the meaning created by them about their school experiences. Lastly, some final considerations are made about some of the aspects that emerged from the discourses of the subjects of this research.

The youngsters' schooling and their families: between the

personal choice and the determination by the family environment

The history of the youngsters' fathers and mothers reveals a precarious schooling, full of difficulties. Taking the schooling of fathers, 5.3% were illiterate, 63.2% had stopped between the 1st and 4th grades, and 10.5% had stopped between the 5th and 8th grades. Only 7% of fathers had completed fundamental education. As for the mothers, schooling was as follows: 12.3% were illiterate, 40.35% had stopped between the 1st and 4th grades, and 24.6% had stopped between the 5th and 8th grades. Only 10.5% of the mothers had completed fundamental education. There were still 1.7% that had incomplete secondary education, and 3.5% that had completed secondary education. Despite the drawbacks in their school trajectories, these youngsters had had access to a much higher level of education than their parents. This is due to the expansion of access to public education, which has, generally speaking, favored the newer generations. On the other hand, most youngsters presented series/age gap, and a significant portion was not at school. Compared with young people from other social strata, they were in an educationally disadvantaged position. For the children of the popular classes, the expansion of the access to education did not translate into a smooth trajectory through the school system.

The need to expand the studies about the relation between the educational trajectories of youngsters and those of their families was reinforced by Gomes (1997) in her analysis about schooling and employment of poor urban youngsters. Based on the works of Willis (1991) and Boudon (1981), the author draws attention to the importance of understanding some of the aspects of the school experiences of the poor youngsters who live in the metropolitan peripheries, such as the role of the family history, of the social origin and life histories of friends, relatives and

neighbors. According to her analysis, the value attributed to education by these youngsters depends on what can be anticipated in terms of risks and benefits, in view of the school and professional trajectory of those around them. The question is then:

> what do these youngsters have in common among them, besides poverty, that makes them attribute such feeble value to schooling? What do they have in common among them, besides poverty, that works as a distinctive aspect of their informal groups when compared with informal groups of urban youngsters from other social classes? (Gomes, 1997, p. 56)

A clue lies in the fact that these youngsters come from a *family history* of incomplete or quite precarious schooling. The resistance to school and the low value attributed to education by the youngsters is a question of non-familiarity with the school culture that follows from a family history of schooling that is still recent and incomplete. This explanation, however, looks still partial. The youngsters and their families do not seem to place a low value on the school, either because the labor market has demanded higher qualifications, or because education is considered as a value in itself. In general, parents want their children to work. Some youngsters have managed to finish basic education, and even dream with the possibility of going into higher education. Others wished to do professionalization courses. On the other hand, some of them manifested distancing and the feeling that investing in schooling was not worth it (the pain, the effort, the dedication). It does not seem to be just a "lack of familiarity with the universe of the school culture", but a realistic posture before the impediments to social mobility produced by a society that watches the levels of unemployment and poverty grow even for those with more schooling.

According to Dubet (1994), "the mass-availability of the school introduces the process of social distribution into the heart of the school system", which is composed of hierarchies of "lines and disciplines in which the individuals orient themselves according to the school resources at their disposal", much like a "market", as imagined by Boudon (1981). The school experience of the youngster is lived as the construction of the career before a series of *tests* and *directions* that each stage of the school system puts at the disposal of the pupils, and is not predetermined by the class destiny defined by the social situation of each family. It is also largely determined by the "identification to the group and to young cultures", attributing to the youngsters an active role in the construction of their school and professional trajectory. The meaning of schooling will be built in the tension between *belonging* and *investment*, which takes on different *forms* and *modalities* according to the level and the resources made available to the youngsters by the distribution systems: "more than the birth, it is the position in the formation system" that matters here.

The low schooling of the parents could lead us to think that families from popular classes put little value on education. The testimonies, however, do not confirm this hypothesis. All parents value the school; and one of the more frequently mentioned motives was the preparation for the labor market and the hope that they would guarantee a *better future* for themselves.

Besides increasing the chances in the labor market, the valuing of the school by the family also happens because of the socialization that the school space offers, allowing the children to create friendship bonds and to develop (to take initiatives, lose inhibitions etc). This dimension of sociability, already mentioned by other authors (Dayrell, 1996; Marques, 1997) emerged in some of the testimonies:

> I kind of like the school. You learn, and also you need the school. It's an obligation. I like a little. It's the exams I don't like. They're more difficult. Good thing is you make friends, you meet a lot of nice people. A lot of bad people too. The false friends that take you down. (Júlio, trainee)

We can say that, for various reasons, the schooling of their children remains as a value for parents, despite their own low schooling. There seems to be no mechanical link between the school history of the parents and the importance attributed to education. The testimonies collected reveal the aspiration and expectation to go beyond what parents had achieved.

Understanding the failures and successes of low-income youngsters requires that we adopt a view that investigates the subtle fabric in which are weaved their school trajectories. The school is, for the youngsters, an experience in which values, life projects, and expectations come into play. As an experience, it mobilizes the subjects involved, demanding a look that goes beyond the merely pedagogical or curricular, covering the active role of the pupils. Many factors interfere in the conduct of the pupils with respect to their motivation to study, as some studies seem to indicate:

However, based on research studies, we observe that the school behaviors adopted by pupils cannot be reduced to influences of the domestic environment. Following their unfolding, the need to consider the role of the pupil as an active part of his/her own path and of the relationships he/she establishes with other levels of socialization becomes clear, either in their neighborhood, in their work environment or in other forms of social interactions. In this sense, the extra-school experiences and the age bracket in which the pupil is are dimensions that cannot be overlooked. (Zago, 2000, p. 21)

The need to consider the *real activity* of the students in the determination of their school trajectories brings up other factors beyond their original social environment and family influence, which will define the school projects of the youngsters researched. The decision between continuing and stopping their studies, and the higher or lower disposition to resume them,

depend on a series of conditioning factors to the plans to go back to school that the students themselves set in place. Some students condition their return to school to getting a job. Others are studying, but commit minimally to the school life. And still to some, going back to school is a remote proposition. That are these different perspectives before the school life that I shall look into next.

The meanings of schooling to the youngsters

The requisite of Fundamental Education and the social achievements of the parents of the new generations have brought with them the view that the school experience is an important dimension in the life of most children in contemporary societies. The decision between studying or not, investing or not in formation or in work, prolonging the school trajectory or stopping at some point, will depend on a combination of objective and subjective factors that will give form to the weight education has in the life of each youngster and that of his/her family. To the youngsters from the popular classes, school and life in general are experiences of inequality in terms of work, consumption, leisure, rights etc. The motivation of the youngster before the school will happen depending on the way in which each one of them elaborates his/her experience of growing up amidst social inequality and the meaning education will acquire in his/her life.

They are at school, and they are not...

Referring to the relation French students develop with the school institution, Dubet (1998) says that the meaning of studying "is constituted in the ability to articulate several modes of action". The first point is that "pupils must build a relationship of utility with their studies". In other words, pupils must be convinced that the efforts put in schooling will result in certain benefits they intend to obtain

in terms of social mobility. Another point is that pupils must "build a subjective integration in the school culture", by developing an identity with the environment and the school culture. Lastly, "the relationship with the studies is also built in terms of intellectual interest", that is, the "conciliation of their 'passions' and their interests". The ability to articulate these different aspects will give them meaning and motivation to continue to invest in their studies. The author mentions three modes of subjectivation with respect to the school:

Certain pupils, often the more well-off, socialize and subjectivate themselves at school. They see themselves as the authors of their studies; their interests and passions converge; they have the sensation of building and realizing themselves in their studies. Other students of the Lycée, on the contrary, live a strong dissociation of their likings and their interests. They do not perceive what the usefulness of their studies is, and engage their personality and intelligence in non-school activities. In these cases, the individuals develop in parallel to the school and adapt to school life without integrating to it. We know these pupils that put themselves as parenthesis, that develop ritualistic conducts without actually playing the game. But there are also those that can never build their school experience; that often adhere to the school judgments that invalidate them and lead them to see themselves as incapable. In this case, the school no longer forms individuals, it destroys them. Lastly, some of them resist the school judgments, they want to escape and save their dignity, to react to what they perceive as violence, throwing it back at the school. They subjectivate themselves against the school. (Dubet, 1998, p. 31)

Although related to a different social context, this typology is useful to understand elements that emerge from the testimonies that the youngsters researched made about their school experiences. In general, they had difficulties to reconstruct their work and schooling trajectory. There were so many comings and goings that they could not recall exact periods of work and study.

For the youngsters that were not studying, the possibility of going back to school came second to the need of accommodating work and studies. The testimonies did not reveal an incompatibility between the school life and work life. For most of them, the difficulties were related to the educational systems: lack of places, distance from home, and schedules that clashed with working hours. For the majority of youngsters and their families, the ideal situation would be one that harmonized study and work, because many times the work is a guarantee of permanence at school (Madeira, 1986).

Some youngsters that were working developed, by their turn, a very pragmatic stance towards education. Faced with the lack of meaning of the school, they fulfilled minimally their obligations, often reduced to attending class and *getting the certificate*. A fact occurred during an observation of the course illustrates well this pragmatic attitude with respect to the school. Some youngsters gathered in a room were chatting while the instructor conducted a practical activity with another group:

Are you going to take part in the graduation ceremony? (Cristiano)
Not me. I'm out of it. It's just getting the certificate and that's it. (Aldir)
My sister said she'll pay it for me. I'll take part in it. If she'll pay... (Cristiano)
What I want is to buy my Secondary School certificate. There's a school guy that sell them in my neighborhood. I want to get my certificate and find myself a job. Even if I won a scholarship I wouldn't want to do the exams to college. Studying sucks. (Aldir)

But what if they find out? (Observer)
It doesn't happen. The companies don't check it. They just take the photocopy. They used to ask just for the 8th grade. Some companies asked only for 4th grade. Now they are asking for more. (Aldir)

(8th November)

The speech seems to demonstrate an anxiety with respect to finishing basic education, since having a certificate of conclusion of secondary education would work as a possibility of finally entering the labor market. The lack of meaning in education is expressed by the denial of any future project linked to the continuity of studies: *Even if I won a scholarship I wouldn't want to do the exams to college.* The current school experience already signals to the youngster a reduction of expectations as to the possibility of success in the educational system and as to the insertion in the most probable job. Many youngsters that were studying seem to develop an attitude *parallel to the school,* similar to that mentioned by Dubet (1998). They are at school, but they do not immerge completely into school life.

In the interview, this youngster was a lot less emphatic about the refusal to continue studying. Perhaps the situation of being interviewed personally by an adult and teacher induced him to take on a more reserved posture. Although in the context of the dialogue with his colleagues he manifested an anti-school and pragmatic attitude – *I want to get my certificate and find myself a job. Studying sucks* – his discourse during the interview did not reveal clearly a denial of education on itself. However, it is still noticeable a feeling that the time studying is time wasted, when one could be actually working: [...] *what we really want is to work.* It is not about a negative value attributed directly to education, but the fact that time at school is lived as a time devoid of meaning when confronted with other dimensions of life that work could fulfill.

This attitude also transpired in the speech of other youngsters:

What I'm trying to do is to graduate. Enter the Police or something else. Get a good job... Make money... (Valdir, trainee)
Studying is an obligation. I'm trying to finish secondary school. I have nothing to complain about the school. I pay attention, but I don't know what happens. I'm not very clever. What I really liked was the job I had doing barbecue, but the boss at the shop didn't want me anymore. What I really want is to work. Finish secondary school to do a course to be a guard, because my father works as a guard in a security company. He'll put in a word for me. [...] I don't want too much, being a medical doctor or a lawyer. All I want is to be a guard. I just want to study the basic, really. (Franklin, trainee)

To other youngsters, the fact of being at school and not assuming it completely was experienced as a rupture. They found themselves divided between the immediate experience of the colleagues that pointed to the lack of meaning in the studies and the promises of a better future, of the rewards that could have been lost.

(My colleagues say) that studying sucks. But, what can I do? You gotta study, ain't it man. It's like they say, study sucks, but you gotta study. But they don't complain about the teachers. It's they who are the problem. I don't know what they're up to. [...] And all I wanted was to get this exam and do well and keep studying. Don't stop studying. Because that's how I think, try something better. And try something better for my folks too. (Samuel, trainee)

Samuel's approval in the 8th grade depended on a new chance to redo the exam relative to the recuperation period in Mathematics, at which he had failed. He comments that he cried when he learned that he had failed: *I didn't cry because I had failed,*

but thinking about my future. I'm 19 this year, and I'm still in the 8th grade. That's no good. The young man seems to suffer when faced with a school progression that does not keep up with time and with the wish to build a better future.

The little weight given to education was also associated to the discrepancy between the discourse of the value of schooling in the labor market and the experience of youngsters in their search for a job. In many cases, especially for the types of jobs available to these youngsters, the requirement of schooling becomes only a formal requisite under a large job offer. The companies *just take the photocopy*, as one of the youngsters said. By their own experience or by that of people close to them, they know that low schooling limits finding a job, but does not make it impossible. The certificate fulfils a selective function with no direct relation with the demands of the job position itself. This awareness of the low value of schooling in itself contributed to make some youngsters reveal a certain distancing from the school, and the wish to skip steps. If what really counts is the final document, *the photocopy*, then the best thing is to reach it as quickly as possible. From the point of view of the school's (social and occupational position) distribution function, the youngsters already anticipated future jobs in which schooling will count for little.

The dismay

Many times the youngsters expressed lack of motivation to the life at school. There was in some of them a vague attitude when they spoke of the project of going back to the studies, certain "carelessness" often incomprehensible to the adults (parents, teachers, social agents etc). It was as if they were saying that, despite recognizing the value of education and feeling guilty for not persisting in the school life, at that moment education had a "smaller" importance in their order of priorities.

The youngsters' ambiguous attitude emerged from the conflict between the social discourse about the value of education divulged by the media, by educators and politicians, and the daily experience of a meaningless and purposeless schooling. Such ambiguity took the form of dismay with respect to the school. When they spoke about their school trajectory, the strongest picture in the testimonies was that of dismay. Most of them had given up studying out of dismay, without being capable of describing exactly the process of giving up school and the reasons they had to do it. Rather, the withdrawal from the school life seems to be the upshot of a tension that gradually produced their silent expulsion.

The big difficulty was to find motivation to study, an experience they shared with their colleagues. The difficulty in articulating the three dimensions of school life described by Dubet (1998) – the sense of usefulness of the studies, the integration of the school life, and the subjective identification with the studies – caused a feeling of dreariness that fed the tension and the withdrawal from the school life.

Ronie had completed only the 3rd grade of Fundamental Education. Following repeated failures, he abandoned school. His elder sister finished the 3rd grade of Secondary Education, and worked as an apprentice at the health center of their borough. His younger sister was 17, and was at the 2nd grade of Secondary Education, and worked as a trainee in the secretary of the municipal school where she studied. Thus, Ronie carried the stigma of failure: he did not study and did not get a job. A shy person, Ronie seemed even more withdrawn when speaking about the school, and about the possibility of going back to study.

His history can be understood starting from the figures of *unhappy conscience* and of *withdrawal* mentioned by Dubet (2001). According to this author, modernity is characterized by the principles of autonomy and equality conceded to the individuals. With regard to equality, it is a formal value: it is the

equality of opportunities. All are equal as long as they prove to deserve it. Therefore, equality is the recognition of the effort and merit of each person. In situations of failure, this self-responsibility tends to develop in the individuals an *unhappy conscience*, when "the individual regards him/herself as responsible for his/her own unhappiness". Another facet of the freedom conceded to the individual in modernity is that the latter "exposes the contempt that accompanies the fact of not being worthy of this freedom". The lower the person is situated in the social hierarchy, the more pitiful he/she is. The individual and social experience of the inequalities is marked by these two figures: the contempt and the unhappy conscience. As strategies against these feelings, individuals develop attitudes of violence or they withdraw: *they choose to fail.* (Dubet, 2001)

For Ronie, withdrawing was not a rational, datable decision, but a gradual dropout. First, there were three years at the 1st grade followed-up by a psychologist. Then failure came at the 2nd and 3rd grades. Slowly, the image of incompetence for studying was formed, and the youngster adopted it, according to his mother's testimony: *because he doesn't like studying. Because he has this barrier that he created, this dismay of thinking that he can't do it. But also he doesn't want to.* She did not understand her son's apathy, and felt impotent, especially after he reached his late teens: *because there comes an age when we cannot take the lead anymore; it'll depend on their decision.*

Even considering Ronie's singular history, several questions present in his mother's discourse can be extended to the particular histories of many poor families: the lack of understanding of the motives for dismay, the comparison with other, more successful relatives, the reduction of failure to a psychological problem, to a question of personal capacity.

The guilt for school failure tended to be assumed as an individual failure, engendering feelings of shame and incapacity, despite relating

several facts that compose the plot of the production of school failure. The theme of the personal decision to leave school dominated the representation of the pupils, along with the guilt that came with it, even if some youngsters recognized the teachers authoritarian attitudes and problems in the school organization, such as teachers' turnover. The difficulty in dealing with the dreariness and the lack of meaning of the school became a question of *sloth*, of *having no head for the studies*, or a problem of *pupils that play too much.*

The themes of *contempt* and of *withdrawal* can also be analyzed from the viewpoint of the teachers, although this is not the objective here. When the pupils spoke about teachers that liked to *do us in*, that *took it out on us*, they were referring to teachers that placed them at the base of a school hierarchy, and thereby ended up developing an attitude of disdain towards these "uneducated", "undisciplined", and "delinquent" youngsters. For this kind of student, all there was left was an iron discipline or, otherwise, leaving them alone. It was then common for teachers to overlook the pupils' indiscipline and lack of commitment to their courses. Many teachers stayed at peripheral schools until they could manage to be transferred. Faced with difficulties and a feeling of impotence, they withdraw from the hostile environment, either mentally or physically. As one of the youngsters declared, *teachers could stand the pupils anyway, and they left.*

The school: an environment of tension

For those in touch with public schools, the large number of complaints from the teachers about their pupils is not a novelty. "Uninterested", "vandals", and "undisciplined" come up as the main features of young students. In several moments of the research the youngsters described episodes of tension in the school environment. During field observations, it was common to hear students talking about fights at school, about acts of vandalism promoted by groups of pupils, about

teachers and principals cowered before students that threatened them etc. This climate of tension structured the relationship of some of the youngsters with the school and teachers:

During lunch break, two pupils talk about the school at Bairro Menezes: 'The principal there is at the students' heels. She is a stressed-out. But it's different at night. At night the students rule. There's one that got a place because he threatened the principal. She is afraid of the students of the night shift. Yesterday the light went out. When it was back, there were three or four with the desks upside down. The principal gave a candle to each teacher.

(23rd October)

At the end of the day, in the coordinators' 'pep talk', the pupils speak about the depredation occurred at the Bairro Menezes. Pupils broke roof tiles and drinking fountains. Even girls got involved. 'The girls there are more violent than the boys; they were the ones that broke the drinking fountains', says one of them. One of the boys complains that the principal does not talk to them about it; she just threatens the students.

(26th November)

The situations of violence, more and more frequent at educational institutes, express the tension experienced in the daily life of the schools in the metropolitan peripheries. The workers of the school feel insecure before the indiscipline and the threats. When schools do not turn a blind eye, they try to take such rigid measures of control of the pupils and imposition of discipline that they end up fueling even more conflicts. Some pupils, especially those seen as problematic to the school, faced with the impossibility of managing the school life under such tense climate, eventually abandon it.

Oh, I didn't like the principal anyway. He was one of these guys, you know what I mean? If he said you're on the top of that wall, you were. There's no arguing. [...] Once he took my clutches. The boys were playing with them. There was this tree with these little yellow balls. Then they'd drop the little balls to throw them at each other. Then he just came and confiscated my clutches. He kept them in his office. And he wouldn't give them back. Then at the end of the class, he said: 'Your mother can pick them tomorrow'. 'Hey, but how am I supposed to go home?' 'It's your problem'. That's when I really started to hate him. I began to hate him! Either I left the school or he did, because the two of us, we would end up picking a fight in there. (Maicon, trainee)

I had an argument with the principal over nothing as well. It was because of a glass of water. I wanted a drink of water, and she wouldn't let me because she was telling the pupils off. And I went, I left the classroom, I asked the teacher and he let me. But she was in the courtyard. I looked sideways, I didn't mean to, and she said for me to stop staring, that I should go to the classroom and not drink any water, that I should drink water some other time. But I'm stubborn... So I went and drank the water. I was mad about that, and she was too, and I got even angrier. She lost her temper with me, and in the end we didn't get along well. [...] I tried to (go back and) study at that same school, but with my age I couldn't anyway. But I think the age didn't have anything to do with it, because there were people much older than me, and she didn't want me to study there. I think she was making me pay. (Bruno, trainee)

Except for a female pupil, who complained of difficulty with Mathematics, no student alleged learning difficulties for giving up school. The motives more frequently mentioned referred to the environment at school, and to skirmishes with the school personnel. This does not mean that there

were no problems regarding school contents, demanding teachers, terrorizing exams etc. However, a poor school performance was not mentioned by any students as the main reason to leave school. Alongside dismay, many youngsters mentioned aspects that refer to the sphere of the relationships within the school institution, and to authoritarian attitudes on the part of teachers and principals. For many youngsters, the relationship was not fair between pupils and teachers, and many times the conflicts ended in attitudes that exposed youngsters to humiliation.

> The only thing I remember is that in the last year I studied in that school, the subject I detested most was Literature. Because the teacher treated me like a dog. Then I got such a dislike for that subject, and I still don't like it, neither the teacher nor the subject. She used to say that I didn't have capacity, that I was stupid, that I shouldn't be studying. Lots of things. She talked a lot about me. And I was silly at the time, I accepted everything. Just listened. Kept it all quiet. Then, after that I didn't want to know about it. (Luís Alberto, trainee)

The reference to the school performance of the pupil many times masks tense relationships between pupils and teachers. To the teacher, put in a position of power with respect to the pupils, there is always the possibility of making use of the school performance as a way to control discipline. For Luís Alberto, remained the feeling that the school was an unfair and bigoted environment.

The loss of value of the public school

If the youngsters manifested strong repulse to the unjust and authoritarian attitudes, there was, on the other hand, a feeling that public schools had no rules, that there was no authority. Many times the youngsters recounted situations of loss of control of the discipline in a clear

demonstration of the impotence of teachers and principals. There is often an attempt to recover the control of discipline and authority with the imposition of rules that make no sense to the pupils, such as the requirement of uniforms or the ban on wearing baseball caps. In other cases, the school negotiates the discipline by lowering demands, which reinforces the image of loss of value of the public school.

> Now I think this school is okay. Although there are things they did that I think are dodgy. Like they invented that to get in you need to be wearing a certain type of clothes, it's mandatory, otherwise they don't let you in. [...] I think they said you have to wear shoes, blue jeans and the school's shirt. You can't go in wearing sandals or shorts. [...] But in my time, I don't know if it was me that was too clever, but I missed classes more often than not, and I still got good grades. Except when I went to recuperation. But I always passed in recuperation. So, I can't say that it was a good school, because if it was really good, with all the classes I missed I should have failed. They passed the students without them knowing, really. (Luís Alberto, trainee)[3]

> I can't speak very highly of it, because you know how public schools are, don't you. If the student doesn't want to learn, he doesn't. They don't make much effort to teach. If the student doesn't want to learn, he just doesn't. They don't care. The school is paid by the state. There's no way to pay for a private school where you can learn better. There are not many teachers who really care about teaching, about passing the contents to the students. Not all of them do. (Ivan, trainee)

There was the idea that the certificate did not correspond to a real level of learning,

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3. The pupil refers here to the Learning Acceleration Programs developed by the Secretariat for Education of the State of Minas Gerais (SEE-MG) since 1998.

that it did not result from the student's merit and effort, but from a concession by the school, which had the effect of making it worthless for the students. To the youngster, it is as if he/she is receiving a second-class teaching. Quite apart from the political-pedagogical discussion over changes in evaluation systems, for parents and pupils "automatic progression" was one of the main reasons for the loss of value of the school for youngsters. The municipal schools of Belo Horizonte adopted the system of reorganization by cycles since 1996. In Minas Gerais' state school system continued progression was implemented in 1998. By employing the phrase "automatic progression" I tried to preserve the representations that the researched parents and youngsters made about the changes implemented in the schools. Such representations are closely related to the conditions for schooling offered to the subjects of this research. Although it is relevant to consider the different conceptions, practices and mediations involved in the introduction of continued progression in these school systems, I do not intend to approach this issue in the present article.

One of the youngsters values her school exactly because of the level of demand from the teachers:

The Mathematics teacher is very good! The Portuguese teacher too. They are very good. They really teach. You have to know to pass there. You have to fight. That's why I like it there. Because it's like this: if you don't know, you don't pass. [...] Lots of people fail. Like, last year I passed because Deiziene taught me, you know. I passed because I really knew. Now, if you don't know, you fail. That's why it's good there. (Cirlene, trainee).

A first reading can give the impression that there is a call for a conservative and selective school. It is possible to settle onto such a discourse, particularly in the case of Cirlene, where one projects on the school dreams of a better social situation. However, a very strong idea of justice and equal treatment can be discerned in her discourse – if you know, you pass – expressing a sense of valuation of the students and of the teaching offered by the school. An opposite feeling takes place among youngsters whose schools allow everything, and also towards those teachers that show no commitment to the learning of the pupils.

In a view close to that, one of the mothers interviewed insisted on the issue of the end of the system of school failure adopted by the municipal schools. In her opinion, *in the past the school used to be much better, pupils learned much more*. She still remembers many things she learned at school, and she helps her children with their homework, even with secondary school level problems. According to her, children today are promoted, and that has discouraged pupils, because they already know they will pass.

Another facet of the lowering of the level of demand was the reduction in the rhythm of teaching. The fact that some teachers lingered on specific topics of the programs caused dismay among some students, who felt overwhelmed by the tiring repetition:

I was getting tired of school, you know. There were times when we saw the same thing for a whole week. I had already learned and had to sit there. And she would talk, and talk... Then I think the school began to lose it. It got so slow. They're taking in many small kids. And some kids this tall (and shows the height with his hand). At their age they should be in the afternoon shift, but they're at night. They sat in their chairs and you couldn't see them. And they were slow. Didn't learn anything. I couldn't take it anymore. The same things coming down every day, every day. I saw it, then after I saw it I saw it again, after I saw it again she would come back and say 'Ah, now you have a couple of days to study this a bit more, and then

another day to recheck it, and then I'll give you an exam'. I'd just put the whole thing aside, and I'd only remember that on the day of the exam, and I'd go there and do the exam. I lost the taste for school. But I missed it. I dropped school and I missed it. (Maicon, trainee)

In this testimony, several elements come together to result in the withdrawal from school life. As we saw previously, there was the stronger feeling of being someone targeted by the principal. Along with that, there was the lack of meaning and usefulness of the contents studied, since the youngster did not feel challenged and motivated for the classes. The pace was slow, classes were monotonous and repetitive. Besides that, the student did not identify with classmates, since they were much younger. What his discourse reveals is that there was no way of integrating to the juvenile community of the school and build from there a meaningful school experience for himself.

The state schools gave priority to students up to 14 years old for Fundamental Education, and up to 18 years of age for Secondary School. Youngsters above these limits that were outside school could not get back into regular schooling, and were sent to Youngster and Adult Education. In the city where most youngsters lived, the State of Minas Gerais, in partnership with the local government, kept three units of Youngster and Adult Education at the State Center for Continuing Education – CESEC – catering for around 3000 students. In the sub-district where the course took place there was a unit of the CESEC that offered courses of 5th to 8th grades and of Secondary School through a semi-distance system. The pupils attended discipline modules with individual follow-up according to their progression, and the evaluation was made along the course at the teachers' discretion. However, the big problem related to the pedagogical model of the CESECs was the pronounced dropout. Apart from that, the municipality offered courses of Adult Literacy (1st to 4th grades) and *Telecurso*[4] (5th to 8th grades) through partnerships with the Industry Social Service (SESI), state schools, parishes, and crèches. These last two modalities were offered in partnership with two community crèches and a municipal school, in addition to the CESEC unit. The problems in this case related to the lack of specific preparation and to the high teacher turnover, apart from precarious conditions of the facilities where classes took place.

Many youngsters presented the fatigue from work as a justification to abandon school. This may lead us to envisage an incompatibility between school and work. However, the testimonies suggested that the real motives for dropout were much more related to the feeling of studying in a debased school. Viviane was in the 1st grade of Secondary School at her borough school when she started babysitting. When asked about the reason for leaving school, her discourse referred immediately to the exhaustion caused by work, but quickly moved to the absence of regulation of the school environment and to the type of teaching offered:

I was out of steam. I used to get home very tired. My mother argued with me because she wanted me to study. Then I started the CESU in April, but I didn't continue with it. I thought it was going to be too much for my mind, because the written material they had... I thought it was messy. I didn't like it. You choose three disciplines to take. You only had to go on the days of those disciplines. If you had only one class in a day, you did that and went home. I didn't like it. It's different at school. They're more demanding, it's not left up to the pupils. At the CESU you go when you want to, just for the disciplines you're taking. (Viviane, trainee)

4. *Telecurso* is a modality of teaching that makes use of television programs in addition to written material.

The exhaustion after a day's work was a hindrance to carry on with the studies. However, the image that the school trajectory demanded an excessive cost – a cost many youngsters were not prepared to pay – remained as the backdrop. There was no motivation and consequently pupils got bored. The boredom manifested itself in many ways: lack of interest, indiscipline, escapes from classroom etc. The pupils had two options: to balance their school life between boredom and tension, or drop out.

The school aspirations of the youngsters: projects and interdictions

Despite the difficulties experienced in the school trajectory, education remained as a value for a large fraction of the youngsters. For some, it was a pendency to be resolved in the future. In other cases there was a prospect, albeit remote, of a course in higher education. The dream of pursuing studies in Higher Education or courses of professional training was described by all youngsters that had finished or were about to finish Secondary School.

Among the school experiences reported, Cirlene had one of the few trajectories of relative success. She did up to the 6th grade of Fundamental Education at her local school. From the 7th grade to the 1st grade of Secondary School she went to another school nearby, because it was a better quality institution, with less indiscipline. She failed only once, at the 8th grade. When she began the course, she was in the 2nd grade of Secondary School, already at a third school, also near home, but in a neighboring borough. Cirlene had a good impression of her current school and of her teachers. Despite mentioning some difficulties, she did not refer to any serious schooling problems, and she invested in her education as a possibility of increasing her chances in the search for a job.

Between studying and working, the weight had been put until then in studying, differently from her elder brother. At 23, he had completed the 5th grade of Fundamental Education. According to Cirlene, their father would rather they studied, but the brother did not want to: *It's him. He didn't want to.* She planned to get a job and pay for a preparatory course (for the Higher Education entering exams). She dreamed of one day going into Higher Education: *Medicine or Nursing.*

For those who planned to resume their studies, the private 'suppletive' (shortened substitute) courses were the favored option. Only one youngster manifested the wish to do the EJA course of the municipal system because it was easier: *you do a discipline, you keep studying until you finish it, and so it's easier.* In general, youngsters considered that the private course was of better quality, many times associated with the fact that pupils were more interested in the course when they had paid for it. There was greater confidence in the efficiency of the private 'suppletives', along with greater speed to finish the course. A hierarchy of school institutions dedicated to the popular classes was established: the private institutions were better than the public ones. Thus, the option for these schools seemed to stem from a calculation that took into account the shorter time and the smaller chances of failing, within a strategy of shortening the path:

But I don't want to go back to studying, I mean, the whole year. Because if I go back to studying the whole year, I'm going to stay one year in the 7th and one year in the 8th. I'm gonna have like five years ahead of me. [...] You're gonna try harder because it's coming from your pocket. Because if it doesn't work out here, you'll have to pay all over again. (Maicon, trainee)
I prefer to pay because sometimes if you pay you give more value to your study, to your money. Because you're not gonna pay to go there and just mess about. Then you give more value to your studies and to your money (Eduardo, trainee)

The preference for the private 'suppletives' was comparative to the Youngster and Adult Education courses of the municipality. The

youngsters had as reference one of the courses that operated in a building in the city's main avenue. The school's working conditions were precarious, both in the physical aspect and in its organization. They offered a negative view of the school for youngsters and adults when compared to private institutions nearby. There was an idea that the school for Youngster and Adult Education offered a superficial, low-quality education, whose certificate had no value. The low quality became an attribute of whoever attended the school: older students and vandals.

Thus, the youngsters tended to save their return to school to an opportunity in which they were employed and could pay for better quality studies, including school fees, transport, and school material. Such decision would depend basically on the safety of relying on an income for some period of time, so that they could make longer term plans.

One of the youngsters, Bruno, manifested a strong wish of going back to study. When he entered the program, he had the expectation of being referred to some school, which did not happen. He asked around the local schools in search for a place, but found none. His only alterative was going to the Youngster and Adult Education courses offered by the municipality. However, as the service at the Youngster and Adult Education School was based around regional units, a new series of difficulties was created for his comeback: the impossibility of harmonizing working hours and studies, the financial costs of transport to school, the difficulty of access and safety if going on foot. One of the few youngsters who demonstrated a strong conviction of going back to studies suffered with the inexistence of an adequate system of school places for the Education of Youngsters and Adults.

Final considerations: the experience of school inequalities

The school "crisis" cannot be explained solely from a pedagogical or school viewpoint.

The school experience of today's youngsters is based on a much wider range of frameworks and possibilities, while it is constructed within a feeling of collapse of the school in its role as an agent capable of promoting the social mobility of the younger generations. A classic reading of the school based on its socializing function, by seeing youngsters just as students, is not able to encompass the meanings of this crisis and of its impacts for the youngsters from popular classes. One has to try to understand the relation weaved between the youngsters and the schools from a perspective that treat the former in their entirety, not as students, but as youngsters who study and also have other activities, who build their school and professional trajectory together with those other dimensions that comprise their lives. Such an approach is based on what Sposito (2003) has called *a non-school perspective of the school*. Retracing the development of the sociology of education in Brazil and the theoretical frameworks of some foreign authors, that author proposes that a non-school perspective in the sociological study of the school would be useful to understand several aspects of the crisis lived by the school as a central agency for the socialization of the new generations. The recognition of the loss of the cultural monopoly by the school occurs in the middle of the social transformations of contemporary society, and the school culture – notwithstanding its specificity – tends to become just one more culture among many. This non-school perspective, although having the school as its privileged object of study, does not choose it as its sole and primordial empirical object, but aims at analyzing the educational phenomenon incorporating the investigation of other educational situations and socializing practices observed in the family, in groups of peers, in informal exchanges, in the public sphere, in the world of associations, in social movements, and in the relations with the media.

According to Dubet and Martuccelli (1997), we must understand the school institution from a *multiple* perspective. In this view, the school fulfils basically three functions:

a function of *integration* that derives from the 'classic' model of socialization by internalization; a function of *distribution* that leads to considering the school as a 'market'; a function of *subjectivation* associated to the particular relationship that the individuals build with the school culture. (p. 261)

For those authors, the school experience is not given, but constructed through a multiplicity of conducts that the students adopt faced with these functions.

In the *subjectivation* plane themes such as *authenticity* and sincerity, on one hand, and the *artifice of the social game*, on the other, come into play. Thus, the sphere of subjectivation presents

[...] the figure of a subject that has the ability to keep his/her authenticity beyond a dual experience that threatens to reduce the actor to the 'artifice' of competition and to the market-driven conformism of the juvenile culture (Dubet, 1994, p. 211).

The search for authenticity emerges, for example, as a struggle against not being recognized by the teachers and by the school organization, of being identified with an inferior position in the hierarchy of school distinctions[5]. Many times, such struggle is manifested in the way of a withdrawal from school life or attitudes of revolt.

The school experience of the youngsters researched seems to clarify what is common to the majority of the practices experienced in the schools of the large urban centers: to attend an institution in which the obstacles to success are enormous and the certificates are almost worthless compared to such personal investment, but to which, despite all that, the youngsters continue to come as one of the few possibilities of living with others, protected from the violence of the streets and from the sameness of their homes. Many students go to

school but do not get involved in the school activities. They value the time when they are out the teachers' control. Others, even being out of school, spend their time at the gates during the pupils' entrance and exit.

On the other hand, we have found youngsters who, regardless of the difficulties, have managed to build a relation without serious conflicts with the school. Among them, some dreamed of carrying on with their studies into Higher Education. Others planned to do exams or invest in professionalizing courses. For these youngsters the school was a less disturbing experience. Seen as a possibility of social mobility and integration or as a space for sociability, the school was still a meaningful space, valued by some youngsters.

The uneven history involving youngsters, schools and teachers has disseminated a preconceived idea of "youngsters against the school". It is common to hear testimonies such as: "youngsters do not value the school"; "they are all delinquents"; "they are barbarians"; "they threaten the teachers". On the other hand, there is also a tendency to shift the responsibility to the teachers: "they stick together"; "they are disheartened"; "they do not understand their pupils"; "they are outdated and incompetent".

The most ordinary and obvious fact is not, however, taken into account: the school is a space where people meet and make social relations. These relations can be rich and human, nut they can also be dehumanizing. A project conducted by the NGO Educative Action with teachers and youngsters from some public schools in São Paulo highlights that

[...] one of the main difficulties for the school to deal with its pupils relates to the invisibility of the features more characteristically juvenile of this clientele, which are hidden behind their identities as students. (Corti; Freitas; Sposito, 2001, p. 36)

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5. On the issue of *contempt* and *authenticity,* see Dubet (2001).

This school-centric view sees pupils as resistant to the school culture and to the role of students, given their social origin. The youngsters come to school with dispositions and habits, developed in their family or produced by a life of poverty, that clash against the environment and culture of the school. This perspective also separates the teachers from the spaces of encounter and dialogue with the youngsters. The school routine, the bureaucracy, the organization of school work, and the conditions for work prevent a closer contact between the actors. The youngsters are there to learn – they are students – and the adults are there to teach – they are teachers.

These encounters and the social representations around poor youngsters produce an image in which the youngsters do not enjoy studying, they hate their teachers, and are a constant threat to colleagues and school personnel. Quite the opposite, the Educative Action project has shown a different universe with regard to youngsters' aspirations: beyond a common view of the students' *anomia*, the youngsters demand clear and democratic rules at school, in which they can feel valued and having access to a pleasurable experience, opposed to a school experience often dehumanizing. They routinely meet and clash against teachers who also live, suffer and react to the dilemmas of a debased social and professional condition. They are presented with the promise of social mobility through education – constantly advertised by the media and by the official discourse – and with a social experience that denies in advance such discourse. The picture is made worse by the fact that their condition as youngsters – their dreams, perspectives and values – cannot find room for expression and realization within the school environment.

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