The youth – is college for all? The importance of student engagement for higher education – an insight into reality to avoid student evasion

A juventude – a faculdade é para todos? A importância do engajamento estudantil para o ensino superior – uma visão da realidade para evitar a evasão estudantil

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ABSTRACT
This article aims to bring into light this highly relevant subject of a drastic reduction in Brazilians access to education not only in terms of quantity but also in relation to quality standards. Recent cuts in public educational policies, strongly influenced by neoliberal political agendas, have taken their tolls not only on the teaching-learning process but also on the permanence of students in higher education. According to that, higher education is still inaccessible to the economically less privileged youth and even for the few from these social group who succeed in entering college it is very hard to cope with all the study requirements and their own economical maintenance: without any institutional support this situation tends to result in evasion or low-quality formation. Therefore, we intend to discuss the complex relation between the youth and College as to promote enlightenment to certain topics specially the so-called student engagement as a way to prevent student evasion. The aspects raised in this paper come from the authors’ teaching experience in state (public) high schools and their respective youth public. It is clear that those students who face difficulties at high school will face even greater difficulties at college. Thus, we consider student engagement a key action to promote students’ full capabilities at what should be a wide range action policy involving different aspects of students’ lives. It should also be seen as a parameter to evaluate the teaching-learning process and in turn be used as input data to improve this management system. The relation student-college, the teaching conditions and the college management are considered fundamental approaches to student engagement at college education.

Keywords: student engagement, higher education, youth, college.
RESUMO
Este artigo tem como objetivo trazer à tona o tema tão relevante da redução drástica do acesso dos brasileiros à educação não apenas em termos quantitativos, mas também em relação aos padrões de qualidade. Os recentes cortes nas políticas públicas educacionais, fortemente influenciados pelas agendas políticas neoliberais, têm cobrado seu preço não apenas no processo de ensino-aprendizagem, mas também na permanência dos alunos no ensino superior. Segundo ela, o ensino superior ainda é inacessível aos jovens economicamente menos favorecidos e mesmo para os poucos desse grupo social que conseguem ingressar na faculdade é muito difícil dar conta de todas as exigências de estudo e da própria manutenção econômica: sem nenhum apoio institucional esta situação tende a resultar em evasão ou formação de baixa qualidade. Assim, pretendemos discutir a complexa relação entre a juventude e a faculdade de modo a promover o esclarecimento de alguns temas, especialmente o chamado engajamento estudantil como forma de prevenir a evasão estudantil. Os aspectos levantados neste trabalho decorrem da experiência docente dos autores em escolas estaduais (públicas) de ensino médio e seus respectivos públicos juvenis. É claro que aqueles alunos que enfrentam dificuldades no ensino médio enfrentarão dificuldades ainda maiores na faculdade. Assim, consideramos o envolvimento dos alunos uma ação chave para promover as capacidades plenas dos alunos no que deve ser uma política de ação abrangente envolvendo diferentes aspectos da vida dos alunos. Também deve ser visto como um parâmetro para avaliar o processo de ensino-aprendizagem e, por sua vez, ser usado como dados de entrada para melhorar esse sistema de gestão. A relação aluno-faculdade, as condições de ensino e a gestão da faculdade são consideradas abordagens fundamentais para o engajamento discente na educação universitária.

Palavras-chave: engajamento estudantil, ensino superior, juventude, faculdade.

1 INTRODUCTION
Education is a complex process in which the individual is gradually inserted into the realm of formal, social and cultural instruction at an early age at primary school and it is meant to be lifelong. Our main point refers to the dialogue about how education comprehends the relation between individuals and actions, in an approach of certain aspects of the relation teaching-learning at college. This paper also makes reference to certain studies of Youth Sociology, which have pointed out certain difficulties of a large number of young students in finding a sense in education, which represents effectively a possible lack of sense to their future in itself.

In higher education, one aims to, or at least should, set up their commitment with full academic formation in order to develop a solid professional profile and then obtain better quality insertion in the job market. Under the educational point of view or any pedagogical approach proposed, the educational institution seeks to comply with their goals keeping track of the social inclusion process and other legal requirements. However,
high education students belong to a real-life social cluster whose intentions, goals and points of view are largely underestimated: therefore, that perspective should be changed into a more considerate one if evasion is to be avoided. Thus, the considerations proposed here are derived from research carried out by the authors in the course “Contemporary Youth and Education from PUCRS PPG (post-graduation program) and they will be used as a reference for raising the question of the necessary visibility to the youth in the definition of governmental educational policies with an eye on the access to higher education.

For us to be able to understand the youth, it is necessary to set its concept, once we understand it is not merely the case of a biological/physiological definition. Thus, as Dayrell e Gomes (2009) point out, the youth is a social construct starting at teenagerhood, also taken as a time of considerable biological, psychological and social changes. This is accompanied by a growing development in their subjective choices and views bringing about higher autonomy and commitment among other social cultural changes. The use of the term the youth in the plural (in Portuguese) is meant to convey the idea that there is not only one model or group that might represent the young people and they are as complex as the society from which they derive or to which they respond somehow.

We, thus, understand the youth might be clustered differently according to their views and behavior considering the same age. Accordingly, the youth will be constituted in response to their social-historical background. In other words, different societies and different social groups produce particularly different youth clusters taking into consideration certain aspects such as ethnicity, values, religion views, geographical locations, genders and many other factors. It is for this reason that taking for granted that youth corresponds to a certain pre-established span of time or as a transition into adult life is wrong, because this view is connected to the theoretical limitations that have disturbed the educational policies. We would rather consider that youth constitutes a wide range and complex process which cannot be simply reduced a transition phase in the life of any individual.

From the perspective of youth as a social construct, Dayrell (2003) criticizes the tags given to this group for they fail to correspond to what should be the right prototype of an adult individual. Another perception from the youth is based on a romanticized perspective from the 60’s (20th century) in which middle class youth stood up for human rights and other social demands remarkably guiding their actions through organized
student movements. In accordance to that, youth is seen as being synonymous with freedom, pleasure and distinct social behavior followed by unassertive experimentation, defying behavior and lack of prudence.

Another notion of youth identified by Dayrell (2003) is the nullification or reduction of youth to the realm of culture as if their participation would be almost entirely based on weekend consumerism. This perspective is highly explored by mass industry, media and fashion, which set up unrealistic standards of consumption, beauty and behaviors most youth reject. It is a treacherous game of alluring and trapping the youth into an unsustainable system which causes most of them to rebel or fall apart along the way. According to Vianna (2003, p.8) being young or remaining young [...] has become a permanent goal. Youth is a type of merchandise sold in plastic surgery offices, self-help books and department stores”. The ideas presented to this point deny the existence of the youth as sociocultural individuals.

As a conclusion, by dealing with the youth as protagonists, we are supposed to understand the medium they emerge from and the contexts in which they are inserted, so that education might come to the aid of development, access, inclusion and permanence at higher education institutions.

2 ACCESS OF THE YOUTH TO THE COLLEGE

When we talk about access to college, there might be a wide range of aspects referred to that mean the reinforcement of the concept of accessibility, in our case though, we are dealing specifically with the youth entrance and permanence in college as opposed to a view in which entrance might be detached from permanence. Moreover, we understand that accessibility is a set of factors that interact towards the integration and well-being of an individual.

In order to reinforce the policies of access and permanence of the less privileged at college, we are supposed not only to create consistent institutional plans, but also monitor their implementation and results providing immediate feedback to adjust actions in due time.

Although INEP\(^1\) points out a raise in the general offer of seat in state (public) and private institutions, high education in Brazil has soured an intense clash of government representatives and members of educational boards all through the country over a wide

\(^1\) INEP – AnísioTeixeira National Institute of Educational Studies and Research (Inep)
variety of changes not recommended by specialists in education.

It is worth mentioning, as Corbucci (2014) points out, that the implementation of higher education in Brazil took place somehow out of time, the same way that it happened to elementary school when compared to most countries in Latin America. The first Brazilian college was only founded in the 20th century whereas the first in Latin America date to the 16th century. This four-century historical gap added to the long prevalence of slavery as an economical system represents this standard of emptiness and deficitary education in all levels, especially for higher education. In accordance to that, Pinto (2004, apud CORBUCCI, 2014, p. 08) states:

[...] the privatist model of higher education improvement is not broad enough, because it inhibits the access of afrodescendents and the poor. Indeed, when one compares the proportions of these two groups in state or private institutions, it becomes clear that their prevalence takes place in the first. Even so, the study proposed by me is prior to the implementation of ProUni (Brazilian Government’s “Program college for all”) in such a way that we have seen a growth of afrodescendents and low-income students in private institutions.

Thus, by observing the data presented by the census in higher education, one verifies that general seats have increased in recent years. According to INEP (p.08), some 10.7 million seats were offered in 2017, from which 73.3% were new and 26.6% remaining from previous occupation (deriving from evasion seats or transferences among other situations).

Following the 2017 INEP\(^2\) report, the private teaching network has offered 92.4% of graduation seats and the state offered the remaining 7.6%. In relation to those who entered in 2017, the report showed that 3.2 million students entered graduation being 81.7% in private institutions.

We observe from this data that there is a prevalence of private institutions at higher education and that distance education is taking over the place of both types of institutions (state and private), as Corbucci (2014, p11) points out. According to that, the new students at distance learning were 15.4% in 2007 and this figure is three times bigger a decade later. Accordingly, we call the attention that between 2007 and 2017, graduation courses such as technologist had an enrollment rate of 19.1%, teaching 20.1% and bachelor degrees reached a rate of 60.1%.

It is remarkable that within one decade, the technologist courses had an increase.

of 119.4%, which indicates the tendency for the youth in taking up higher education at relatively short terms with a view on the immediate admittance to the job market. That is why, still following Dayrell and Gomes (2009), it is urgent and vital that some measures are taken in educational public policies for the youth to be prioritized and identified as entitled individuals of rights which aims not only to democratize higher education but above all assure their permanence at college or IES\(^3\).

The mere observation of the youth social behavior and other aspects such as their ethnicity, gender and social origin might point out their interest for different branches of graduation courses – the interference of external policies defining a marcadological view to formation implies higher rates of enrolment at what is called professionalizing courses at higher education.

There has been a considerable raise in the participation of low-income students reaching higher education, which changes a long time standard. According to Silvino (2009), that happens, among other aspects, for the rate of students reproved at high school has decreased considerably due to the educational public policies adjusting elementary school flow and the expansion of seats at state high school, allowing for the admittance of more students. It naturally reflects in the admittance of more students at higher education, as shows Corbucci (2014, p. 9),

The raise in the demand and the fiercer concurrence for seats at higher education can be partially explained by the increase in the number of graduates of high school in the 90’s. According to Catani and Hey (2007), the state found itself unprepared for this raise in demand, opting for the private sector to operate. This conclusion was presented by Corbucci (2004) when he stated “there was a certain deregulation of the sector referring to the flexibilization of institutional requirements for the creation of courses and institutions.”

In conclusion, we understand that part of the lower-class youth eventually succeeds in entering a college which was not thought over for them, and soon enough they are faced with a wide range of uncertainties which frequently result in their evasion. Their access to higher education should be seen as a success in itself and it essentially proves the point that these individuals are seeking for improvement in their formation and in their social status and that is why certain means should be provided by the institutions and the government to encourage their permanence at high education. Their ascension represents not only a personal achievement but also an improvement of the national

\(^3\) IES – higher education institution
human capital since our country, Brazil, shows those enormous contrasts of high economical rates against very low human development indexes, comparable to the poorest countries in the world. It is vital to approach the reasons that force students to quit, and it is in our view comprised in the concept of Student Engagement⁴ which is meant to reinforce the links between student and higher education.

3 STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Engagement⁵ in our theoretical approach is meant to determine indexes of a healthy life, considering a pro-active state as related to work psychology which evaluates three dimensions of a person’s will – vigor, dedication and absorption. However, this concept has already been employed in education as related to the action of permanence as a basis for protagonism built along this integrated teaching-learning process. In Active Pedagogy, engagement is characterized as an action into the dialectal process beyond the subjectiveness of an individual, which means it is supposed to be built independently of one’s initial or natural disposition.

Teaching plays a key role in this process because, differently from the other social-institutional relations, it is based on an intersubjective approach which puts side by side historically and culturally distinct individuals mediated by instruction processes and disciplinary contents. In other words, the relation teacher-student is built by dimensions concerning the human factors such as conflicts, wrongdoing, tensions, accomplishments, denial and acceptance. Besides that, this relation becomes political once it is mediated by knowledge.

Engagement is not only about competences and skills employed to motivate an individual. Interactions, affection and sensitivity must also be a reference to the pedagogical practice in order to provide means to those who need to establish themselves as autonomous individuals at college. In this sense, one of the most important goals of engagement is the effective practice of this action to become a real policy to contain and

⁴ We use the term young following the introductory dialogue on youth, but in this case we understand it does not refer exclusively to young people who enter college since there is a larger range of ages to newcomers.

⁵ The concept of engagement is widely used in the active psychology area with reference to the working fields. – several authors have provided theoretical aspects to the concept making it considerably flexible. It is necessary to define a certain limit that applies to our work. In this case we use the concept of engagement as referring to the individual inserted in the community actively towards the construction of an improved performance for the support of their own members facing integration difficulties to assure full instruction and completion of study cycles.
revert evasion in due time before a new government implement new educational guidelines and all efforts are lost. Teaching reveals itself in the care for the other, or according to Teixeira (2007, p. 9),

[...] in this relation there are stories getting started, identities and subjectiveness blooming, pathways being taken, horizons opening up or closing down for the infants or teenagers who shape up more or less fairly according to the way they are worked out or lapidated in the pedagogical relation.

In opposition to the difficulty of several college students, Teixeira (2007) refers to the softness that translates into the commitment for the formation of the other. The difficulty in the handling, in empathy and even in the sympathy some teachers display might compromise not only the class, but the engagement of a young student the moment that they see themselves forced to face what might be seen by them as a hostile interaction considering the interlocutors at play are do not fully share the same historical and cultural background, a first obstacle to be surpassed. The same way teachers normally label students as good or bad, we can expect students to do the same in relation to teachers, having their models, representations and expectations frequently based on superficial interaction. According to Morales (2006 apud SILVINO, 2009, p. 7), there might be motivation based on students’ ideal representation of a teacher when they are allowed to have a real experience of interaction which eventually puts some teachers as human and professional references to them.

Sposito and Galvão (2004) on their turn and based on a state high school research carried out in São Paulo reveal that students expect their teachers to help them locate themselves and realize they belong to their environment, which is an idea that fits perfectly in the context of college especially for the lower-class students who are in most need of support to remain in college. Therefore, intervention and cooperation implied in teacher’s engagement is fundamental. Sposito and Galvão (2004) emphasize that the more thorough this action is, the more it will reflect in the student’s permanence.

However, management also has a key role in the engagement process to cooperate with teachers’ board to promote the construction of individuals’ subjectiveness and autonomy. Accordingly, it is also important to clear out that in the long adaptation process to ensure students permanence, there is a tendency to deny students’ reality outside college limits, which, in turn, represents a refusal of students themselves. Again, it is necessary to set a dialogue with them on this respect. Several papers in education
sociology have shown that teachers´ (vowed) expectations in relation to their students exert a significant influence on their learning and their permanence at school (Bressoux, 2003)

Dayrell (2001, p. 15), then, states:

The classroom is also a meeting place but with some peculiar traits. It is the everyday routine of people who have the most varied goals, cultures and background and share the same space at least for a year. Thus, new subdivisions are formed by common interests and so on. It is the “pack” formation, almost always identified by some recurrent stereotype: the messy ones, the nerds, the dandies.

For Barbosa (2007), the feeling of belonging to an affinity group might influence students´ behavior, since every group establishes a different relation with the institution as a product of its own collectiveness: it will in some measure be distinct from the initial personal view of a student as he entered college and it will naturally turn into relatively updated views.

We then assume that engagement does not only comprise students´ motivation, but also concrete actions that allow the individuals to carry through their human dimensions as students, that´s to say, involving their affection, cognitive and personal behavior. It aims to provide actions in the context of active learning so that students become actors in the construction of their own learning and towards full membership of this higher education institutional realm.

4 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The elements we brought for discussion in this article were meant to expose some of the complex relations that are established among the youth and college, especially in the dynamicity of the current world. Based on the problems raised here, we would like to emphasize the need for the professors and their institutions to better understand their students beyond stereotypes and negative representations always seeking for dialogue. It is time now for us to reach a new level in education, for which students´ expectations, fears, demands and wishes are taken into dear consideration. It is not only the future of individuals that are at stake here, it is the future of our nation itself that is being brought up every day in the classroom with this young and most varied generation.

Therefore, we can say college should be for all and for this goal to be achieved higher education institutions should promote student engagement as an official practice,
meaning there should be a doble process comprising students’ internal motivations survey and the issuing of corresponding policies and actions to be carried out.

Lastly, college must also contribute for the construction of youth’s life projects, helping them to know themselves better, enlarging their range of possibilities and, above all, providing them with a better understanding about their choices and decision making. That all makes up the overall engagement that prevents evasion and contributes to a more complete formation.
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