

Transição escolar e evasão no ensino médio integrado dos institutos federais: contribuições da psicologia histórico-cultural

School transition and dropout in integrated technical upper secondary education at Federal Institutes: contributions from cultural-historical psychology

Transición escolar y evasión en la educación media integrada de los institutos federales: aportes de la psicología histórico-cultural

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RESUMO

O problema da evasão e da permanência escolar nos institutos federais tem sido um dos principais desafios para a democratização do ensino oferecido pela rede federal. Este artigo tem o objetivo de contribuir para a elucidação desse problema, mais especificamente no ensino médio integrado dessas instituições, a partir de contribuições da psicologia histórico-cultural e de autores do campo educacional. Dados oficiais demonstram que cerca de um terço dos estudantes dessa modalidade de ensino não conclui seus estudos nessas instituições. Argumenta-se a necessidade de compreender o fenômeno da transição escolar como um importante aspecto que afeta a trajetória escolar, bem como a permanência ou a evasão dos estudantes. A análise procura esclarecer as relações entre desigualdade social, desenvolvimento psicológico, transições escolares e evasão escolar, destacando a natureza dialética

dessas relações. Conclui-se pela necessidade de avanço na discussão teórica a respeito das mediações sociais e institucionais nos processos de transição escolar, assim como pelo aprimoramento das políticas e das práticas de permanência estudantil, considerando a questão da transição escolar como um dos fatores explicativos da evasão escolar.

Palavras-chave: Transição escolar; Evasão escolar; Desenvolvimento humano.

ABSTRACT

The issue of school dropout and retention in the Federal Institutes has been one of the main challenges for the democratization of education offered by the federal network. This article aims to contribute to the elucidation of this problem, more specifically in the integrated technical upper secondary education of these institutions, based on contributions from cultural-historical psychology and authors in the educational field. Official data show that approximately one-third of the students in this modality of education do not complete their studies in these institutions. It is argued that understanding the phenomenon of school transition is essential, as it significantly affects students' educational trajectories, including their retention or dropout. The analysis seeks to elucidate the relationships among social inequality, psychological development, school transitions, and dropout, highlighting the dialectical nature of these connections. The conclusion emphasizes the need to advance theoretical discussion on social and institutional mediations in school transition processes, as well as to improve policies and practices for student retention, considering school transition as one of the explanatory factors for school dropout.

Keywords: School transition; School dropout; Human development.

RESUMEN

El problema de la deserción y de la permanencia escolar en los institutos federales ha sido uno de los principales desafíos para la democratización de la educación ofrecida por la red federal. Este artículo tiene como objetivo de contribuir, por lo tanto, a la comprensión de este problema, más específicamente en la educación secundaria integrada de estas instituciones, a partir de aportes de la psicología histórico-cultural y de autores del campo educativo. Datos oficiales demuestran que cerca de un tercio de los estudiantes de esta modalidad no concluyen sus estudios en estas instituciones. Se argumenta la necesidad de comprender el fenómeno de la transición escolar como un aspecto importante que afecta la trayectoria educativa, así como en la permanencia o la deserción de los estudiantes. El análisis busca esclarecer las relaciones entre desigualdad social, desarrollo psicológico, transiciones escolares y

deserção escolar, destacando la naturaleza dialéctica de estas relaciones. Se concluye por la necesidad de avance en la discusión teórica acerca de las mediaciones sociales e institucionales en los procesos de transición escolar y en el perfeccionamiento de las políticas y prácticas de permanencia estudiantil, considerando la transición escolar como uno de los factores explicativos de la deserção escolar.

Palabras clave: Transición escolar; Evasión escolar; Desarrollo humano.

Introduction

School education occupies a central place in social life insofar as it constitutes an institutional, organized, and intentional means of transmitting social contents and practices to individuals in the process of formation. It fulfills the role of developing and humanizing^I each individual and, at the same time, promotes the socialization of historically systematized knowledge (Saviani, 2021), contributing to the dialectical reproduction of social life. Thus, the democratization of schooling also signifies the democratization of the conditions for human development. For an educational perspective aligned with this social function of the school (Duarte; Duarte, 2023), it is essential to discuss one of the impacts of social inequalities on schooling: the issue of school dropout/retention^{II}. This phenomenon is particularly significant in integrated upper secondary education in the Federal Institutes and will be the object of analysis in this article.

The problem of student dropout in integrated upper secondary education in the Federal Institutes has been a major challenge for the democratization of education within this network. Dropout, as a school and social phenomenon and an expression of social inequality within the school, has been studied from different aspects and perspectives. In general, these studies seek to identify the various individual, institutional, and social factors that have contributed to school dropout, from a perspective that has increasingly emphasized the multifactorial nature of this phenomenon (Dore; Lüscher, 2011; Sacramento; Albuquerque; Cypriano, 2021).

This theoretical essay aims to analyze this problem from a perspective that

seeks to understand its multidetermined nature based on the idea of school transition. It concerns the complex process through which students move from lower secondary education to integrated technical upper secondary education at Federal Institutes. This analysis is grounded in cultural-historical psychology, as well as in authors from the field of education and/or the Marxist tradition and seeks to provide reflections that may contribute to the improvement of student retention policies and practices by demonstrating the relevance of school transition for understanding school dropout. This does not imply reducing the phenomenon of dropout to the issue of transition, since the root of this problem is fundamentally social and economic in nature. The aim is to advance the theoretical elucidation of one of the determinants, both objective and subjective, of this problem.

In recent decades, there has been significant progress in policies aimed at expanding access to education, producing results at different educational levels (Simões, 2019). At the same time, within the context of federal education, there has also been a substantial expansion in the number of places offered with the creation of hundreds of new campuses of the Federal Institutes, particularly in regions outside Brazil's major metropolitan centers. In addition, democratization in this network has expanded through the reservation of places for students through the quota policy. However, despite this historical progress, school dropout remains a challenging reality that requires educational policies and practices capable of responding to this problem.

Based on official data from the federal network available on the Nilo Peçanha Platform^{III} (*Plataforma Nilo Peçanha*), it is possible to understand the extent of the dropout/student retention phenomenon through information on academic efficiency. The indicators "cycle completion" and "cycle dropout," in summary, show the number of students who completed their studies within the same cycle (an entering cohort), as well as those who dropped out of the institution during that same cycle.^{IV}

Analyzing integrated technical upper secondary education at Federal Institutes in the period from 2017 to 2023, the overall cycle completion rate ranged between 56.53% and 62.37%, and the cycle dropout rate ranged between 28.09% and 37.69%. This means that, during this period, approximately one-third of the students enrolled in

integrated technical upper secondary education programs at Federal Institutes did not complete their studies in these institutions. In addition, the data indicate that dropout is inversely proportional to income: the lower the family income, the higher the dropout rate (Brazil, 2024c). One of the aspects that continues to affect student retention is social inequality, which is reflected within the school despite student assistance policies that seek to mitigate its impacts.

These data are considerably more expressive than those of other public basic education networks. For example, upper secondary approval rates were close to 90% in the same period, according to the National Institute for Educational Studies and Research Anísio Teixeira (*Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais Anísio Teixeira – Inep*) (Brazil, 2024b). The analysis proposed here is not a comparison between these education networks, but this significant difference indicates the concreteness of the problem of student retention in the federal network.

Based on these data, reflection on the objective and subjective conditions for student retention in these institutions is necessary. Considering that one-third of the students who enter this educational network drop out reveals a situation that requires analysis. Added to this is the recognized quality of education in the Federal Institutes^V, as well as their student assistance policies: what explains that such a significant number of students do not complete their studies in these institutions? In this sense, the hypothesis is that, in order to advance the understanding of this problem, the discussion of school transition is one of the relevant aspects that has not been the focus of retention policies. Through the understanding of school transition considered as a whole – that is, in its objective and subjective determinations and conditions – it is expected to contribute to theoretical advances in the elucidation of school dropout and to future proposals for educational intervention. It is understood and argued that the conscious role of institutional mediation in the school transition process can contribute significantly to student retention and to greater democratization of education in the federal network.

Integrated technical upper secondary education, social inequality, and school transition

Integrated technical upper secondary education is an educational modality of the Federal Network of Professional, Scientific and Technological Education that was restructured and expanded beginning in 2008. Its pedagogical proposal is based on the integration of upper secondary education and vocational education within a single curriculum, grounded in the assumption of polytechnic education. According to Saviani (2003), the notion of polytechnic education seeks to overcome the dichotomy between manual labor and intellectual labor by taking labor as an educational principle. As clarified by Frigotto, Ciavatta, and Ramos (2005), although under current conditions there are not yet the foundations for genuinely polytechnic education, integrated technical upper secondary education constitutes a social and historical condition for its construction. In this sense, this form of education proposes, through the integration of general and technical education, to promote the integral, omnilateral formation of the human being and to contribute to overcoming the contradiction between capital and labor that is reproduced in education. It is necessary to emphasize that such overcoming will occur only through the overcoming of capitalist society itself; education does not have the purpose or the power to transform society. In this regard, Saviani (2003, p. 139) is quite explicit: “The union between intellectual labor and manual labor can only be realized with the socialization of the means of production, placing the entire productive process at the service of the collective, of society as a whole”. Nevertheless, at the same time, school education can contribute, within its specificity and within existing contradictions and conditions, toward the overcoming of a society governed by capital.

One of the pillars of the Federal network is student assistance policy. According to Decree No. 7,234 of July 19, 2010, which established the National Program for Student Assistance (*Programa Nacional de Assistência Estudantil – PNAES*) (Brazil, 2010), its objectives are the democratization of the conditions for student retention and the minimization of the negative effects of social inequalities within federal educational

institutions. This legislation was recently updated by Law No. 14,914 of July 3, 2024 (Brazil, 2024a), which expanded the scope of this program and signaled the inclusion of new aspects that were not explicitly present in the previous decree. What can be observed, however, is that the core of the legislation concerns benefits of a socioeconomic nature, such as scholarships, housing, transportation, and food assistance.

Since Decree No. 7,234/2010, provisions had already been made for expanding the policy to include access to health services and psychological support, pedagogical support, the promotion of sports and culture, the inclusion of students with disabilities, among other aspects not directly economic in nature, according to the specificities of each institution (Taufick, 2014). However, such aspects, which may be considered subjective conditions of student retention^{VI}, still do not receive the same scope of funding or the same level of systematic provision in institutional budgets and daily practices as economic benefits.

It is in this context that understanding the process of school transition can contribute to the improvement of this policy. Although some material support is provided to economically vulnerable students, high rates of school dropout persist despite the advancement of these policies. At the same time, by highlighting the relationship between the subjective and objective conditions of student retention, the intention is not to shift the focus of student assistance policies away from their economic dimension; on the contrary, what is advocated is the expansion of investments and resources in this area, which have been threatened by neoliberal policies that shape the budgets of federal institutions.

To advance this discussion, it is necessary to clarify the difference between social inequality and the resulting individual inequality that takes shape in a capitalist society, that is, a class society. When considering student assistance policies, whose origins lie in broader social policies, it becomes evident that their primary focus is directed toward responding, albeit in a limited way, to inequalities of an economic nature. Just as social policies represent attempts by the public sector to address the so-called “social question” (Montaño, 2012), student assistance policies perform a

similar function within school education. In this sense, these policies focus primarily on the objective conditions of student retention, which are implemented, for example, through the provision of housing, food, transportation, scholarships, and financial assistance, among other forms of support. However, it is necessary to highlight the nature of the other pole of this process, namely inequality among individuals, which originates from social inequality. According to Leontiev (2004, p. 293),

[...] inequality among human beings does not arise from their natural biological differences. It is the product of economic inequality, class inequality, and the resulting diversity of their relations with the achievements that embody all the aptitudes and capacities of human nature formed in the course of a socio-historical process.

From this perspective, there is inequality in terms of the potential for psychological development to the same extent that objective conditions are unequal. This means that objective determination delimits the range of possible human development through the social mediations that are or are not available to different social groups. For cultural-historical psychology, individual development occurs through the internalization of social mediations, that is, of human relations and culture, both material and non-material, historically objectified. The social division of labor and the resulting unequal distribution of knowledge and historical objectifications also result in different forms of subjective appropriation of social reality.

It is therefore possible to understand the particular nature of the difficulties experienced by individuals from the working class in their schooling processes and also at moments of school transition. Material living conditions, especially the reproduction of labor, impose several forms of restriction on the activities of working-class children, producing obstacles to psychological development made possible by the appropriation of scientific, artistic, and philosophical objectifications. In the capitalist mode of production, objective expropriation is accompanied by subjective expropriation. Likewise, students have different histories of subjective appropriation of socially objectified human capacities, such as the activity of study (Elkonin, 2017), which is essential for schooling.

By placing the provision of material conditions (fundamental and non-negotiable) at the center of student retention policies, other aspects that also contribute

to educational inequality and directly affect educational trajectories may be overlooked. Among the various aspects that could be considered objective and subjective conditions of student retention, school transition emerges as a particularly significant process.

The concept of school transition

School transition, like other social experiences of transition, occurs when there is a significant change in the social context and, consequently, in the relations and social mediations available to the individual in the process of formation. According to Abrantes (2009), school transition encompasses different changes that operate jointly, for example: curricular changes; changes in pedagogical and disciplinary practices; changes in school institutions; changes in social groups; and changes in the position occupied in social relations, including relations between teachers and students, among students themselves, and between the school and the family. For the author, transitions are experienced most intensely in the initial moments of a new educational stage and involve the interactions among all educational agents as well as the institutional dynamics as a whole. In this sense, the author criticizes perspectives that center explanations of transitions on the individual dimension, which, by naturalizing the difficulties and problems experienced by students, ultimately mischaracterize a process that is essentially social.

In Brazil, several studies have investigated school transitions at different stages of the educational system. Most have focused on transitions within early childhood education, basic education, and higher education. Only a portion of these studies has analyzed the transition to secondary education (Lebourg, 2015; Lima; Carvalho, 2021; Miranda; Barbato, 2022; Silva, 2021), and even fewer studies have addressed the transition to integrated technical upper secondary education at Federal Institutes (Cunha, 2022; Gomes, 2018; Jost, 2019). One possible explanation for this scarcity of studies, in the case of the transition to traditional upper secondary education, may be related to the fact that this transition generally does not involve as many discontinuities

and potential ruptures as the transitions that have been more frequently studied. In contrast, the absence of studies on the transition to integrated technical upper secondary education may be explained by the fact that this format (integrated) is relatively recent^{VII}, with its origins dating back to the early 2000s (Frigotto; Ciavatta; Ramos, 2005). In this sense, it is understood that the explanations for the scarcity of studies on upper secondary education and on integrated technical upper secondary education are different. This is because integrated technical upper secondary education differs significantly from traditional upper secondary education and represents a rupture, for many students, with their previous schooling experiences.

School transition, human development, and dropout

In a broad sense, a transition is an experience of change that occurs in the course of social life within a new context that engenders it. This means that it is not possible to consider an individual's life trajectory and the transitions experienced independently of the social and cultural structures that, in turn, are also subject to historical change. Thus, each society produces different living conditions and social mediations that will be expressed in subjectively lived experiences. Childhood and adolescence themselves, as stages of development, have a historical and social origin. School transition, as a socially determined phenomenon, is directly related to the conditions and characteristics of the Brazilian educational system, as well as to the specific objective social conditions of capitalism in Brazil. In this way, the tendency that has predominated in educational policies does not appear to favor the full development of human beings, but rather to respond to social demands driven by market logic, as can be observed in recent educational reforms, such as the reform of upper secondary education (Malanchen; Santos, 2020).

As with all school education, strong relationships exist during moments of school transition between strictly pedagogical aspects and the process of students' psychological development. However, it is necessary to emphasize that the fact that this article takes as a reference, within the field of developmental psychology, studies

conducted within the framework of cultural-historical psychology does not imply an identification between the concept of school transition and the meanings assumed by the word “transition” in studies conducted by Vygotsky and other representatives of this psychological tradition. In the specific case of Vygotsky’s texts, the term “transition” is used in different contexts and with different meanings, for example, to refer to adolescence as a transitional age between childhood and adulthood; when the author analyzes transitions in the history of humanity and in child development – such as the passage from drawing objects to drawing words –, or when he examines the transition between one stage of psychological development and the subsequent stage, among other situations.

The issue of school transition, however, is a phenomenon that occurs within the educational trajectory and therefore has educational and social determinations whose nature differs from psychological development. That is, it is not possible to explain the process of school transition in its entirety by resorting solely to its psychological dimension. As Duarte (1996) and Magalhães and Martins (2020) clarify, one of the errors of perspectives that psychologize education is the immediate transposition of concepts from psychological theory to educational issues without the necessary mediation of a pedagogical theory that allows for understanding the specific processes of educational work.

In the book *Thought and Language*, Vygotsky (1993) analyzes, in the sixth chapter – dedicated to the study of the development of scientific concepts in childhood, the relationships between school education and psychological development, arguing that school education has decisive importance for promoting psychological development. However, the author also states that school instruction has its own logic, which is not the same as that of psychological development, and that the relations between the two are complex and varied, with no necessary synchronicity between advances in instruction and advances in psychological development.

It would therefore be inconsistent with this analysis to postulate any identification between the periodization of schooling and the periodization of psychological development. Regarding this aspect as well, Elkonin (2017, p. 150)

states that “[...] naturally, the division of childhood established on pedagogical grounds approaches the true one relatively but does not coincide with it – which is essential – nor is it linked to the question of the driving forces of the child’s development [...]”. At the same time, Vygotsky (1993) and Elkonin (2017), as well as the perspective of cultural-historical psychology, emphasize the close relationship between educational processes and the promotion of development, particularly through school education.

What is characterized here as school transition has relations with the various transitions that may exist in psychological development, but it is not an originally psychological phenomenon. The aspect that is emphasized is that school transition directly affects the development and activity of the student. Dialectically, processes of development will also decisively influence the educational trajectory. Transition is a school phenomenon, but one that has objective and subjective determinations and expressions. It is precisely because of this multidetermined nature that the idea of school transition represents a synthesis capable of contributing to the explanation of the issue of school dropout/student retention.

The process of school transition includes several aspects highlighted in research in the field as factors related to dropout and retention: individual, social, and institutional factors. This can be demonstrated, for example, through the systematic review study of research on dropout in the federal network conducted by Sacramento, Albuquerque, and Cypriano (2021). In their study, the authors identified 12 main groups of factors encompassing a total of 44 factors associated with dropout. The analysis of these factors is particularly significant for the discussion of transition. According to the authors, when analyzing the research:

Among those that identify individual factors, the one most frequently highlighted in these studies was the “Discrepancy between students’ knowledge and skills at the moment of entering the programs,” with 14 references, followed by the “Early decision that students need to make when choosing a profession, which may lead to a lack of identification with the chosen program,” with 7. Next, we have “Histories of grade repetition generating age–grade distortions,” identified in 4 studies, and “Emotional issues,” with 3 references. Regarding factors internal to the institution, 11 studies indicated “Teaching and learning practices that are not very engaging and demanding” as a cause, while 10 pointed to “Inadequate curricular

organization.” Among external factors, the most prominent were the “Distance between home and campus,” with 5 references, and “Economic difficulties faced by the student/family,” with 4 (Sacramento; Albuquerque; Cypriano, 2021, p. 94-95).¹

As can be observed in this passage, which presents the authors’ classification of the main findings regarding dropout across all the studies they analyzed, the different factors – especially those most frequently identified – refer directly or indirectly to what is defined here as school transition. According to the study, the most recurrent individual factor was the “discrepancy between students’ knowledge and skills at the moment they enter the program,” while the most frequently mentioned institutional factor was “teaching and learning practices that are not very engaging and demanding.” Among external factors, the most common was the issue of the distance between home and campus^{viii}. All these factors, as well as the others identified by the research, reaffirm that the strictly economic dimension does not correspond to the complexity of the dropout phenomenon.

Rather than identifying which factors are most important within a certain hierarchy for determining the causes of dropout, what is proposed here is an understanding of all these factors as part of the same process: the process of school transition. A student who moves from one educational level to another will experience this process subjectively based on their own individual developmental history, mobilizing psychological processes and functions, while at the same time this experience will be mediated by different social determinations (economic, political, historical, and cultural) and institutional determinations, that is, by the characteristics and ways in which the school provides conditions for the process of school transition. It is therefore argued that, insofar as institutions are able to understand this process in

¹ Original: “Dentre aquelas que compreendem fatores individuais, as de maior destaque nesses estudos foi a “Discrepância de conhecimentos e habilidades dos/as alunos/as no momento de sua entrada nos cursos”, com 14 sinalizações, seguida da “decisão precoce que o/a estudante precisa tomar na escolha da profissão, o que pode levar a uma falta de identificação com o curso escolhido”, com 7. Em seguida temos “Históricos de retenções que geram as distorções idade/série”, indicada em 04 estudos, e “Questões emocionais”, com 3 sinalizações. Quanto aos fatores internos à instituição, 11 pesquisas apontaram como causa as “Práticas de ensino e de aprendizagem pouco atrativas e exigentes”, ao passo que 10, a “Organização curricular inadequada”. Nos fatores externos se destacam a “Distância entre a casa e o campus”, com 5 indicações, e “Dificuldade econômica do/a estudante/família”, com 4” (Sacramento; Albuquerque; Cypriano, 2021, p. 94-95).

its different determinations, it will be possible to improve current student retention policies so that they can respond more effectively to the causes of dropout. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that the causes of dropout cannot be reduced to the issue of school transition, although this aspect is understood to make an important contribution, especially in relation to the dropout of newly admitted students.

Contributions of cultural-historical psychology to the analysis of school transition

Once the difference in nature between psychological processes and school processes has been clarified, and the insufficiency and error of perspectives that explain educational phenomena on strictly psychological grounds have been noted, it is possible to advance some contributions of psychological theory to the analysis of school transition.

In the educational context, the processes of teaching, learning, and development occupy a central position, making a brief characterization of these processes relevant. For Vygotsky (2017), education^{IX}, as a specifically human form of appropriation of objective reality, is a source of development; that is, it enables the development of certain psychological processes that would not otherwise be possible. In the author's words:

[...] learning itself does not mean development; it is rather the correct organization of a child's learning which leads to mental development, activates a whole group of developmental processes, and such activation would not be possible without learning (Vigotski, 2017, p. 115).

Taking this principle means highlighting the role of education so that individuals in formation may develop within themselves the main psychological functions that will enable them to participate in different types and levels of social activity. Thus, through the individual's relationship with the different objective aspects of historically produced culture, mediated by other individuals, a person may develop the specifically human characteristics that allow them to develop as a social being. All development that

manifests itself psychically, that is, as an intrapersonal and internal process, is the product of the internalization of a social, interpsychic, and interpersonal process (Martins, 2011).

From this perspective, the activities that promote individual development involve a triple relationship between the individual, cultural productions, and other people in historically constituted socio-institutional contexts. When individuals enter these contexts, they are inserted into them through the mediation of intentionally educational actions carried out by other individuals. In the case of educational institutions, teachers play a decisive role in this process, although not an exclusive one. Other agents within the educational institution may also contribute significantly to the successful integration of new students. Thus, an important dimension of school transition is that of interpersonal relationships, both formal and informal.

Although the conceptions of transition in development and school transition are distinct in terms of their nature, this does not mean that they do not establish dialectical relations with one another. A specific aspect may be taken as a point of connection between the two conceptions: the change in the social position occupied by the individual in formation. According to Vygotsky (1996), it is precisely this change, what he calls the “social situation of development”, that promotes development itself:

[...] the social situation of development represents the initial moment for all dynamic changes that occur in development during the given period. It determines wholly and completely the forms and the path along which the child will acquire ever newer personality characteristics, drawing them from the social reality as from the basic source of development, the path along which the social becomes the individual (Vigotski, 1996, p. 264).

In this passage, the author indicates that the driving force that engenders the psychological development of individuals lies in the social mediations and relationships in which they are embedded. In this way, insofar as the social situation of development changes, that is, when the individual in formation occupies a different position within the social context and social relations, this becomes the source of their development, since new psychological processes will be required for the appropriation of the new context through their activity. Without a change in the social situation of development,

there is no development in the proper sense.

This dialectical relationship between actual development (Vygotsky, 2017) and the social situation of development is particularly significant for understanding the transition process to which this study refers. As will be discussed in the next section, the transition of students from lower secondary education to integrated technical upper secondary education represents a highly significant change in the social situation of development of these students. Depending on particular conditions, this change may in fact represent a rupture with several aspects of the student's life, decisively influencing their educational trajectory and potentially leading to dropout, among other consequences.

Any process of change in the sphere of social relations in which the individual participates involves the mobilization of already existing psychological characteristics and processes in order to appropriate a new social context that was previously unknown to them. At the same time, new processes and new psychological formations are produced (Leontiev, 2017), as required by the new social demands that arise. As discussed, the process of human development occurs through the internalization of social processes external to the individual. For Leontiev (2017), this internalization occurs through the individual's activity, which, in addition to constituting a mode of interaction with the social context, also serves as a means for psychological development.

Another concept of Lev Vygotsky that may provide important elements for advancing the understanding of transitions is that of developmental crises. As in the case of the idea of transition, when reference is made here to this concept, the intention is not to explain an educational process from a psychological point of view, but rather to highlight how this social and school phenomenon affects development. Furthermore, this concept makes it possible to emphasize a theoretical principle present both in crises of psychological development and in school transitions: contradiction. According to the author, at different moments in the psychological development of individuals there are critical periods in which new psychological functions and personality traits are developed, often in a seemingly abrupt way, constituting turning points in

development (Vigotski, 1996). It is important to emphasize that these periods are not the product of internal or biological factors of individuals; on the contrary. In the author's view, they do not occur in the same way or at the same moments for different individuals, but rather are the product of their relationship with the social context. According to Abrantes and Eidt (2019, p. 11), "[...] crises represent processes of overcoming particular contradictions whose cultural contents indicate the production of more complex challenges for the individual and reorganize their relationship with the world on new bases".²

It is also relevant to highlight that, for Vygotsky (1996), during these periods of crisis there initially appears, and more visibly, a series of negative characteristics, in the sense that, before new interests emerge, the individual undergoes a loss of former aspirations and interests that previously motivated their activity. Only afterward do new interests, new forms of activity, and new forms of inner life emerge. In addition, during these critical periods there may be declines in academic and school performance, conflicts in social relationships, and experiences of inner conflict and suffering (Vygotsky, 1996). Leontiev (2017), in turn, understands that crises, as such, are avoidable, distinguishing them from critical periods of development. For this author, development occurs through periods of rupture and qualitative change, but these do not necessarily need to be accompanied by a crisis, depending on the mediation of this process.

These characteristics of the critical period of development indicate a principle through which aspects of school transition may also be elucidated. This principle is contradiction, as the objective expression of the dynamics of transformation of historical phenomena. It is important to emphasize that this text adopts the principle that contradiction is neither a phenomenon of psychological origin nor merely a way of interpreting reality. Contradiction is an essential aspect of the objective movement of nature and society itself. Contradictions at the psychic level are related to objective

² Original: "[...] as crises representam os processos de superação de contradições particulares cujos conteúdos culturais indicam a produção de desafios mais complexos à pessoa e reorganizam sua relação com o mundo em novas bases" (Abrantes; Eidt, 2019, p. 11).

social contradictions. To understand any movement, it is necessary to understand its contradictions. Lukács (2012, p. 291) explains this issue:

Contradiction is thus not only, as with Hegel, the form of sudden transition from one stage to another, but rather the driving force of a normal process. Certainly, the sudden transition with its crisis-like character as a qualitative leap is in no way rejected. But knowledge of these leaps now depends on the discovery of the specific conditions under which they appear; they are no longer purely 'logical' consequences of an abstract contradiction.

Thus, in school transition there is also a contradiction experienced by the student, which manifests itself between the new school and social demands and their particular history of individual development, their actual development (Vygotsky, 2017). This contradiction can be defined as follows: on the one hand, there is the concrete student, the result of specific historical social mediations and determinations and, therefore, a particular moment in psychological development and in their activity, as well as in the interests and motives that orient this activity; on the other hand, there is the set of conditions and demands resulting from entry into a new educational stage (and stage of life), which directly affect the student and require both the reorganization of their relationship with the world of objectifications and social relations and the modification of their activity and of the motives and interests that guide it.

This contradiction manifests itself subjectively as the desire to return to the previous, already familiar situation, alongside the desire to remain in and integrate into the new school/social situation. Objectively, this is expressed in the dialectic between retention and dropout. It is important to emphasize that retention does not mean the complete absence of the possibility of dropout: the student who remains still experiences this contradiction, and the possibility of dropout remains latent. Thus, throughout their educational trajectory, the student may overcome this contradiction, whether partially or provisionally, either consciously or unconsciously. The school institution will mediate this process, whether consciously or not.

School transition in integrated technical upper secondary education

Based on the foregoing discussion, the phenomenon of school transition can be understood as simultaneously subjective and objective, individual and social/institutional. There is no school education or schooling process in the abstract, that is, one that does not occur within concrete objective conditions that determine school forms and contents. Likewise, the analysis of schooling must consider the social and institutional aspects of mediation, that is, the institutions, conditions, and practices that promote it.

In the school context, these processes of mediation concern the conditions of education in a class society, but also the individuals who are part of it, such as teachers, students, and other education workers, as well as the institutional aspects that promote the educational process, such as content, curriculum, forms of organization of time and space, school culture, interactions among individuals, among other elements that constitute the reality and daily life of the school. These elements, which are social and institutional and manifest themselves in school practices and relationships, perform a mediating role between the student and their schooling process and are essential for understanding the process of school transition.

In the context of the Federal Institutes, this complex process also involves characteristics that differentiate it from traditional upper secondary education with regard to the quantity and quality of changes in relation to previous social and schooling contexts. These changes imply significant differences in school transition and also produce different consequences that are subjective, social, and educational. They may contribute to different expressions of social inequalities within the school, such as learning difficulties and difficulties in the schooling process, grade retention, dropout, difficulties in social interactions, impacts on mental health, among others – phenomena that may be synthesized in the expression “school failure,” in a critical reading (Patto, 2022).

The schooling experience in integrated technical upper secondary education at the Federal Institutes manifests itself in the concrete life of the student through a series

of significant differences in relation to traditional upper secondary education. Among some of these differences, the following stand out: nearly all students change institutions^X; a significant portion change cities and no longer live with their families; there is a shift to full-time schooling, combining general upper secondary education and vocational education in an integrated format, with a greater number of subjects, contents, and academic demands; and there is a first experience of professional choice. These are only some objective aspects that produce a series of changes and demands that may profoundly affect the student's schooling experience. Students are not always aware of these changes, nor have they necessarily had any prior similar experience that could help them deal with the new demands. Consequently, students possess different histories of development and of appropriation of cultural objectifications, which also differentiates them in their capacity to deal with the particularities of the new educational and social context.

Among some of the challenges that entering students – especially those who need to move to another city, generally around 14 or 15 years of age – will face are: separation from previous social relationships, including family and friendships; the need to build new social ties in a new city and institution; the need to organize themselves to deal with school demands of greater complexity, which require increased responsibility, organization, and autonomy; the need for rapid adaptation to institutional dynamics and new pedagogical practices, as well as to more complex scientific content; challenges related to independence, self-care, and practical aspects of everyday life, among other determinants that each student will experience in their individual trajectory.

Added to this is the fact that these are adolescent students, a stage of human development characterized by profound transformations in ways of acting, feeling, and thinking, resulting both from social demands and from the new needs engendered in this process (Vigotski, 1996), which further increases the complexity of the school transition process. Generally, this type of more significant change occurs at the moment of entry into university; however, in this case, especially for students who move to another city, it occurs earlier.

The effects of the distinction indicated between the schooling experience in upper secondary education and in integrated technical upper secondary education can be demonstrated by the dropout data presented in the introduction, but also by their school-related and psychosocial consequences. These quantitative and qualitative differences reinforce the need to analyze the role that school transition plays in this process. In this way, the forms and means through which entry into a new educational stage occurs may decisively influence educational trajectories and the schooling process as a whole.

School transition is never experienced by the student in a passive manner; it is always a process in which the student carries out activities (Leontiev, 2017), whether in the classroom, in other spaces within the school institution, or outside the school. At this stage of psychological development, two activities will be of vital importance: the activity of study and interaction with peers. These activities are related, but they are not identical. In the case of the activity of study, relationships with teachers are also included. All these aspects are equally of great importance for the school transition process.

Final considerations

Based on what has been presented and discussed, it is hoped that this study has contributed to demonstrating the relevance of the mediating processes of school transitions, especially in the context of integrated technical upper secondary education at the Federal Institutes. Conscious institutional and educational mediation of this process may contribute decisively to student retention, academic success, and the integral formation of students, as well as to combating the different forms of social exclusion that operate in education. It is essential, however, to emphasize that the social inequality underlying the phenomena analyzed originates in the very organization of capitalist society, whose overcoming constitutes the only horizon for the full realization of the democratization of education. Furthermore, although it was not the object of this study, it is necessary to emphasize that the contributions of

psychology to school education must be oriented in light of the purpose of education, that is, educational work and the social function of the school (Duarte; Duarte, 2023; Saviani, 2021), so as to avoid a psychologization of education.

This study sought to highlight the necessary understanding of the dialectic between the subjective and objective conditions of retention as a path toward advancing the elucidation of the different determinations of school dropout, especially in the Federal Institutes. The relationships among social inequality, psychological development, school transition, and dropout were analyzed, as well as how these relationships largely determine students' educational trajectories. This analysis was conducted with reference to cultural-historical psychology and authors in the field of education and aimed, far from exhausting the contributions of this theoretical perspective, to advance the debate by presenting possible approaches to the problem.

Further studies are needed to advance the theoretical understanding of these relationships based on cultural-historical psychology, as well as on other frameworks within the field of education, for example, with regard to the activity of study, which, within the limits of this article, was not satisfactorily addressed. Studies involving the production of empirical data combined with rigorous theoretical analysis are also important for clarifying the different determinations of these phenomena, approaching their concrete nature (Kosik, 1976). Another limitation of this study – left for future work – is a more in-depth dialogue with the national and international scientific literature on school transitions.

With regard to school institutions, especially the Federal Institutes, it is considered relevant that they improve their student retention policies and practices by considering the particularities of these institutions. From a general perspective, expanding the budget for education, including student assistance, is essential in confronting attempts to undermine public schooling. Specifically concerning school transition, an aspect to be investigated is the main objective and subjective characteristics of this process, in order to identify which social and institutional aspects act as mediators and, thus, promote conscious educational work on these mediations.

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Notes

^I Humanization, here, has the meaning of the production of humanity, that is, the process of transition from the biological being to the social being through the dialectic between appropriation and objectification (Duarte, 2013).

^{II} The use of the expression dropout/retention aims to emphasize the mutually constitutive relationship of this phenomenon. Dropout and retention are opposing expressions of the same phenomenon: it is not possible to define retention without referring to dropout, and vice versa.

^{III} *Plataforma Nilo Peçanha* available at: <https://www.gov.br/mec/pt-br/pnp>. Accessed on: Aug. 12, 2025.

^{IV} According to the methodological reference guide of the Nilo Peçanha Platform, “[...] an enrollment cycle involves the offering of a course with a defined workload, with the same start date and the same expected completion date, aiming to encompass a set of student enrollments for obtaining the same certification or diploma” (Moraes *et al.*, 2020, p. 27). Thus, this analysis focuses on a cohort and, at the end of the expected time for completion (for example, three years), the enrollment status of the students in that cohort is verified, which may fall into three situations: the student completed the course or fulfilled all requirements (cycle completion); the student lost their institutional affiliation (cycle dropout); or the student remains enrolled in some curricular unit and is therefore retained (cycle retention).

^V Studies indicate that the educational outcomes of the Federal Institutes are superior to those of other schools, both public and private, when measured by students’ performance on the National High School Exam (*Exame Nacional do Ensino Médio – Enem*) (Sousa *et al.*, 2019). In addition, these institutions have distinguishing factors in the provision of education, such as infrastructure, the quality of the teaching staff, and student assistance policies.

^{VI} Subjective conditions of retention refer to aspects predominantly related to the sphere of subjectivity. This does not mean disregarding the objective determination of these aspects as well.

^{VII} The history of vocational education in Brazil is long-standing; however, it has been marked by different transformations in its provision. Integrated technical upper secondary education only began to exist in the first half of the 2000s, and the Federal Institutes were created in 2008.

^{VIII} These results represent only part of what is presented in the referenced study. Each group includes different responses that were grouped by the authors. For further details, consultation of the research is recommended.

^{IX} The expression used here, “education”, differs from the one that appears in the translation cited immediately afterward, “learning”. This is due to the fact that Vigotski, when addressing these processes, does not use the term “learning”, which does not exist in Russian, but rather the term *obutchenie*. As clarified by Prestes (2012, p. 65): “The Russian word *obutchenie* does not properly have an equivalent in Portuguese [...]. In fact, *obutchenie* refers to a two-way process, a process of instruction or teaching, which does not occur solely in the direction from teacher to student. It is a situation that involves both the student and the teacher, in which the teacher plays the role of organizer of the social environment of development”.

× With the exception of Colégio Pedro II and the laboratory schools (*colégios de aplicação*) of some universities, there is no early childhood or elementary education in the federal education system.