

Public schools and meritocratic discourse: high school reform proposals and student expectations

Danyelle Nilin Gonçalves¹
ORCID: 0000-0002-9353-054X
Irapuan Peixoto Lima Filho¹
ORCID: 0000-0002-6669-2471
Harlon Romariz Rabelo Santos²
ORCID: 0000-0002-5642-0448

Abstract

This article discusses the reform proposals for secondary education, reflecting on the extent to which some of the proposed contents and practices converge with individualistic and meritocratic concepts and discourses already present in the public school environment, but now reinforced. Based on a broad set of surveys conducted between 2019 and 2022, it seeks to capture the meritocratic perceptions of public school students from Ceará. Reflexive data analysis allowed us to identify a considerable expectation among high school students for an educational and future life that provides stability and desirable social conditions. Such expectation, however, goes hand in hand with a mass adherence to meritocratic and individualistic discourse in general, with little reflection on social conditioning factors. The reports and data indicate that school agents—teachers and classmates—are significant players in the process of constructing this view. However, one must consider a possible mismatch between young people’s expectations and the educational reality provided by this new high school. At a time when higher education is expanding and knowledge-based economic dynamics are intensifying, schools play an increasingly key role in ensuring an adequate, complete education as to not produce even greater educational gaps between different social groups, especially in Brazil’s already serious context of social and educational inequalities.

Keywords

Public school – Meritocracy – High school reform – Youth – Reflexivities.

1- Universidade Federal do Ceará. Fortaleza, Ceará, Brazil. Contact: danyelle.nilin@ufc.br; irapuan.peixoto@ufc.br

2- Universidade Federal de Mato Grosso. Cuiabá, Mato Grosso, Brazil. Contact: harlon.romariz@gmail.com



<https://doi.org/10.1590/S1678-4634202450273348en>

This content is licensed under a Creative Commons attribution-type BY 4.0.

Introduction

Since the mid-1990s, basic education in Brazil has come closer to universalization, especially in the context of elementary education, achieving a result pursued for decades by social actors in Brazilian society. New challenges emerged, above all, around the quality and purposes of education. At the high school level, despite numerous advances, challenges remain such as those related to school dropout and the significance of this stage of education among young people.

As an attempt to respond to the problems of secondary education, the federal government at the time proposed a reform, initiated in 2016, which, in addition to being carried out in a non-democratic and ineffectively discussed way, it was marked by a set of ideals that reflected interests loaded with values such as meritocracy, individualistic perspectives and proposals around themes such as entrepreneurship and youth protagonism. Among others, these values guided the reform, with an impact both on its design and implementation, as well as on school dynamics and the perception of adolescents and young people, i.e., the students at this stage.

In this paper, we propose to carry out a general discussion on the reform of secondary education, reflecting on the extent to which some proposed contents and practices converge on individualist and meritocratic concepts and discourses, already present in the public school environment, but reinforced by these changes. Furthermore, we consider school as an environment of social interaction, where formal and informal content and curriculum are constituted by agents, including students, the importance of the production of meanings, expectations, perceptions, and processes of reflexivity that arise among these young people and adolescents, both in their interaction with the school as a social microcosm, and in their intersection with society. In this way, how present individualistic logic and meritocratic discourses are among adolescents and young people in the context of high school is brought into question. Likewise, we seek to understand the meaning of school for these students and their expectations for the future, in relation to what is provided by the school and to their perceptions about the present, future, and possible trajectories.

It is considered that there is a flow and relational set between what adolescents and young people project, their beliefs and expectations, and what the school provokes and can offer, especially based on what is offered and manifested in its curriculum. This understanding causes a special concern about the impacts that this new secondary education proposal can generate, what values and contents are in the universe of these changes, and the effects they can produce.

Methodological design

This paper makes articulated reflections on meritocracy in public schools and expectations among school-aged young people based on a broad set of research carried out, with data collection at six different moments, within the scope of the Laboratory for Studies in Politics, Education and City of Federal University of Ceará (LEPEC/UFC) between 2019 and 2022.

In general terms, the data was obtained through (I) a questionnaire applied to 118 high school students enrolled in a central public school in Fortaleza in 2019; (II) a questionnaire applied to 57 alumni from that same school, who passed recruitment processes and entrance exams in 2021; (III) a questionnaire applied to 489 high school students of eleven schools in ten municipalities in the state of Ceará (distributed across the State's planning macro-regions), in 2022; (IV) two questionnaires applied to school-aged young people (students and alumni) participating in a professional qualification project offered by the Government of the State of Ceará, the first with 487 respondents and the second with 415, collected a few months apart, in 2020; (V) questionnaires carried out during the following editions of the same project: the second edition applied to 491 participants in 2021 and the third edition to 487 participants in 2022; and (VI) data from the focus groups carried out with these young people, totaling 199 participants distributed in 35 groups held between 2020 and 2022.

Each of these collections met different objectives and methodological specifications, such as the use of electronic forms, presenting quantitative approaches (questionnaires) and other qualitative approaches (focus groups). However, all of them were directed or coordinated by the authors of this paper, which places them within a flow of investigations that unfold over time with the same general target audience (school-aged young people or their immediate alumni), dealing with related topics, such as perceptions about education, sociability, political participation, among others.

The questionnaires administered in schools between 2019 and 2022 used Google electronic forms and were analyzed with *Microsoft Excel* and R; while the questionnaires collected between 2020 and 2022 from young people participating in the government project were collected via electronic form in *SurveyMonkey* with analyses in the software itself and in *Stata*. Descriptive analyses and simple crosses with the Chi-square test were prioritized. The focus groups were carried out in different ways due to the Covid-19 pandemic, as those in 2020 had to be mediated via videoconference on the *Zoom* and *Google Meet* platforms, while those in 2021 and 2022 took place in person. In both cases, the conversations were transcribed by the research team³ and analyzed via *NVivo* software through the coding of priority themes and their organization into cluster trees and cross-coding matrices, also generating word clouds by recurrence.

To achieve the proposed goal, a mass of data was obtained that discusses mostly the way young people see school and how they associate the logic of meritocracy with their lives, school, and professional ambitions, intersected by the recent context of the reformulation of education and its implications in a perspective focused on young people's alleged ability to choose what to study and the centrality of technical-professional training.

It is also worth highlighting the youthful condition involving these actors. We start from a broad conception of youth (Pais, 2003) that considers not only the age dimension, but the diverse components that build the notion of what it means to be young, related to the biological maturation of the body, the personal chronology self-constructed by the

3- All references to focus groups are part of a survey carried out by researchers from the University of Fortaleza (Unifor) and Federal University of Ceará (UFC) within the Chief Scientist Program of the Ceará Foundation for Support of Scientific and Technological Development. (Sales *et al.*, 2021, 2022, 2023).

subjects and, mainly, to the social and symbolic aspects surrounding representations of youth, related to lifestyle, aesthetics, and consumption of cultural goods (Lima Filho, 2014).

This vision is aligned with the perspective of the construction of public policies for youth in Brazil, especially in the first decade of the new century, which made an effort to break from the image of young people as a “social problem” or exclusively as living in a “risk situation” to understanding them as a “subject of rights”, which “represents a paradigm shift, in which the target audience goes from passive to agent, co-responsible for the construction of public policies” (Castro, 2011, p. 283). Since education is, of course, one of the main public policies involving youth, it presupposes the challenge for schools to recognize their students as subjects of rights, endowed with identity processes and diversities not always taken into account in pedagogical practices (Dayrell; Carrano, 2014).

Finally, data analysis was guided by the perspectives of discussions on reflexivity based on the work of authors such as Beck (1997), Bourdieu (2002, 2007, 2012) and Giddens (1997, 2002, 2013).

Secondary education reform: actors, discourses, and conflicts

Effected by Provisional Measure no. 746 of September 22, 2016, the secondary education reform caused considerable change in the curricular basis of secondary education, with practical effects on its educational and social purpose. This measure was issued 22 days after Dilma Rousseff was removed from her position by the National Congress, which culminated in her impeachment. This was a rupture that brought consequences not only for democratic institutions, but for a series of policies that had been constructed in recent years. The secondary education reform proposed changing the National Education Guidelines and Bases Law (n. 9,394/1996) without a settled social discussion and budgetary conditions foreseen for the implementation of the proposed changes.

The discussion about the need to reformulate secondary education was not new. Changes had been suggested for years, especially by educational think tanks⁴, such as the group called “Movimento Todos pela Educação”, as well as large private education conglomerates. Since the 1990s, these institutions have been gaining ground in educational discussions and debates undertaken by education commissions across the country and in the media (Motta; Frigotto, 2017). As Peroni (2015) demonstrates, despite the Brazilian State being the main responsible for access to school, with more than 80% of basic education institutions being public, the training, routines, pedagogical, and management content of the schools are mostly defined by private institutions.

This process is what Rikowski (2017) calls privatization of the public. In the educational case, it occurs through companies taking control over education, not necessarily involving ownership, but a dispute over content, in a class restoration project. The current idea defended by these groups was that public schools and, in particular, secondary education were in crisis, that educational indices did not meet the parameters established by the World Bank and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF). Criticism

4- Institutions that operate in different areas and that, among other functions, produce research, analysis, and recommendations for public policymakers.

also focused on the quality and training of teachers, the content taught, the quantity of subjects, the disconnection with the world of work and inadequacy with the demands of the production system.

The explanatory memorandum that accompanied the proposal for MP no. 746 criticized the curriculum, (considered extensive, superficial, and fragmented) the lack of dialogue with youth, the productive sector and the demands of the 21st century, the high number of young people out of school, and the poor performance shown by external assessments. In order to resolve these issues, it was proposed to make secondary education more flexible, through a new teaching model that separated the curriculum into two moments: the first phase, aimed at common basic training (performed in a year and a half); and the second, subdivided into training itineraries (Languages, Mathematics, Natural Sciences, Human Sciences, and Technical and Professional Training), with the student being responsible for only one of these itineraries in the remaining period of one and a half years.

Complying with the legal procedure, 568 amendments to the Provisional Measure (MP in the Portuguese acronym) were presented over the course of a week, with 148 being ultimately accepted partially or completely by the rapporteur of the matter.

In the days following the MP's presentation, the congress debate surrounding secondary education intensified. Supporters of the reform reinforced the need for immediate change, and those against it proposed a broad debate on the topic. Education professionals, researchers on the subject, teachers' and students' unions vehemently opposed the proposal, both due to its arbitrary form (through an MP), as it would alter the most important national education law, and due to the little space given to debate, mainly with key stakeholders. Criticism was also directed at the content, as it established a hierarchy between subjects, causing some of them to be summarily excluded from the education system, in addition to a fragmented teaching logic, which would lead to an expansion of the already well-known social inequalities, since it would prevent new generations, especially the most vulnerable, from having broad educational opportunities (Silva; Gonçalves, 2017).

Young influencers made videos with of informative and opinionated nature, aimed at students, in which they discussed the current problems in secondary education and the solutions brought about by the reformulation, trying to improve even the points that at first seemed problematic, such as the increase in workload. With examples of previously tested successful experiences, including the ones of other countries, the influencers showed the advantages of studying more hours and being able to "choose" the subjects to study, reinforcing that the existing system appeared to be outdated and not very appealing to students. Thus the new proposal was the most appealing for students who would now choose what to study, according to what they want to do in the job market. One of these videos alone had, at the time, more than 1,600 million views and each of them generated favorable and contrary expressions⁵. It was later discovered that these videos were advertisement, in order to gain support for the proposal. Using something not yet

5- The video in question is titled "Everything you need to know about the new high school!!", from the channel "Você Sabia?" in which two young people, using very colloquial language, explain the "positive" points of the reform.

widely explored at the time, the government paid *YouTube* channels to present the reasons for reforming secondary education, as well as the possible “benefits” that the proposal would bring.

Traditional media outlets also positioned themselves and were almost always in line with the government proposal. Matheus (2020, p. 89), in his dissertation, demonstrates that when conceiving...

[...] education as an individual process, which seeks to prepare the subject to adapt to the opportunities of the job market and develop the skills necessary to achieve their personal objectives, Grupo Globo’s journalistic discourse [...] produces an effect of evidence on Brazilian education centered on the notion of specialized training for subjects with different life perspectives, erasing the class struggle, and naturalizing the inequalities generated by capitalism.

The students, the target audience of the proposal, occupied schools in several states across the country in what became known as “Primavera Secundarista” (secondary school’s spring). Inspired by demonstrations that had been taking place since the previous year, in repudiation of the measures taken by some governors, the occupations of educational institutions were articulated by groups and student movements and organized through social networks in some states of the Brazilian federation, in a simultaneous movement. Despite being stronger in the states of Paraná and São Paulo, it gained national coverage (there were occupations in 22 states of 27 federal units), starting to gain the support of university students who also occupied their institutions in protest against the reform of secondary education and the proposed law that established low spending limits to education by the federal government. School occupations, considered practically unprecedented in the country, postponed for the first time the application of the National Secondary Education Exam (ENEM, in the Portuguese acronym), the main gateway to public universities in the Brazilian educational system.

Despite the eleven public hearings and the wide demonstration of students, professors and researchers, and the impacts brought on by the student occupation, the MP was approved in its vast majority by the congressmen. In the Federal Chamber, on December 7, 2016, it obtained 263 votes in favor, 106 votes against, and three abstentions; and in the federal senate, on February 8, 2017, it obtained 43 votes in favor and 13 against, going on to the presidential sanction, becoming Law no. 13,415, on February 16, 2017 (BRASIL, 2016; Rossi, 2017).

One of the most blunt criticisms consistently made towards the reform of secondary education concerns its utilitarian nature, focusing on training for the job market (Motta; Frigotto, 2017). This approach is fragmentary and individualistic, bringing the student the responsibility of choosing an itinerary according to “their interest”. Contradictorily, this was the main idea promoted at the time of the MP discussion: the idea that, finally, the student would get rid of the “burden” of studying all subjects and would be “free” to decide what really “mattered” to them. In this context, above all, subjects that would initially have no immediate “usefulness”, such as those linked to the Human Sciences and Arts, would be excluded.

The fact is that the secondary education reform exposed a discourse that mixes individualism, utilitarianism, a distorted notion of freedom, and a premise of meritocracy that had been continually gaining support and been previously repeated in schools by teachers and managers, due to the influence of both private actors in the definition of the content and paradigms, as well as the public circulation of themes of entrepreneurship and youth protagonism.

Sousa (2023) demonstrates, based on the observation of daily school life, in its different practices and rites, how the discourse on school success is being constructed by reinforcing the neoliberal logic that understands results more as the consequence of personal effort, of notions such as discipline, determination, and focus than through the lens of social aspects that help or hinder success.

Since the term emerged, coined by Michael Young in 1958 in *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, this topic has been discussed by specialists, with special emphasis on recent decades, when the neoliberal project gained strength in the construction of public policies, notably contrary redistributive and social welfare policies.

According to Barbosa (2006), there is no consensus on meritocracy: when it comes to representation, meritocracy is a seductive system that distinguishes societies based on privileges and inheritances, as well as current democracies. However, when it comes however to making it a basic criterion for social organization based on individual performance, it ceases to be consensual.

Meritocracy understood as the denial of privileges is accepted by everyone as a tool against social inequality, but when applied as an affirmation of deserving, it justifies inequalities, a fact that is rarely brought “to people’s consciousness and, even less, made explicit and discussed”. (Barbosa, 2006, p. 23).

In recent years, criticisms about recurring inequalities and difficulties in social mobility have become more evident. Studies by economists Papageorge and Thom (2018) demonstrated that significant differences between low- and high-income children are not genomic and are instead a result of access to schooling and prosperity. The *The Global Social Mobility Report 2020*, from the World Economic Forum (WEF, 2020), which analyzed the situation in 82 countries, in addition to confirming the difficulty of mobility in most of the cases analyzed, also concluded that countries are failing to provide citizens with opportunities to prosper, leaving them binded to their status at birth. The impact of this affects not only the lives of individuals, but economic growth itself.

The difficulty of social mobility, the central role given to education, the increasingly strenuous selection processes, and a tacit acceptance of meritocratic premises have encouraged great contemporary thinkers to look critically at the idea of meritocracy, such as in the cases of Daniel Markovits (2021) and Michael Sandel (2022), professors at Yale and Harvard, respectively.

Markovits, in *The Meritocracy Trap: How America’s Foundational Myth Feeds Inequality, Dismantles the Middle Class, and Devours the Elite*, published in the United States in 2019 and in Brazil in 2021, defends that meritocracy is not only a sham, but also a trap (as suggested by the title of the book) that affects all social layers, including those who initially benefit from it. According to the author,

Whatever its original purposes and early triumphs, meritocracy now concentrates advantages and sustains toxic inequalities. And the taproot of all these troubles is not too little but rather too much meritocracy. Merit itself has become a counterfeit virtue, a false idol. And meritocracy – formerly benevolent and just – has become what it invented to combat. A mechanism for the concentration and dynastic transmission of wealth and privilege across generations. A caste order that breeds rancor and division. A new aristocracy, even. (Markovits, 2021, p. 15).

Sandel (2022) analyzes the communitarian and political implications of this logic, since this idea, repeated and internalized for generations, destroys the sense of community and mutual respect, thus including, for it reduces the capacity for solidarity with the less fortunate, “losers” in this scheme.

Several authors that discuss the topic agree that, in the medium term, unfulfilled expectations and promises may generate both resentment in the layers that are not able to rise economically (in lower and middle classes) and a deep feeling of anguish and pain for young people. According to Llosa (2019), the most employable youth become very hopeless when they discover that promises about their future are outdated.

Therefore, it is noteworthy that this meritocratic discourse is extremely widespread, often without any questioning process in the school environment, and resonates with students from different social segments.

Given the above, we sought to deepen the analysis of the meritocratic discourse in schools, taking as an indicator the comparison between the responses to a questionnaire applied in a public school in the central area of Fortaleza, capital of the state of Ceará, in two different years: in 2019 and in 2021. While in 2019 the questionnaire was applied to both students and alumni, in 2021 it was applied only to alumni. Based on a Likert scale, the participants had to take a stand in face of expressions often used in a meritocratic approach.

Table 1 – Level of agreement with popular phrases from meritocratic discourse

| Meritocratic Phrases | 2019 sample (students) | | | 2021 sample (alumni) | | |
|---|------------------------|-----------------|-------|----------------------|-----------------|-------|
| | % partially agree | % totally agree | Total | % partially agree | % totally agree | Total |
| “They’ll say it’s luck, but you know it’s effort.” | 25,4 | 74,6 | 100 | 19,3 | 80,7 | 100 |
| “Success is the sum of small efforts repeated day after day.” | 12,7 | 83,9 | 96,6 | 3,5 | 94,7 | 98,2 |
| “The early bird catches the worm.” | 58,5 | 34,7 | 93,2 | - | - | - |
| “Train while they sleep; study while they have fun; persist while they rest; and then, live what they dream.” | 36,4 | 52,5 | 89,0 | 40,4 | 26,3 | 66,7 |
| “Meritocracy is a reward system based on personal merit, according to which rewarding those who do not deserve it, demeans those who have merit.” | 40,7 | 27,1 | 67,8 | - | - | - |
| “The correct way to enter university must be individual merit and not a quota system.” | - | - | - | 15,8 | 8,8 | 24,6 |

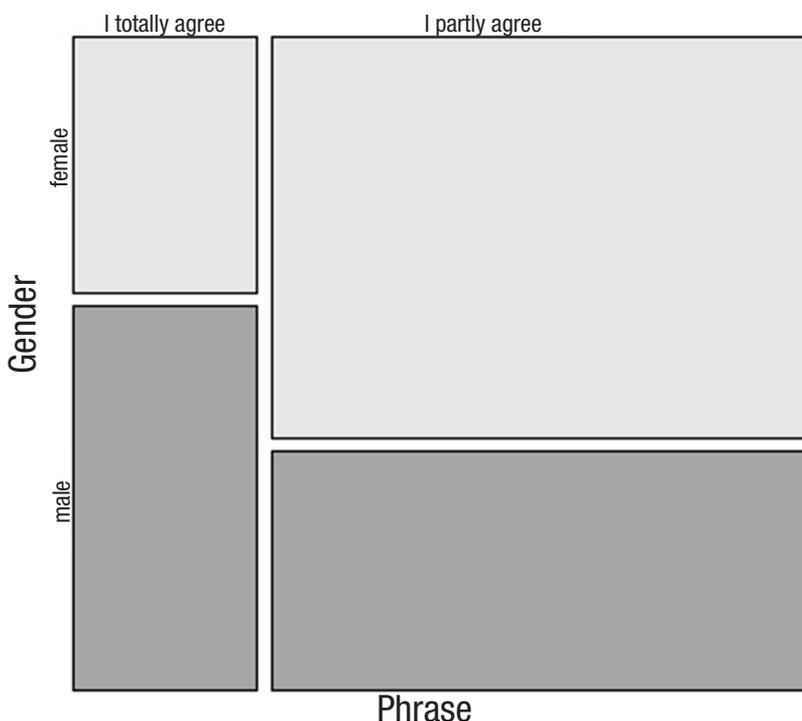
Notes: Likert-type responses (totally disagree, partially disagree, partially agree and totally agree). Not all phrases were included in the questionnaires submitted to both groups.

Source: Prepared by the authors.

The results presented in *Table 1* indicate a high level of agreement with these popular phrases of meritocratic discourse, being consistent between the two groups researched. Even though mere agreement with these phrases is not complete evidence of meritocratic ideological commitment, they are an indication of adherence to this perspective, especially when considering that these respondents are students from public schools, enrolled or graduated, where coherently this discourse would have less capillarity due to the fact that it is a non-privileged social context.

From the 2019 sample, we crossed the level of agreement with the sentence that reached total agreement (partially or completely) and in both samples – “They will say it’s luck, but you know it’s effort.” – in order to verify the association with the variables gender, income, and religion.

Figure 1 – Mosaic graph of the intersection between level of agreement with the phrase and gender

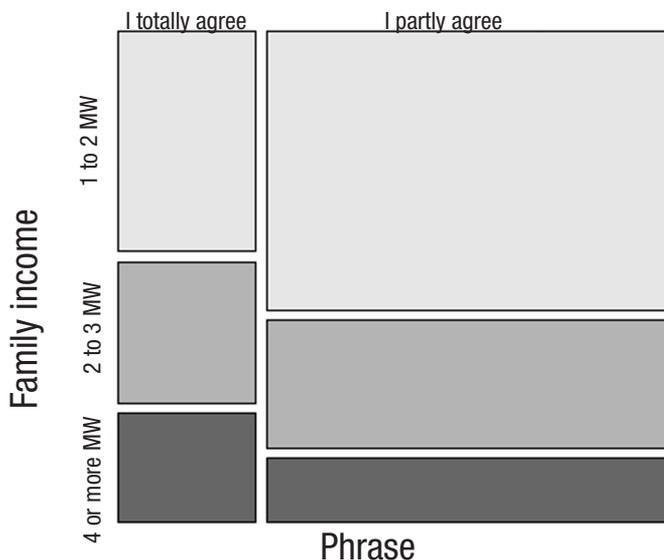


Note: Phrase: “They’ll say it’s luck, but you know it’s effort.” p-value (Chi-Square): 0.03.

Source: Prepared by the authors.

Through *Figure 1*, it can be seen that women have a significantly lower level of agreement than men. *Figure 2* shows that students with higher declared income have a proportionally higher level of agreement with the sentence than students with lower declared income.

Figure 2 – Mosaic graph of the intersection between level of agreement with the phrase and income in minimum wage

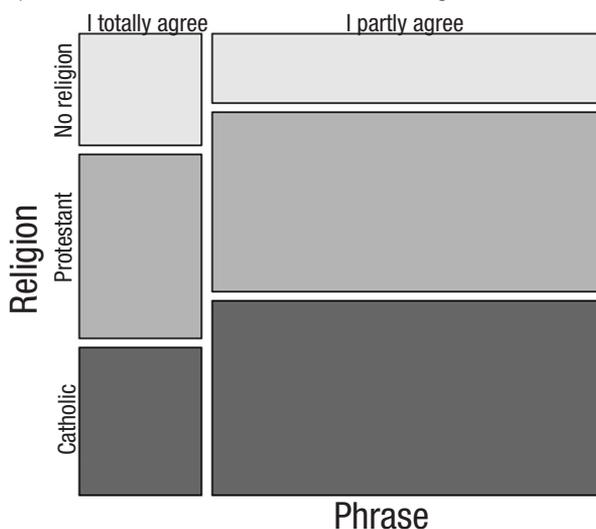


Note: Phrase: "They'll say it's luck, but you know it's effort." p-value (Chi-square): 0.05.

Source: Prepared by the authors.

In turn, through *Figure 3* it is possible to verify that religion is also a variable that is related to the level of agreement with this phrase, with Catholics being those who show proportionally less adherence. These associations, graphically represented here, showed significance in the Chi-Square Test performed. Despite these differences, it is important to emphasize that the level of agreement is very high, and the differences produced by these social variables are low in general, indicating that there is majority adherence, even among different social groups.

Figure 3 – Mosaic graph of the intersection between level of agreement with the phrase and religion



Note: Phrase: "They'll say it's luck, but you know it's effort." p-value (Chi-Square): 0.05.

Source: Prepared by the authors.

In the questionnaire applied in 2020, with 482 young people aged 15 to 19, residents of the peripheries of Fortaleza and participants in a professional training course offered by the State Government of Ceará, we asked “if you could go back in time and give yourself some advice, what would you say?” The three most significant responses were: “study more” (25.8%), “believe in yourself more” (22.4%) and “don’t leave school” (20%) (Sales *et al.*, 2021).

During the focus groups held afterwards, young people were able to further elaborate on this discourse, through responses such as: “[I would say:] ‘Study more, persist in your dreams and one day you will achieve everything you want’” (Young person #1, female, 19 years old, Fortaleza, October 2020).

To the same extent, talking about school “failure” also mobilizes the same discursive structure, in which the young person themselves is to blame: “I could [learn at school], but I think I lacked commitment. I think I could do it... I just didn’t want to, because I was lazy. I went to school just to move on to the next grade” (Young man #176, male, 18 years old, Fortaleza, July 2022).

As Bruni and Santori (2021) state, society has established a belief in meritocracy as a type of promise that allows anyone – as long as they try hard enough – to reach the top; but in fact, it is a complex ideology that legitimizes inequality. While the idea of success within anyone’s reach (or on a more modest scale, the faith that the effort of one’s work today will yield the fruits of recognition tomorrow) mobilizes subjects in their daily activities, at the same time, it promotes political thoughts against redistributive policies and are favorable of rewarding individual effort.

The ideology of Job’s friends returns with all its force: the unworthy is guilty. No one ever says this explicitly, but behind so many speeches, today as well as yesterday, there is the idea that poverty is a fault. After all, the real, big problem with meritocracy is that it justifies and legitimizes inequalities. As if inequalities, which have always existed, and perhaps will always exist, needed defense lawyers. (Bruni; Santori, 2021, p. 1).

The strength of these ideas even places young people in a competitive logic of success and failure, alongside the naturalization of the “loser” due to their personal failure, and not due to a structure of inequalities that prevents them from achieving greater ambitions.

In Brazil, one of the markers of this academic success is entering higher education, especially via ENEM. Obviously, for low-income young people from the peripheries of large cities, entering higher education is a dream, but there is a portion of this group that rises to the desired level, and this puts them in a different situation in the public education system and even in their own families. In a reality where a significant portion of parents have not even completed basic education, higher education is a projected achievement, like the hope of social mobility.

They [the parents] always encouraged me, they always encouraged me. It’s something that my mother, since I was little, tried to pass on to us. It was something she didn’t have the opportunity to do, and it was her dream, right? And I’m kind of the first person in my family to go to college and I’m... not taking on the dream, right? But it’s like I made her dream come true, too. (Young woman #34, female, 18 years old, Fortaleza, November 2020).

The dreams of entering higher education – and the consequent better placement in the job market – are incorporated by young people, as well as the sense of returning to the benefits of parents who invested and encouraged the entire process: “I want to go to college, get a job, give my parents the best and the greatest, right? As they always did for me and still do today” (Young woman #3, female, 20 years old, Fortaleza, October 2020).

In the questionnaires applied in 2020 to these young people from the social project, 51.4% of them dreamed of entering a higher education course, although another 26.3% only wanted a technical course. Those who intended to start a business totaled 6.1%. This data showed that there was a direct link between dreams and the job market.

Meritocratic logic, however, dominated the thinking of these young people. Thus, at each edition of that project (the first in 2020, the second in 2021 and the third in 2022), we asked young people “what is important for you to make your dreams come true?”, and the answer varied a little each time, but made it clear that their own effort was the main element for success in their professional and student careers, alongside a first opportunity, financial facilitation, and family support (Table 2).

Table 2 – Percentage of Responses to “What is important for you to achieve your dreams?” (Multiple choice)

| | My own effort | First opportunity | Family help | Money to get started |
|------------------|---------------|-------------------|-------------|----------------------|
| Edition #1/ 2020 | 90,2 | 70,6 | 47,6 | 44,9 |
| Edition #2/ 2021 | 63,3 | 56,0 | 39,6 | 48,9 |
| Edition #3/ 2022 | 69,4 | 65,5 | 40,7 | 43,5 |

Source: Prepared from Sales *et al.* (2021, 2022, 2023).

These young people are also able to objectify these questions when they reflected on their student and professional lives.

So, [where I work] is not the career I want to pursue, but yes, it is important to me and money doesn't mean much, no, because... what's the point of having money...? There are so many people making memes lately with this thing: “either be happy and poor, or be sad and rich”? Huh? And people are treating this like it's a joke, but in reality, everyone chooses... they'd rather be rich or to be happy and poor. (Young woman #24, female, no age, Fortaleza, October 2020).

In this dynamic of planning for the future or at least thinking about it, the school plays an important role. Surveys that measure the social trust index, such as the one carried out by *Ibope Intelligence* in 2019, placed public schools in 5th position as the most trustworthy institution. This positive perception was also seen in the questionnaires we analyzed. In the survey of 489 young high school students carried out in 2022, we asked about their perception of the school and 63.3% of them saw the institution as a “possibility to have a future”, while 29.6% saw it as “a place to gain knowledge.” In the other options offered, no item accumulated more than 4%.

In the questionnaire applied to 487 young people aged 15 to 19 from the peripheries of Fortaleza, conducted in 2020, we asked if the young people liked the schools where

they studied in (whether they were students or alumni) and 66.8% answered “yes”, and although (in a multiple choice question) 69.7% chose friendships as what they liked most about schools, 54% chose classes, and 56% the teachers. Of the students, 68% believed that school helped them get a job.

The positive evaluation continued in the following cycles of application of that research. In focus groups carried out between 2020 and 2022, for example, we collected reports like this:

I've always had great teachers! I studied in public schools all my life, and I always had great teachers, from elementary school to high school. I never had a problem with a teacher. They always encouraged me to grow, they were always there when I needed it, to help with something. So, I have nothing to complain about: it was a great school for me, and I learned a lot there. (Young man #159, male, 19 years old, Fortaleza, July 2022).

However, there was a group of young people who complained about the lack of links between school and the job market or the inability to direct students to work occupations, corroborating the discourse of the secondary education reform.

Personally, I think that, *although I really liked the teachers* I had there, I think most of them didn't encourage the students, [...] they didn't help me at all, like, after I finished. And there are schools that encourage it. It doesn't make it easier, but it encourages, like, getting your first job and things like that that make it easier [...] at least for me it didn't make it any easier [...]. The teachers were great, but they really lacked that. (Young woman #153, female, 20 years old, Fortaleza, July 2022, emphasis added).

Student Ambition and School Performance

To analyze how young people deal with the meritocratic discourse, it is worth taking a look at the way they perform in school. In 2021, we identified the significant success of 135 people approved in the previous year's ENEM in a centrally located public school in the city of Fortaleza, which had already been monitored in other research. Thus, a specific questionnaire was applied to 3rd year high school alumni (equivalent to 12th grade in the US system) who had passed exams such as ENEM, the Unified Selection System (SISU), and entrance exams to public and private universities, resulting in 57 responses.

Almost all the respondents (98.2%) had tried the ENEM, but a significant number also signed up for selections at state universities (68.4%) and private colleges (19.3%). Approval was high, with 58% approved at federal universities, 19.3% at the state universities, among other institutions. Of the total, 68.4% were attending higher education at the time of the survey, although another 22.8% had given up for various reasons (14% were willing to try the ENEM again the following year).

It is interesting to see how they managed to achieve such results. The vast majority studied at home in addition to the hours they already spent at school; but a significant number also took attended extra classes both at school and externally (via YouTube

channels, for example), and practiced writing the essay on their own; while a smaller but still significant portion read books on their own, participated in study groups, or took preparatory courses in parallel. No one checked the “I did nothing” option.

Passing exams for access to higher education is not the result of chance, therefore, requiring the student’s “preparation” and a series of specific practices of systematized studies. Even so, such systematization did not need to go too far beyond what is understood as a “school routine”: when asked how many hours a day they studied outside of school time, the majority (57.9%) replied “less than 4 hours”, even though 5.3% said that they spent more than 8 hours. As for the days of the week, 80.7% said they studied only on school days. We might think that there were some contributing factors to their academic success, and the questionnaire captured some of them: just over half (51.8%) had their own room to study at home and 61.4% just studied, without having to work or having a job.

It is also interesting to note that only 35.1% took their entire primary education in the public system. In Brazil, there is a movement among families to enroll their children in private institutions and make an effort to pay for them, an indication of family investment in better education for their children (Nogueira, 2013).

This sample seemed to experience a different situation of “educational success”, as the entry of young people into higher education was not unprecedented within their families: no less than 80.7% of them had close relatives who attended higher education, and of these 56.5% were cousins, 45.7% uncles and aunts, 39.1% brothers or sisters and 17.4% the mother, among others.

Bourdieu (2012) considers that the transmission of cultural capital specifically aimed at academic success is a family investment, whether through the continuity of a dynasty or through the effort to provide descendants with the acquisition of a portion of non-inherited cultural capital, which involves seeking enrollment in better schools, providing a favorable environment for studies (a “little corner or room” to study at home, without having to work) and a series of objective (financial) and subjective incentives (stimulus, praise), elements that match what the exposed data brought. Lahire (1997), in turn, criticizes the author’s vision and how his theory deals with the problem of the “transmission” of cultural capital.

By investigating 26 cases through interviews with family members in the context of French outskirts (in particular with immigrants), Lahire (1997) understands the details of how children perform in their studies within the most varied family contexts, and leaves somewhat in the background the structuring aspects to emphasize the ways in which they occur, the small strategies adopted, how parents encourage children to study and even empower them in the balance of everyday domestic life, when non-literate parents (at least in French) put their children to read bills, correspondence, and tickets. It identifies that families are contradictory agents, in which a young student will find situations of academic success or failure, encouragement or discouragement, and that this contradiction and the strength of their poles is part of the process that will lead students to failure or success. However, according to the French sociologist, in order to succeed, young people must have a family representative to “lean on” or look up to, and this process will help them achieve their objective, which is also echoed in the data presented.

However, research on this topic considers not only the family environment, but also other factors. In a study on young people's academic expectations, Lorenz *et al.* (2020) consider the influences of the social context, parental socialization, and peer influence, even recognizing that the role of friends tends to grow as they enter adolescence to the detriment of parental influence. Upon realizing that studies indicate that friends' academic expectations are similar to each other, the authors state that, in a study with German high school students, this is due to a friendship selection process activated by the young people themselves. In other words, the educational expectations of friends are similar because students select them from pairs with similar expectation profiles. Although variables such as income, gender and race contribute to the social ties built by these young people are formed in schools and influence aspects of students' ambition, they are not determinant, with views on educational aspirations prevailing in the establishment of friendships (Lorenz *et al.*, 2020).

Although the German research is about educational aspirations and not about academic success, it is possible to see how the sociability factor is something to be considered more carefully in the educational environment, and studies conducted out in Brazil, such as that of Alves *et al.* (2015), also confirm the influence of friends on student success, linked to with factors such as the degree of intensity and quality of student's institutional ties. Segregated, conflictual, and degraded environments contribute to failure, as well as negative social relationships (such as violence, bullying, lack of bonds, etc.).

Despite this social panorama linked to student performance, the idea that self-effort is the main driver of academic success, and to some extent, of the resulting social mobility, is still very strong among young people themselves. Going back to the questionnaires applied to high school graduates admitted to in higher education institutions, when asked what they attributed their success to, 84.2% said it was due to their individual effort, although contradictorily, as it was a multiple choice question, they also credited guidance from teachers (93%) and help from the school (80.7%), which shows that they at least share the idea of their own merit with external help.

However, when stressed with *cliché* phrases about individual performance and meritocracy as a whole, as demonstrated previously, young people end up showing that they believe in the individualistic logic of success.

The dynamics between a social structure that conditions inequalities and individual performance that is even capable of overcoming it is one of the topics that give rise to the discussion of reflexivity. The old "subject versus structure" paradigm of sociology is problematized in contemporary literature that seeks to understand how these flows are possible.

In this way, despite the processes of primary socialization (which include family and school) imputing subjects to incorporate structures, Bourdieu (2002; 2007) explains that the subject will act through practice (the author likes the analogy of "the game": the individual "plays the game") at the intersection between *habitus* and symbolic field in the management of symbolic capital, being able, under the specific conditions of their context, to mobilize the interface between inherited and acquired capital and compete for prestige and legitimacy in a given field.

This capacity is related to the perception of the social subject as an “agent”, someone capable of understanding the social world around them – the fields in which they are acting – and through information, knowledge, capital, being able to perform in search of “better results”, or at least, in “creative outlets”. Such perspective is enhanced when we realize that, at no other time in history, have we had access to so much information and, as a result, have navigated in so many different fields.

This is associated with the perception of reflexive modernity (Beck, 1997) – although Giddens (1997) prefers the term “institutional reflexivity” –, a process that historically locates this moment, which confronts the possibility of Sociology exploring the dynamics that occur between the agent and the structure and, therefore, that indicate the modes of interaction (and tensions) with the structuring conditionalities. Ultimately, this process makes the clash between the modern and the traditional something much more complex. At the same time that the dynamics of globalization enable intense exchanges (of what we could call cultural capital) between different cultures (think of Brazilians young high school students obsessed with Korean cultural assets, such as K-pop and Korean TV shows), there are also organized movements to recognize, preserve and strengthen tradition (Beck, 1997; Giddens, 1997). Even though Domingues (2002) criticizes the vague way in which the concept of reflexivity is treated in the general work of Giddens (2002, 2013), such theoretical development is useful for furthering the analysis of agency, which allows the subject to “pierce the blocking of structures” at times.

The routinization of practices, the assumption of moral values and norms of behavior, associated with other subjects that enable the experience of self-identity processes and lifestyles, even if always developed in association with similar peers, also gives the subject the construction of a very particular self (Giddens, 2002), related to the more general conception of individualism or processes of individualization, which, in a broader perspective, puts tension on the traditional collective categories of sociology (such as class or family) and ends up playing the (individualized) subject in an unequal clash against the global risk society (Beck, 1997).

In this way, young high school students’ adherence to meritocracy discourses is doubly strained by reflexivity. Firstly, the process of individualization mobilizes the discourse that it is each person’s “effort” that will enable social mobility linked to student ambition and success in the educational market, obviously ignoring the opposite movement of structures that maintain their own inequalities of the school system, such as those analyzed by Bourdieu (2012). Secondly, young people are inserted in a society with a wide dissemination of information (Giddens, 1997, 2002), which allows them to know the systems in which they operate and, therefore, more than in other times, they are aware of the need to “play the game”, as Bourdieu (2007) would say. This unique condition confers a greater degree of information – strategic knowledge to act, that is, a differentiated agency – which allows more mobilized students (more capable of acquiring non-inherited symbolic capital) to really “go further” than the structural conditions initially made them think it was possible.

Taught by “example” and by objective changes caused by systematic attitudes – the routinization of practices, as Giddens (2002) says –, such as the case of the school, where

a series of actions aimed at training students to take entrance exams (ENEM, included) effectively resulted in an increase in the number of people approved in consecutive years, young people end up reinforcing the idea of meritocracy and ignoring structures of inequality, creating the situation that Beck (1997) warns about as one of the risks of reinforcing their vulnerability (unemployment, academic failure, for example) and, by individualizing themselves through effort and merit, giving up the collective condition that would provide them with more “security”, as a reinforcement of public policies.

Final considerations

The set of data analyzed in this article allowed us to verify that there is considerable expectation among young students for an academic and professional life that provides stability and allows them to obtain desirable social conditions. However, as general as they may be, these expectations for the future indicate the desire that these students, mostly from lower-class contexts, have to improve their social conditions and that of their families. These expectations, however, go hand in hand with a mass adherence to meritocratic and individualistic discourse, with little reflection on their own social conditions. Although women and other groups demonstrate less adherence to it, this is a clear trend, indicating the need for more studies on the dissemination of these values in lower-class social contexts, in public schools, including in one of the most non-privileged regions of the country. Furthermore, it is necessary to analyze the way in which such groups act reflexively or not in a context marked by socially restrictive discourses, such as the meritocratic discourse.

The reports and data indicate that agents in the academic context – teachers and schoolmates – are significant actors in the process of building this vision. These future expectations, however moderate, and the belief in their role, can be an opportunity to enhance students’ trajectories, through the reflection on the role of the school institution, its meaning for these students and the objective capacity of the school in offering learning conditions for personal and educational development. It is necessary to reflect on how the school reproduces certain values or not and establishes discourses that may or may not enhance these trajectories.

Furthermore, it is necessary to think about a possible mismatch between young people’s expectations and the education provided by the new secondary education. At a time of expansion of higher education and of intensification of knowledge-based economic dynamics, the role of the school becomes even more central in ensuring adequate, complete instruction that does not produce even greater educational distances between the different social groups, especially in the already serious Brazilian context of social and educational inequalities.

There is an important research agenda on how this new scenario of widespread social values, the convergences caused by the reform of secondary education, the role of secondary education in Brazilian society and the relationship between schools and young people in the construction of their expectations and trajectories. This is both a series of open questions and an opportunity to reflect on what type of high school we want as a

society and what is the role to be performed by these institutions that are so pressing and have so much social reach.

References

ALVES, Cássia Ferrazza *et al.* Relações com a escola e expectativas quanto ao futuro em jovens brasileiros. **Nuances**, Presidente Prudente, v. 26, n. 1, p. 50-65, 2015. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14572/nuances.v26i1.3818>.

BARBOSA, Livia. **Igualdade e meritocracia**. 4. ed. Rio de Janeiro: FGV, 2006.

BECK, Ulrich. A reinvenção da política: rumo a uma teoria da modernização reflexiva. *In*: GIDDENS, Anthony; BECK, Ulrich; LASH, Scott (org.). **Modernização reflexiva: política, tradição e estética na ordem social moderna**. São Paulo: Unesp, 1997. p. 11-71.

BOURDIEU, Pierre. **Esboço de uma teoria da prática**: seguido de três estudos de etnologia cabila. Oieras: Celta, 2002.

BOURDIEU, Pierre. **Escritos de educação**. 13. ed. Petrópolis: Vozes, 2012.

BOURDIEU, Pierre. **Meditações pascalianas**. 2. ed. Rio de Janeiro: Bertrand Brasil, 2007.

BRASIL. Câmara dos Deputados. **MPV 746/2016**. Institui a Política de Fomento à Implementação de Escolas de Ensino Médio em Tempo Integral, altera a Lei n. 9.394, de 20 de dezembro de 1996, que estabelece as diretrizes e bases da educação nacional, e a Lei n. 11.494 de 20 de junho de 2007, que regulamenta o Fundo de Manutenção e Desenvolvimento da Educação Básica e de Valorização dos Profissionais da Educação, e dá outras providências. Brasília, DF: Câmara dos Deputados, 2016. Disponível em: <https://www.camara.leg.br/proposicoesWeb/fichadetramitacao?idProposicao=2112490>. Acesso em: 12 dez. 2022.

BRUNI, Luigino; SANTORI, Paolo. Meritocracia? Uma ilusão que justifica desigualdades. **Adital**, São Leopoldo, 6 maio 2021. Disponível em: <https://www.ihu.unisinos.br/categorias/608998-meritocracia-uma-ilusao-que-justifica-as-desigualdades>. Acesso em: 29 jan. 2023.

CASTRO, Elisa Guaraná de. O campo das políticas públicas de juventude e o campo político da juventude: contribuições para a reflexão. *In*: PAPA, Fernanda; FREITAS, Maria Virgínia de (org.). **Juventude em pauta: políticas públicas no Brasil**. São Paulo: Peirópolis, 2011. p. 281-305.

DAYRELL, Juarez; CARRANO, Paulo. Juventude e ensino médio: quem é este aluno que chega à escola? *In*: DAYRELL, Juarez; CARRANO, Paulo; MAIA, Carla Linhares (org.). **Juventude e ensino médio: sujeitos e currículos em diálogo**. Belo Horizonte: UFMG, 2014. p. 101-133.

DOMINGUES, José Maurício. Reflexividade, individualismo e modernidade. **Revista Brasileira de Ciências Sociais**, São Paulo, v. 17, n. 49, p. 55-70, 2002.

GIDDENS, Anthony. **A constituição da sociedade**. 3. ed. São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 2013.

GIDDENS, Anthony. **Modernidade e identidade**. Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 2002.

GIDDENS, Anthony. Risco, confiança, reflexividade. In: GIDDENS, Anthony; BECK, Ulrich; LASH, Scott. **Modernização reflexiva**: política, tradição e estética na ordem social moderna. São Paulo: Unesp, 1997. p. 219-254.

IBOPE INTELIGÊNCIA. **Índice de confiança social 2019**. São Paulo: IBOPE, 2019. Disponível em: [http://www.ibopeinteligencia.com/arquivos\(final\).pdf](http://www.ibopeinteligencia.com/arquivos(final).pdf). Acesso em: 01. ago. 2019.

LAHIRE, Bernard. Sucesso escolar nos meios populares: as razões do improvável. São Paulo: Ática, 1997.

LIMA FILHO, Irapuan Peixoto. Culturas juvenis e agrupamentos na escola: entre adesões e conflitos. **Revista de Ciências Sociais**, Fortaleza, v. 45, n. 1, p. 103-118, 2014.

LLOSA, José Antonio. Juventude sem futuro e sem passado: as falsas promessas da meritocracia. **Adital**, São Leopoldo, 14 jun. 2019. Disponível em: <https://www.ihu.unisinos.br/categorias/590038>. Acesso em: 25 jan. 2023.

LORENZ, Georg *et al.* Social influence or selection? Peer effects on the development of adolescents' educational expectations in Germany. **British Journal of Sociology of Education**, Abingdon, v. 41, n. 5, p. 643-669, 2020. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2020.1763163>.

MARKOVITS, Daniel. **A cilada da meritocracia**: como um mito fundamental da sociedade alimenta a desigualdade, destrói a classe média e consome a elite. Rio de Janeiro: Intrínseca, 2021.

MATHEUS, Mario Luiz Bezerra Feitoza. **O discurso jornalístico sobre a reforma do ensino médio**: condições de produção, memória e efeito de evidência. 2020. Dissertação (Mestrado em Estudos de Linguagem) – Universidade Federal Fluminense, Niterói, 2020.

MOTTA, Vânia; FRIGOTTO, Gaudêncio. Por que a urgência da reforma do ensino médio? Medida provisória nº 746/2016 (Lei nº 13.415/2017). **Educação & Sociedade**, Campinas, v. 38, n. 139, p. 355-372, 2017. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/ES0101-73302017176606>.

NOGUEIRA, Maria Alice. No fio da navalha: a (nova) classe média brasileira e sua opção pela escola particular. In: ROMANELLI, Geraldo; NOGUEIRA, Maria Alice; ZAGO, Nadir. (org.). **Família & escola**: novas perspectivas de análise. Petrópolis: Vozes, 2013. p. 109-130.

PAIS, José Machado. **Culturas juvenis**. 2. ed. Lisboa: Imprensa Nacional/Casa da Moeda, 2003.

PAPAGEORGE, Nicholas; THOM, Kevin. **Genes, education, and labor market outcomes**: evidence from the health and retirement study. National Bureau of Economic Research, Cambridge, 2018. Disponível em: <http://www.nber.org/papers/w25114>. Acesso em: 28 jan. 2023.

PERONI, Vera Maria Vidal. Relação público-privado no contexto de neoconservadorismo no Brasil. **Educação & Sociedade**, Campinas, v. 41, p. 1-17, 2020. Disponível em: <https://www.scielo.br/j/es/a/gPNy6mbMhQVmfzrqX8tRz4N/>. Acesso em: 16 out. 2023.

RIKOWSKI, Glenn. Privatização em educação e formas de mercadoria. **Retratos da Escola**, Brasília, DF, v. 11, n. 21, p. 393-414, 2018. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22420/rde.v11i21.810>.

ROSSI, Marina. Reforma do Ensino Médio é aprovada no Senado: anunciada por Temer em setembro, Medida Provisória passou pela Câmara no final do ano. **El País**, 9 fev. 2017. Disponível em: https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2016/12/14/politica/1481746019_681948.html#?prm=copy_link. Acesso em: 12 dez. 2022.

SALES, Lilia Maia de Moraes *et al.* **Relatório da pesquisa Virando o Jogo**. Fortaleza: UNIFOR: UFC: FUNCAP: Governo do Estado do Ceará, 2021. Relatório de pesquisa com recomendações e resultados da edição 1 de Fortaleza.

SALES, Lilia Maia de Moraes *et al.* **Relatório da pesquisa Virando o Jogo**. Fortaleza: UNIFOR: UFC: FUNCAP: Governo do Estado do Ceará, 2022. Relatório de pesquisa com recomendações e resultados da edição 2 de Fortaleza.

SALES, Lilia Maia de Moraes *et al.* **Relatório da pesquisa Virando o Jogo**. Fortaleza: UNIFOR: UFC: FUNCAP: Governo do Estado do Ceará, 2023. Relatório de pesquisa com recomendações e resultados da edição 3 de Fortaleza.

SANDEL, Michael. **A tirania do mérito**: o que aconteceu com o bem comum? 7. ed. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2022.

SILVA, Ileizi Fiorelli; GONÇALVES, Danyelle Nilin. Desafios e possibilidades para o futuro da Sociologia na educação básica. *In*: SILVA, Ileizi Fiorelli; GONÇALVES, Danyelle Nilin (org.). **A sociologia na educação básica**. São Paulo: AnnaBlume: Sociedade Brasileira de Sociologia, 2017. p. 389-398.

SOUSA, Ana Maria Gonçalves. **Sucesso escolar e o ensino de Sociologia**: discursos e práticas numa escola pública de ensino médio. São Paulo: Dialética, 2023.

WEF. World Economic Forum. **The global social mobility report 2020**: equality, opportunity and a new economic imperative. Geneva: WEF, 2020. Disponível em: https://www3.weforum.org/docs/Global_Social_Mobility_Report.pdf. Acesso em: 16 out. 2023.

Received on: 03.27.2023

Revised on: 06.15.2023

Approved on: 07.11.2023

Editor: Prof. Dr. Leandro R. Pinheiro

Danyelle Nilin Gonçalves is the national coordinator of the professional master's degree in sociology on a national network (ProfSocio), the coordinator of the Laboratory of Studies in Politics, Education and City (LEPEC) and a professor at the Federal University of Ceará (UFC).

Irapuan Peixoto Lima Filho is a researcher at the Laboratory for Studies in Politics, Education and City (LEPEC), professor at the Postgraduate Program in Sociology and at the Department of Social Sciences at the Federal University of Ceará (UFC).

Harlon Romariz Rabelo Santos is a professor at the Postgraduate Program in Sociology (PPGS) and at the Department of Sociology and Political Science (SOCIP) at the Federal University of Mato Grosso (UFMT).