

Gramscian Analysis of K-12 Schools in Brazil

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[See table of contents](#)

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Abstract

This paper aims at discussing the characteristics of the Brazilian K-12 educational system using contributions from the Italian scholar Antonio Gramsci. His writings about education discuss the effects of unequal distribution of educational opportunities among students of different social classes and the consequences of this inequality on the social fabric and human development. Using Gramsci's contributions, this paper analyses empirical data about Brazil's public education system and indicates that such a system is shaped for the maintenance of inequalities. Finally, it argues that the characteristics of the public schools in Brazil restrict the potential of intellectual and cultural development of pupils whom it serves.



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Introduction

Sharp inequality among different classes characterizes Brazilian history, and the education system is deeply affected by it. Since the arrival of the Portuguese, in 1500, education has been much more a privilege than a right. In the colonial era, although there were initiatives to create a free school system, which happened through the Jesuit missions who received government funds, it excluded the vast majority of the population such as the slaves (around 40% of the population), women, orphans and all non-whites (Saviani, 2013). Hence, it was accessible only for the children of Portuguese settlers, mostly landowners who profited from the export of crops such as coffee beans and sugarcane.

After the country's independence, in 1822, the Brazilian crown drafted the first national constitution, which determined that primary education would be public and free for all citizens (again excluding those under slavery). There were no effective measures, nonetheless, to fund such schools and it remained only a decorative piece of the law (Saviani, 2013).

In 1888, the republic replaced the monarchy, but the class structure of society remained intact. Access to land ownership was extremely difficult as the only way to have it was through direct purchase from the government and payment of registration fees, making it inaccessible for most people. This restriction had major repercussions on the country's social structure, as the land was a crucial asset in the agrarian economy (Skidmore, 2010).

Hence, the beginning of the republican period was neither inclusive nor had any inclination to be so. It did not implement concrete measures to extend the access to free primary public education for all (Holston, 2008). Voting rights were restricted to those considered to have "real stakes" in the country and applied only to literate males who had possessions and reached a certain income threshold (Holston, 2008). These restrictions left out masses of people who had no possession and access to education and offered an abundant pool of cheap labour to the plantations.

The decline of the plantation system due to international competition was concomitant with the growth of major cities and the development of an incipient industrial economy. In this new stage, people increasingly started to see education as an asset that could afford better jobs (Holston, 2008). In the 1930s, the rural economy collapsed, and the urban centres became the focus of the government, both for creating an electoral basis and curbing possible disruptions against the nascent industrial economy. The working classes received new rights such as paid vacation and sick leave, and there were initiatives to extend the access to public services to the population (Levine, 1999).

There was the creation of vocational and academic schools to provide the country with skilled and semi-skilled labour. However, the scarcity of schools in places far from urban centres and the need for an early entrance in the job market kept a large portion of youth outside the education system. Other mechanisms pushed students from impoverished groups away from schools, such as admission exams to the primary and secondary cycle and a very high retention rate. In an analysis of the 1959 census, for example, Veiga (2017) points out that, from all students who started in grade one, only 17% would reach grade four, 8% would reach grade ten, and 1% would enter higher education. These mechanisms ensured that only a minority of pupils would make it through all cycles, mostly the members of the elite. They had connections and could support their children's educational path. Consequently, by the 1950s, roughly half of the country's population was illiterate (Veiga, 2017).

The severe living conditions in the rural areas and the demand for labour in the cities led to exponential urban growth and, by 1960, most of the population lived in such regions (Caldeira, 2000). According to Holston (2008), the city growth opened a new arena for the search of rights by the impoverished sectors of society, mostly composed of immigrant peasants. They started demanding better living conditions, including access to education.

In 1964, the military mounted a coup d'état under the justification that they would finally place the country into modernity, aligned with the economic ideals of the western industrially advanced capitalist countries. This political move had the support of the upper and middle urban classes, who feared the rise of popular movements inspired by the Cuban and Soviet revolutions (Skidmore, 2010).

Under the human capital theory tenets, there were efforts to eradicate illiteracy and expand school access to meet the demand for a skilled workforce. The principles that guided the expansion of the school system in the period were “maximum results with minimum expenditure” and “non-duplication of means for identical goals” (Saviani, 2008, p. 297).

Public schools started to deliver technical and vocational courses for students to finish secondary education with a trade certificate, such as accounting and childcare. According to Zibas (2005), these policies aimed at curbing the demand for higher education by the poorer classes and the quality of the courses was bad. The main reason for such a lack of quality was that budget allocations to education remained low even though the number of schools was increasing (Saviani, 2008).

Nosella (2015) argues that these measures to expand access to schools were never an endeavour to equalize the educational opportunities for the different social classes. Rather, it was an attempt to juxtapose the two sides of the socioeconomic spectrum by offering a semi-skilled education to the lower echelons of society. In this move, the humanities were sacrificed to give more space to technical disciplines in schools.

Upper and middle-class families, observing the deterioration of the public system, started enrolling their children in private institutions that would primarily focus on preparing them for university entrance exams. The expansion of private schools also had a powerful lobby among policymakers, which gave them an additional push through favourable laws (Saviani, 2008). Therefore, the expansion of the public education system was concomitant to the migration of wealthier students to private institutions and the beginning of the dichotomy between private and public education. While the former was restricted to the ones who could afford the tuition and emphasized the preparation for higher education, the latter saw a sharp decrease in quality and ended up being just a preparation for an immediate entrance in the labour market (Frigotto & Ciavatta, 2011).

In 1984 the military regime collapsed, and the policy to have secondary students professionalized in public schools was abandoned. Since then, there have been national debates about the ideal structure of school cycles, especially in secondary education. This search for the ideal format has been accompanied by continuous growth in the percentage of students enrolled, and the access to elementary and junior high school has been virtually universalized. Antonio Gramsci's ideas offer relevant tools to analyze this expansion and discuss whether it represented a new stage in the Brazilian education system, or just another expression of the perennial class divide in the country.

Antonio Gramsci and the School

Following Marx, Gramsci envisioned the overcoming of the capitalist mode of production by socialism. Different than positivist Marxists, nonetheless, he did not see education and culture as mechanically determined by economic structures. For him, these were important components in the dispute for social hegemony, consisting of moral and intellectual direction over society (Dore, 2014). For the author, therefore, social change necessarily entails cultural evolution (Gramsci, 1971). Gramsci made an analogy with the Lutheran and Calvinist reforms, as they were successful in places where there was strong popular ideological support, such as in Germany. He claimed that this ideological support led people to resist the powerful Catholic armies and gave rise to the most dynamic European nations (Mochcovitch, 2001).

Hence, he dedicated much of his work to investigating the role of cultural institutions in forming social ideas, especially the press, the church, and the schools (Gramsci, 2011). These institutions were the backbone of the social superstructure, which forged consensus among the different classes to accept the status quo (Anderson, 2003). Gramsci acknowledged that consensus and conformity are essential to the society's functioning and was mostly concerned with the type of consensus and conformity the cultural institutions promoted (Gramsci, 2011).

The historical context in which Gramsci wrote about education was distinct from that of Marx's. Even among sectors of the ruling classes, there was support for a lay and unitary school that had work as the pivotal curriculum component (Dore, 2014). There was a growing perception that access to knowledge, which had been systematized through written language, was essential for the development of nation-states and the productive forces (Dore, 2014).

Still, at the time in Italy there were segments of society (such as members of the Catholic clergy and landowners) that argued that it was unnecessary to extend the access to schools to peasants and poor workers. They contended that formal education was not necessary for a virtuous life and could be a distraction for workers in their labour (Saviani, 2002). Hence, the country had side by side, a well-established higher education system and a high percentage of people who did not have access to school and were illiterate (Saviani, 2002).

The period in which Gramsci wrote most of his ideas about schools (in the 1920s and early 1930s) was particularly turbulent. He saw the rise of the fascist regime of Benito Mussolini, which sent him to prison in 1926 under the accusation of being a threat to the stability of the state. Gramsci saw the implementation of educational policies by the education minister Giovanne Gentili, who devised different types of schools to allegedly accommodate students with different inclinations.

Gentili's main argument for the reform was that offering a classical humanistic education for impoverished students who lacked general academic culture was a waste of resources (Nosella, 2015). For such students, there were vocational schools that trained them for manual labour, whereas for wealthier pupils, there were academic schools for university preparation. These developments made Gramsci deeply concerned about the education of the subaltern classes as he considered this division of humans into different categories an artificial imposition of the capitalist states (Dore, 2010).

Gramsci (1971) did not deny that pupils from the higher strata were better prepared for academic life due to their family background. He recognized that providing students from the working classes with an academic education would pose significant challenges. Gramsci (1971)

argued that if the aim is “to produce a new stratum of intellectuals, including those of highest degree of specialization, from a social group which has not traditionally developed the appropriate attitudes, then we have unprecedented difficulties to overcome” (p. 43). A crucial component in solving these difficulties was the teacher, whose work was to mediate the tensions that might arise from the contact between students and academic culture. Gramsci (1971) considered that

The child’s consciousness is not something “individual” (still less individuated), it reflects the sector of civil society in which the child participates, and the social relations which are formed within his family, his neighbourhood, his village, etc. In school, the nexus between instruction and education can only be realized by the living work of the teacher (p. 35).

Gramsci deemed it vital that the lower echelons of society generate their own intellectuals. Only then would they be able to create their ideas, free from the control of bourgeois intellectuals, and pose a real challenge to the exploitative status quo (Gramsci, 1971).

While he considered that the industrialization of society promoted the insertion of the popular masses into the social life and educational system, he also noted that this insertion would not bring about social change if the masses did not enter the political life as well. Gramsci contended that access to political life would only be possible through a high-quality humanistic education (Nosella, 2015). Hence, only through cultural strength and lucid consciousness would humans act in society as historical agents (Manacorda, 1990, p. 22). This humanistic culture, nonetheless, would not come spontaneously from the interactions of people with their environment. Only through disciplined study that learners would acquire the intellectual skills to exercise their free will critically (Manacorda, 1990).

This perspective is the reason why Gramsci defined technical and vocational schools as “monsters incubators” that provided an arid instruction and were just concerned with the development of a skilled hand and a sharp eye among pupils (Gramsci, 2011). For Gramsci (1971), therefore, “democracy cannot mean that an unskilled worker becomes skilled. It must mean that every “citizen” can “govern”, and that society places him, even if only abstractly, in a general condition to achieve this” (p. 40).

Gramsci’s (2011) main critique of the educational system in Italy was that not only did it clearly reflect the social divide, but it also worked for its maintenance. Thus, it curbed the possibility of members of subaltern classes of developing sophisticated scientific, historical, and social ideas and fixed them in the conceptions of their milieu.

Comparing Russia to advanced capitalist western societies, Gramsci concluded that social change would not occur in the latter through revolution due to the deep-seated capitalist values among all social classes (Anderson, 2003). Only through a laborious educational effort would the working classes overcome conventional beliefs and reach a historical understanding of their social existence. For Gramsci, all human beings were potential philosophers, and even those occupied in manual labour could reflect on their activity within the social structure. The inequalities, therefore, were not a result of natural differences between humans but historical relations of domination and subordination between social classes (Manacorda, 1990). Gramsci argued that the subaltern social classes were immersed in conventional ideas that provided a fragmented worldview that justified exploitative relations. To overcome this fragmented consciousness, it was necessary a sustained educational effort. Only then would people abandon their individualistic dispositions and work collectively to participate in history actively (Mochcovitch, 2001).

Throughout his educational reflections, Gramsci pondered about the Jesuit method, which emphasized obedience and memorization, and the spontaneous approach, advocated by philosophers such as Rousseau, who claimed that adults should let children choose to learn what they are curious about and not impose external pressures on them (Manacorda, 1990). Gramsci rejected the former for being dogmatic and not leading students to the autonomous exercise of reason. He also discarded the latter for leaving children's ideas to be formed by random experiences acquired from the environment. For him, this approach was most problematic for working class children, who had very little access to academic and classical culture and relied on their immediate groups of socialization to form their ideas (Manacorda, 1990).

While he saw education as a way to promote human adaptation to the environment, he also conceived of it as a way to struggle and transform this environment, using both technical skills and diligently cultivated intellectual ideas (Manacorda, 1990). Gramsci deemed that a new society would not emerge unless there were new human beings. He expressed a special interest in the industrial development in the United States, as it offered a counterpoint to the European social structures, which retained aspects of its medieval caste system (Gramsci, 1971). The Taylorist and Fordist productive models, for Gramsci, were an example of the creation of a new type of discipline among workers necessary to promote industrial development. For Gramsci, such development represented "a continuous victory against the animalism in human beings, a painful and continuous process of subjugation of instincts to promote rigid habits of order, exactitude, and precision" (in Manacorda, 1990, p. 143).

In this way, Gramsci (1971) reaffirmed the dialectical principle that "philosophy is affirmed in action" (p. 307). He critiqued European philosophical traditions claiming they were only contemplative and modified only "the word, not things, the external gesture and not the man inside" (p. 307). This principle undergirded his view of education as both a subjective organization (through discipline for work), and external practice (through action that is socially informed) and schools had an important role to play in the elaboration of both (Manacorda, 1990).

While in prison (from 1926 to 1932), Gramsci eagerly followed the development of the Soviet education system through his wife's and sister-in-law's letters, who had fled to Russia with his two sons when he went to prison. He learned that schools there emphasized work in groups to solve tasks given by teachers, following the social need for technicians to run the emerging industrial complexes. Gramsci, nonetheless, expressed some reservations about these practices. He considered they were leading students to accept a professional orientation too early, curbing pupils' creative potential. For him, schools should be disinterested and not impose any external demand for a specific occupational duty on the child. Instead of prioritizing one set of skills over others, Gramsci contended that schools should foster the harmonious development of all activities: intellectual, moral, and manual (Nosella, 2015).

In this sense, the ideal school would provide students with ample development opportunities that would combine working and cognitive skills (Manacorda, 1990). This perspective came from Gramsci's idea that the human spirit was a product of history and not innate disposition. This spirit should be cultivated by guided experiences, which would eventually lead to a mature vocational choice (Manacorda, 1990).

Gramsci's criticism of the academic school in Italy was not related to its form, but to the privileges it gave to upper-class students to the detriment of impoverished ones. He referred to secondary schools as aristocratic institutions, in the sense they, at least on the outset, should be

destined to the best pupils, not just to the wealthy ones. Hence, he argued they should select their students through fair tests (Manacorda, 1990). He also contended that students should live in the school premises to develop a collective lifestyle where they would work together with the assistance of the best pupils. Therefore, a spirit of mutual assistance should be a vital component of learning, especially in the higher grades, because it would enable pupils to learn to work cooperatively in a common society (Manacorda, 1990).

Gramsci highlighted the two main goals of schools: to introduce pupils into the society of objects (*societas rerum*) and human society (*societas hominum*) (Mochcovitch, 2001). Unlike classical scholars, he did not see a dichotomy between instruction and education or, in other words, technical and intellectual skills. He deemed necessary that humans be equipped with both to create a new society based on socialist ideals. This new society would involve a reformulation of the means of production (the structure) as well as of the moral order (the superstructure), which should overcome the individualistic and classist conceptions (Manacorda, 1990).

The introduction into the society of objects would involve learning the natural laws and the development of rational thinking. For Gramsci, technological advancement was intimately connected to scientific and technical skills (Mochcovitch, 2001). Schools, therefore, should provide pupils with ample opportunity to acquire scientific knowledge and technical abilities.

The second goal of education, pupils' introduction into human society, should guide students to learn that "there exist social and state laws which are the product of human activity, which are established by men and can be altered by men in the interests of their collective development" (Gramsci, 1971, p. 34). Knowledge of these laws would prevent the barbarism that stems from individualism and provincialism (Mochcovitch, 2001). Provincialism and individualism, for Gramsci, were the most significant obstacles in human development because they prevented people from realizing they are part of a collectivity that goes beyond their castes or groups. Furthermore, they were an impediment to the perception of one's activity as part of the dialectical- historical relationship of people with one another and people with nature.

Gramsci and Educational Sages

Gramsci (1971) argued that the division of school stages should consider the critical changes puberty brings about in students' personalities. For him, before puberty, children are easy to lead, and it is possible to instill study habits. Infancy, hence, offers an extraordinary window of opportunity to inculcate children with discipline for the formation of life-long study habits. After puberty, nonetheless, any external intervention becomes hateful. Therefore, elementary schools should enforce discipline among pupils to achieve some collective conformism (Gramsci, 2011). The severity of the elementary school would be useful for selecting, among the student population, a few talented scholars that every society needs for its development (Manacorda, 1990). The main goal in elementary education, thence, would be to promote diligent study habits among pupils to establish a solid knowledge basis.

After this stage dedicated to cultivating study discipline, it would be possible to promote independent study habits. Students would go from a state of intellectual and moral heteronomy to a degree in which they would experience increasing levels of autonomy. Secondary education, therefore, should be the summit of creativity after a long time of preparation. At this stage, teachers would act more like counsellors and guides, akin to what should happen at the universities where there is collaborative work (Manacorda, 1990).

For the author, scientific activities should neither be the monopoly of universities nor left to chance but should be the duty of secondary schools (Gramsci, 2011). The fundamental school activities, therefore, should take place in seminars, at the library and laboratories. In these different environments, students can go through different experiences essential to choosing the appropriate professional orientation (Manacorda, 1970). It is evident Gramsci's disapproval of connecting the child to a professional stream too early. For him, only through attentive and judicious observations would school staff be able to determine each student's inclinations (Manacorda, 1990). Therefore, schools should be comprehensive and enable pupils to participate in social life after having elevated them to a certain degree of maturity for intellectual autonomy and practical orientation (Gramsci, 2011).

A crucial component in Gramsci's ideas is the concept of conformism, which was inherent to human life in society (Manacorda, 1990). What the author proposed, then, was the shift from a conformism related to the coercion of one social class over the other to a conformism based on self and mutual control. It was the replacement of a narrow-minded spirit of belonging to a specific group by the idea of belonging to the human species, which had the vocation of achieving freedom (Manacorda, 1990).

The educational process, thence, should start with the establishment of a robust psychosocial basis for the development of a collective sense and discipline among pupils. This establishment would involve coercion to foster essential habits for technical, intellectual, and moral development. This stage would pave the way for the creative school, after puberty, in which students would develop their creative powers. For Gramsci (1971), creativity entailed discovering "a truth oneself, without external suggestion or assistance- even if the truth is an old one" (p. 33). Then, human beings, endowed with autonomous thought, would be able to lucidly intervene in the political order with the culture's strength. In this sense, politics and pedagogy go together (Manacorda, 1990).

The Contemporary Education System in Brazil

As mentioned before, the huge economic gap between the social classes shaped the Brazilian educational system. With the military coup d'état, there was an endeavour to expand the access to school to the impoverished classes to fulfill the need for semi-skilled labour as well as respond to their demands for access to school. The premise behind this educational model was that preparing the masses to find work in the urban-industrial society was sufficient to promote their development (Saviani, 2008). Educating them to acquire intellectual skills, thence, was considered useless because the ideal political order was dictatorial, like the Italian fascist schools under Giovanni Gentili. Nonetheless, this model was far from Gramsci's ideal of a comprehensive and disinterested school that would allow for the development of a range of skills among pupils from all classes. Consequently, upper and middle-class families moved their children to private institutions that turned into a lucrative industry. They became indispensable for accessing academic knowledge and concomitant preparation for the admission exams of universities.

After the collapse of the military regime in 1984, there was the promulgation of a new federal constitution in 1989, which became known as the citizen chart for its extensive recognition of social, political, and civil rights (Holston, 2008). It recognized, for example, that access to education is a basic human right, and there should be no impediments for anyone to enter and remain at school throughout all cycles and grades.

In the spirit of the new constitution, a new educational policy was formulated in 1996, aiming to put into effect the chart's tenets. In its first article, it established, for example, that the education system's main goal was to prepare pupils for citizenship and work. Hence, it should promote the increase in intellectual and moral autonomy to enable students to be lifelong learners and adapt to the changing social circumstances (Brasil, 1996).

One of the consequences of this new policy was the establishment of secure investment sources for public schools, which brought about a significant expansion in the population access. In the past 40 years, the number of students enrolled in elementary and secondary schools grew approximately 80%, and the access to grades one to nine has been virtually universalized (Marchelli, 2010).

This expansion, however, came at the cost of quality (Domingues Toschi & Oliveira., 2000). To accommodate the increasing number of students, most public schools started operating in three shifts: morning, afternoon, and evening. This *modus operandi* meant that most students spent around five hours at school, and there was no way to offer them remedial and extracurricular activities as all rooms were in use. In addition to that, most school buildings did not include facilities that are essential to the development of study habits. The 2018 national education census, for example, shows that, among public schools, only 37 % have a library, 11 % have a science lab, and 38% have a computer lab (Qedu, 2020).

It is important to consider that, as the education system expanded, many pupils were the first ones in their families to achieve higher grades. This fact meant they had no access to academic and cultural capital in their socialization groups and relied solely on the school to advance in their educational path (Bourdieu, 2007). The insufficient amount of assistance has had several detrimental consequences to the intended educational outcomes. One of the consequences is the low learning levels of students, as many of them reach high school without knowing basic literacy and numeracy. The results of Prova Brazil, a national standardized test administered by the federal government that assesses students' language and math skills, corroborate this perception. In 2017, for example, this assessment revealed that, in grade 5, the percentage of pupils who demonstrated adequate knowledge in language was 56% and in math 44%. By grade 9 only 34% of students had learned the expected in Portuguese language and only 15% had done the same in math (Qedu, 2020).

It is possible to see that many students end up falling behind the curriculum content, which tends to disrupt their progress in subsequent grades. Historically, the way to deal with pupils who had not achieved the goals for their grades was to have them repeat it. However, retention rates were rampantly high and were a burden to the system. Furthermore, it had a very negative effect on failing students' self-esteem and on the rest of the pupils, who had to share the classroom with older peers. In 1996, to tackle the problem of grade repetition and regulate the flow of students, grade retention was substituted by cycle retention, which meant pupils would have a cycle of three years to learn the expected. In practice, nonetheless, this initiative ended up promoting students with low performance without any plans to help them move forward in their learning process (Freitas, 2007). The consequence, as evident in the results of Prova Brasil, is that many students finish each cycle knowing much less than the expected, which adds substantial challenges for high school teachers (Araujo, 2015).

Another issue related to the expansion of the education system is that teachers' wages were reduced to finance its expansion (Domingues, et al., 2000). Consequently, the best high school

students usually steer away from the teacher career (Louzano et al., 2010). Furthermore, the low wages end up pushing teachers to overwork. According to Carvalho (2018), 20% of the teachers in Brazil work in two or more schools. Also, more than 60% of high school teachers have more than six groups. All these conditions severely compromise their ability to research, plan their classes and forge the nexus between students' lived experience and academic knowledge.

Finally, in high schools, which Gramsci (2011) saw as the summit of creative and collaborative work, there is a very high dropout rate that affects 1.3 million youth. One of the causes of this high evasion rate is the need of an early entrance in the job market by many pupils from poor classes. Also, many students perceive that what is offered is neither relevant to their experiences nor offers anything useful apart from a diploma (Araujo, 2015). Much of this perceived meaninglessness of high schools is related to its structure, which offers only one path comprised of academic disciplines and does not afford students an ample variety of experiences to help them make informed vocational choices. Hence, for many pupils, going to school becomes a monotonous experience they must endure to obtain a diploma that is the minimum requirement for most occupations. Students' lack of interest, in turn, ends up creating an enormous difficulty for teachers to establish discipline and order in their classes (Araujo, 2015).

Final Considerations

It is possible to see that throughout Brazilian history, the class divide has shaped the Brazilian education system. Initially, schools were destined only for the children of the agrarian elite to prepare for an academic career. The impoverished groups remained illiterate and offered cheap labour to landowners. With time, the country's economy shifted from agrarian to industrial and the productive system started demanding more skilled and semi-skilled workers. These changes were accompanied by the state initiative to create academic and vocational schools for different social classes. While the former enabled students to attend a post-secondary institution, the latter would prepare pupils for an immediate entrance in the job market. Furthermore, schools were scarce outside urban centres and would push out most students with entrance exams for each cycle and high retention rates, which mostly affected lower-income pupils.

According to Holton (2008), profound changes in the country's demographics led the masses to see education as an essential asset in the urban economy to provide an insertion in the productive system. The military regime, in this way, acted to respond to the burgeoning demand from the popular classes for education by expanding access to schools. Following the tenets of human capital, there was a strong emphasis on technical skills, and the humanities were subsumed to creating conformity among pupils to the social superstructure (i.e., the capitalist system and the nation-state) (Frigotto & Ciavatta, 2011). These initiatives set into motion core principles of productivity and budget optimization, making the curriculum rigid and school buildings overcrowded and scarce in resources (Saviani, 2008). As previously described, the lack of variety in educational institutions is still a defining trait of the public system.

One of the consequences of this policy was the migration of the upper classes to private schools in search of better education that prepared them for university courses. Thence, the demographics of public schools quickly changed, but the social divide of educational opportunities remained the same.

Gramsci (1971, 2011) offers insights into this divide by arguing that schools are neither conservative nor revolutionary. The problem he identified in the Italian education system was that

it destined pupils of different classes to certain occupations. This division reflected a state-imposed alienation of the working classes, who were denied access to academic knowledge.

For Gramsci, nonetheless, only through a solid humanist formation would the poorer classes acquire the skills to participate in the political struggle lucidly. This consciousness would not come spontaneously but through the diligent study of ancient and present societies and their economic and legal orders (Gramsci, 1971). Thence, elementary schools' primordial duty was to inculcate such habits among students so that when they reach high school, they have attained a mature cognitive level and potential to independent learning.

The Brazilian education policies have recently adopted a language that speaks to the need for forming critical thinkers capable of challenging the social inequalities (Brasil, 1996). As this paper argued, though, the state's concrete practices do not support the attainment of such goals. Public schools, which bear the brunt of educating pupils of groups with very little academic capital, have very limited potential due to time, resources, staff, and space constraints. The result is that many students are promoted to higher grades without knowing the foundational skills of reading and writing and the basic concepts of the various disciplines. It is in the higher levels, hence, that these difficulties are most evident.

For Gramsci (1971), high school is the moment to attain intellectual freedom and perceive reality with a strong historical and rational foundation. However, public schools in Brazil, in general, are just an extension of the earlier grades as there is no variety in the activities, and the pedagogical methods are the same (Araujo, 2015). This approach neglects adolescents' needs for experiences that allow them to find their vocation and status as historical beings.

Gramsci offers valuable intellectual tools to shed light on the fact that the social divide moulds the Brazilian educational system, making it unable to overcome the inequalities and generate possibilities of challenging them.

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