






POPULAR PREPARATORY COURSES FOR ENTRANCE EXAMS, HIGH SCHOOL, AND THE ISSUE OF RESTRICTED ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION¹

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Abstract

In this article, we analyze the adoption of popular preparatory courses as a mechanism to address the educational inequalities evident in access to Higher Education by Brazilian youth. Using the case of a preparatory course linked to an extension program of a public university, which is the subject of a Master's research in Education, we present discussions about the reform of High School and its potential to widen gaps through distorted curricula. We also explore how popular preparatory courses aim to address the contradictions inherent in the economic system and, like affirmative actions, enable a break from the logic of privilege for the already privileged (wealthy). Through a qualitative approach, bibliographic research - mobilizing prominent studies on the topic; and documentary research - primarily using documents from the program called Pró-Enem, the data indicate that there are challenges in maintaining the preparatory course, such as infrastructure and volunteer staff, as well as difficulties faced by its students (costs for transportation and meals). These issues highlight the difficulties in expanding the program, which concluded its activities at the end of 2024, with good approval rates of its students in public universities: 54 students were approved to access this space.

Keywords: Selection; Inequality; High School; Popular preparatory course.

How to Cite

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CURSINHO POPULAR, ENSINO MÉDIO E A PROBLEMÁTICA DO ACESSO À EDUCAÇÃO SUPERIOR

Resumo: Neste artigo analisamos a adoção dos cursinhos populares como mecanismo para lidar com as desigualdades educacionais evidenciadas no acesso à Educação Superior, por parte das juventudes brasileiras. A partir do caso do cursinho vinculado a um programa de extensão de uma universidade pública, objeto de estudo de pesquisa de mestrado em Educação, são realizadas problematizações sobre a reforma do Ensino Médio e seu potencial de ampliação de abismos via currículos disformes e como os cursinhos populares buscam lidar com as contradições próprias do sistema econômico e, assim como as ações afirmativas, possibilitar uma ruptura com a lógica de privilégio dos já privilegiados (abastados). Por meio da abordagem qualitativa, pesquisa bibliográfica - que mobilizou estudos proeminentes sobre a temática; e documental - cuja fonte central são documentos do programa intitulado Pró-Enem, os dados indicam que há dificuldades para manutenção do cursinho, como infraestrutura e pessoal voluntário, além das próprias do seu público (custos com deslocamento e alimentação), mostrando a dificuldade de capilaridade do programa, que encerrou suas atividades no final do ano de 2024, com bons índices de aprovação do seu alunado em universidades públicas: 54 aprovados para acessarem este espaço.

Palavras-chave: Seleção; Desigualdade; Ensino Médio; Cursinho popular.

CURSO POPULAR PREPARATORIO PARA INGRESO A LA UNIVERSIDAD, EDUCACIÓN SECUNDARIA Y LA PROBLEMÁTICA DEL ACCESO RESTRINGIDO A LA EDUCACIÓN SUPERIOR

Resumen: En este artículo analizamos los cursos populares como mecanismo para abordar las desigualdades educativas evidenciadas en el acceso a la Educación Superior por parte de la juventud brasileña. A partir del caso de un curso vinculado a un programa de extensión de una universidad pública, objeto de estudio de una investigación de maestría en Educación, se realizan problematizaciones sobre la reforma de la Educación Media y su potencial para ampliar las brechas a través de currículos desformados, así como de cómo los cursos populares buscan lidiar con las contradicciones propias del sistema económico y, al igual que las acciones afirmativas, posibilitar una ruptura con la lógica de privilegio de los ya privilegiados (adinerados). Mediante un enfoque cualitativo, investigación bibliográfica - que movilizó estudios relevantes sobre la temática; y documental - con fuentes principales en documentos del programa denominado Pró-Enem, los datos indican que existen dificultades para el mantenimiento del curso, como infraestructura y personal voluntario, además de las propias dificultades de su público (costos de transporte y alimentación), mostrando la dificultad de la capilaridad del programa, que cerró sus actividades a finales de 2024, con buenos índices de aprobación de sus estudiantes en universidades públicas: 54 aprobados para acceder a este espacio.

Palabras clave: Selección; Desigualdad; Educación Media; Curso popular.

Introduction

The Brazilian youth are diverse and marked by the inequalities that characterize Brazil, to which educational inequalities are added. Upon reaching the end of high school, which is already a privilege, a certain portion of young people view the continuation of their studies as self-evident, while another portion has been shaped to immediately enter the labor market. An unequal economic system privileges the privileged, with apologies for the redundancy, but it is a fact. In the words of Furtado and Silva (2020, p. 164), supported by the studies of sociologists Bourdieu and Passeron: “educational selectivity that excludes, segregates, and marginalizes students from popular classes, while favoring and privileging students with more economic, social, symbolic, and cultural capital”.

A system that disguises itself as fair under the justification of individual merit, even though the privileged often exert less effort and have reserved places of prominence/prestige/power. If effort were truly to be assessed, considering starting conditions, study subsidies, among others, the logic of the elite, who gained privileges by enslaving and subtracting goods and freedoms, would be disrupted.

What affirmative actions seek to do is provide conditions for people deprived of privilege in capitalist society (the less affluent), who face obstacles of all kinds, to break into the spaces reserved for the predestined. This is similar to the role that popular *cursinhos* (preparatory courses) aim for. This term refers to preparatory courses for university entrance exams, which are selection exams for a place in higher education courses. In this text, we discuss a *cursinho* that was born and developed within a public university.

When considering the role of the Brazilian public university, we are led to think about the tripod of teaching, research, and extension, permeated by social commitment. Such commitment relates to the implementation of affirmative action policies, from the perspective of combating what can be considered invisible castes, promoting diversity within the university. However, we propose to think before affirmative actions, how the university endeavors to mitigate inequalities through popular *cursinhos*.

For this purpose, we discuss the high school stage as central for young people to have access to *cursinhos*, to affirmative actions themselves, and, consequently, to opportunities for access to Higher Education, especially public education. This text was generated from a qualitative research approach, whose methodological path is affiliated with documentary

analysis, based on the project document in which the popular *cursinho* discussed was registered under protocol at the Federal University of Mato Grosso, approved by the extension administration, as well as the Program's report (with results). According to Lüdke and André (1986, p. 38), this type of analysis is valuable for qualitative data, “whether by complementing information obtained by other techniques, or by revealing new aspects of a theme or problem.”

In its organization, this text is divided into a section addressing the problem of high school, specifically *High School as an initial filter for continuing studies*, already an obstacle to be overcome by young people subject to educational inequalities, especially in full-time education and with disparate curricula regarding the flexible part. If attending high school is an achievement, occupying a place in Higher Education often becomes something surreal.

In the section *Inequalities, ideological support, and affirmative actions*, the point of inequalities as characteristic of a neoliberal economic system, which praises market management and meritocracy, is touched upon, as well as the reform of the Brazilian State in the 1990s as further ideological support for the strengthening of such principles.

In *Popular cursinho in the public university*, we present the case of the extension program *Programa Integração Universidade-Sociedade Pró-Enem*, a popular *cursinho* initiated by students of the Federal University of Mato Grosso (UFMT) in 2016 and which ceased its activities in 2024, amid difficulties in continuing its operation.

Finally, structurally, the final considerations are presented with reflections on the performance of popular *cursinhos* in interface with affirmative action policies, presenting challenges for initiatives to combat inequalities within this economic system and the aspirations regarding the constitution of a high school that does not further subjugate the marginalized, those who are historically placed at the margin of the possibility of aiming for certain objectives, such as being and remaining in Higher Education.

High School as an Initial Filter for Continuing Studies

In 2023, regular High School education registered 7,676,743 enrollments (INEP, 2024). These enrollments comprise diverse, plural, and heterogeneous youth who constituted the final stage of Basic Education. Such pluralism denotes that there are different ways of living and

experiencing youth, conditioned by social structures, opportunities, and the needs of the territory where young people live. There are effects of inequalities on youth experiences, influencing their life projects, access to basic rights such as education, health, work, and culture; it is not a transitional stage, a becoming adult, but rather a period of building projects, experimentation, among others (Oliveira; Pimenta, 2023).

The recent high school reform, known as the New High School (NEM), instituted by Law No. 13.415, of February 16, 2017, extended the period of school attendance, instituting full-time education, in addition to establishing a flexible part of the curriculum, with the constitution of formative itineraries, and the common part with competencies and skills to be developed throughout the country, through the National Common Curricular Base (BNCC) (Brasil, 2017).

For Santos, Menegon, and Alves (2020, p. 192), this is a reform with a market-oriented bias that can compromise the emancipation of poor and Black youth, as it revisits old educational projects molded by market ideals, using education as a mechanism in economic and political crises, relying on technical training for Black and poor youth and university for the affluent: “to the poor, education for work; to the ‘court,’ education for their enlightenment.”

This restructuring of High School was accompanied by the dissatisfaction of students, teachers, and education researchers, who raised various problems, such as: lack of adequate structure in education networks, disparate curricula, demotivation of working students, among others. Although the NEM presents the perspective of student protagonism (Brasil, 2017), the diversified part of the curricula, given according to the possibilities of the networks, can reinforce and expand the inequalities present in Brazil, considering its potential to favor private schools with good infrastructures and possibilities for diversified study schedules for their students' teaching-learning process.

Santos, Menegon, and Alves (2020) emphasize that there is a gap between the 1988 Federal Constitution and the NEM, since the former discusses the valorization of diversity and plurality, and the latter directs a specific contingent of youth to the world of work. The authors address the duality between low-income students and wealthy students. With vocational education in regular High School, poor and Black youth can be “pushed into careers that lead to underemployment” (Santos; Menegon; Alves, 2020, p. 196), while affluent youth follow the same stage of education, preparing for ENEM and/or entrance exams, seeking and achieving any fields of productivity they desire.

Another point that Santos, Menegon, and Alves (2020) criticize is related to the (impossibility of) students' permanence in schools within the scope of the NEM. In line with this criticism, Mota, Casagrande, and Alonso (2022) question for whom this High School would be intended. The study conducted by Mota, Casagrande, and Alonso (2022) shows that, given the establishment of full-time High School, the researched school experienced significant dropouts among students, especially young workers.

In addition to the issue of full-time attendance/permanence, it is necessary to reflect on the idea of a flexible curriculum. When the curriculum is made flexible, establishing formative itineraries, a false conception is created that the student will be able to choose a specific itinerary. However, it should be noted that the student will only be able to choose from those that schools make available, and the institution, in turn, may or may not offer all itineraries.

Cássio and Goulart (2022, p. 530) analyze how free students actually are to choose the formative itineraries that interest them most, based on data from the state of São Paulo. For the authors, “[...] the ‘free choice’ promised to students is strictly limited by the material conditions of the education network and, above all, of the schools.”

Still under the analysis of Cássio and Goulart (2022), regarding the implementation of the High School reform in the state of São Paulo, the authors highlight some points such as: young people are limited in the choice process, as they choose from what is available within the networks' possibilities, as determined by law; the increase in educational inequality with the institution of the diversified part of the curriculum, even with the support of the BNCC in part of the curriculum; no expansion of the physical space of the school; and negligence towards working students.

From this perspective, the aforementioned authors emphasize that the NEM, as a curriculum-based revolution, occurs with minimal public investment, as it does not foresee the physical expansion of education networks, the hiring and valorization of education professionals, in addition to the absence of policies that guarantee the permanence of working students in schools with extended hours. That is, they consider that: “The implementation of a large-scale curricular reform without a substantive alteration of the material conditions of schools results in the reinforcement of existing school inequalities as social inequalities” (Cássio; Goulart, 2022, p. 528).

In the face of these criticisms, the NEM underwent public consultations, public hearings, meetings, a cycle of webinars, and national and regional seminars for evaluation and restructuring of the ongoing national policy in High School. As a result, there was a suspension of the reform calendar, including the suspension of changes to the National High School Exam (ENEM), which was planned to adapt to the new High School curricular structure. The outcome was an executive report, called the *Executive Summary of the Public Consultation Report on High School* (Brasil, 2023).

Subsequently, the federal government submitted Bill No. 5.230 to the Chamber of Deputies on October 26, 2023, with partial redefinitions to compose the National High School Policy. After back and forth between the Chamber and the Senate, a substitute document was approved by the Federal Senate on June 19, 2024 (Opinion SF nº 68/2024), which returned to the Chamber of Deputies.

The text of the reform's restructuring was approved without the Senate's proposals on July 9, 2024. The presidential sanction determined the approval of Law No. 14.945, on July 31, 2024, with the expansion of the basic general education workload and the reduction of the workload for formative itineraries (Brasil, 2024). We note a search for the composition of a less unequal curriculum, as some researchers denounced, such as Furtado and Silva (2020), who address the offer of formative itineraries linked to the reproduction and legitimation of social and school inequalities. For the authors,

[...] the logic of fracturing knowledge into the itinerary model will consequently lead to distinct formations that will inevitably be subordinated to the socioeconomic situation of the students and the conditions of the educational institutions, thus potentially favoring the maintenance, legitimization, and reproduction of social disparities” (Furtado; Silva, 2020, p.162).

These itineraries, considered the diversified part of the curriculum, must, by requirement for education systems, guarantee the offer of comprehensive deepening in all areas of knowledge, namely Languages and their technologies; Mathematics and its technologies; Natural Sciences and their technologies; and Applied Human and Social Sciences (Brasil, 2024). Thus, it is required that at least two formative itineraries with distinct emphases be offered, with the exception of institutions that offer Technical and Professional Training (FTP), which, in turn, will be governed according to the technological axes and technological areas defined under the terms provided in the national curricular guidelines for professional and

technological education (Brasil, 2024). The implementation of these formative itineraries and the supposed expansion of curricular possibilities (flexibilization) occur amid the scenario of social, economic, cultural, and, we emphasize, educational inequalities experienced by young people. In this context, discussions emerge about the ideological contribution that permeates public education policies and the need for affirmative actions as a mechanism to mitigate disparities toward social justice. In the next section, the current socioeconomic context, marked by ideological determinants of the neoliberal system and the rationality of capital, will be explored.

Inequalities, Ideological Contribution, and Affirmative Actions

The current capitalist economic system, presently characterized as neoliberal, consists of a renewed liberalism that understands the participation of the State in a different way, one that is highly relevant when it serves the interests of capital. Revisiting the beliefs of pure liberalism was decisive for the system to reestablish and strengthen itself. According to Dardot and Laval (2016, p. 58), “The ‘new liberalism’ rests on the recognition of the inability of liberal dogmas to define new limits for governmental intervention.”

From the neoliberal perspective, Dardot and Laval (2016, p. 69) state that “even though they acknowledge the necessity of State intervention and reject pure governmental passivity, neoliberals oppose any action that hinders the play of competition among private interests.” What remains unchanged involves certain precepts regarding public administration, viewing it as less efficient compared to the private sector.

In this sense, the proposal to readjust State administration in Brazil materialized in the Plano Diretor da Reforma do Aparelho do Estado (PDRAE), which was developed during the first term of President Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995–1998), under the Ministry of Federal Administration and State Reform (Ministério da Administração Federal e da Reforma do Estado – MARE), whose minister was Luiz Carlos Bresser-Pereira.

The PDRAE proposed the reform of the Brazilian State, which consisted of limiting the functions of the State as a producer of goods and services and, to a lesser extent, as a regulator

(Pereira, 2006). In practice, according to Peroni (2003), it ended up promoting a withdrawal of the State from responsibilities related to social issues.

When questioning the role of the State concerning social policies, within this reform perspective, Peroni (2003, p. 63) observes in documents and declarations, such as those by Pereira, “that funding and regulation will be entrusted to society,” which allows her to conclude that, in the sphere of social policies, “the State is seeking to transfer to society tasks that should be its own.” According to what was established in the PDRAE, the proposal was to redefine the role of the State, strengthening it as a promoter and regulator of economic and social development through the production of goods and services, with the main objective of transforming “a type of public administration, bureaucratic, rigid, and inefficient, focused on itself and on internal control, into a managerial, flexible, and efficient public administration, focused on serving citizenship” (Brazil, 1995, p. 12).

The basic proposal, then, was to transform Brazilian public administration into a managerial model, a principle that Pereira (2006, p. 32) claims is associated with neoliberal ideals, which, from his perspective, lacks logic, since it had become “clear to social-democratic administrations that fiscal adjustment was not an ideologically motivated proposal, but a necessary condition for any strong and effective government.”

According to the PDRAE, the State had tended to assume direct execution functions, which were inefficient, making it clear that reforming the State meant transferring to the private sector those activities that could be controlled by the market (Brazil, 1995). Among the guidelines expressed in this Plan to optimize the productivity of public service, the following stand out: privatization, a process consisting of the privatization of state-owned enterprises; decentralization, characterized by the transfer of auxiliary or support services to the private sector; and the so-called *publicization*, defined by Pereira (2006) as the transformation of a state organization into a private-law organization—such an organization would be public insofar as the interests surrounding it are public, but it would not be a state entity.

Pereira’s (2006) consideration, which aligns with the views of theorists favorable to the proposals of the PDRAE, is that this type of property strengthens the partnership between the State and society, making social control more effective. However, for those who understand the

State as obligated to respond to social policies, it seems more like a strategy of dividing or transferring State responsibilities to society.

The PDRAE's conception, therefore, is that a crisis in Brazil resulted from "the loss of State revenue [...] and/or high spending with no return" (Montaño, 2008, p. 216), with "no return" referring to spending on social policies, which require reform by reducing State action. Thus, "since the proposed diagnosis is that the State is to blame for the crisis, the market logic came to be synonymous with quality" (Peroni, Oliveira; Fernandes, 2009, p. 774).

The diagnosis that the crisis lies within the State, as postulated in the PDRAE, is not universally accepted. Peroni, Oliveira, and Fernandes (2009, p. 764) warn that "for authors such as Antunes (1999), Mészáros (2002), and Harvey (1989, 2008), the crisis is not within the State, but is a structural crisis of capital"; Montaño (2008) also shares this view.

The notion that there is a State crisis in Brazil, and that the public sector is administratively inefficient, gives rise to the thesis that education should be understood through the lens of productivity (Peroni, 2003). In this way, there is an ideological shift with the glorification of market principles and the notion of fair competition through meritocracy. Decades later, the effects of this policy are still felt in Brazilian education at its various levels, including secondary education, which ultimately affects the continuity of studies in higher education.

As a way to address the bottleneck in continuing education amid the evident inequalities experienced by youth, Law No. 12.711 was enacted on August 29, 2012. It regulates admissions to federal universities and federal technical high schools and provides other provisions. Its main objective is to expand access to higher education for the most vulnerable populations, as a means of reducing the historical inequalities in access to education (Brazil, 2012).

One important point to be highlighted in the law concerns the provision that 50% of the places offered by federal universities and Federal Institutes of Education, or by community schools operating within rural education and partnered with public authorities, must be reserved for students who completed their secondary education in public schools (Art. 1). A gradual implementation was established, whereby the mentioned institutions were required to implement at least 25% of the quota system each year, with a maximum period of four years from the publication date of the law to fully comply with its provisions (Art. 8) (Brazil, 2012).

Affirmative action policies are understood here based on Carvalho's definition (2004, p. 51), as "public policies aimed at correcting a history of inequalities and disadvantages suffered

by a racial (or ethnic) group, generally in the face of a national State that discriminated against it negatively.” That is, public policies are advocated which do not deny the racial inequalities of the Brazilian population—inequalities that result in other barriers, such as access to higher education. Daflon, Feres Júnior, and Campos (2013) present findings from a survey on the characteristics of affirmative action in the admissions processes of Brazilian public universities, seeking to understand educational inequalities.

The authors consider that universities base their policies on these disparities, implementing procedures to mitigate inequities and turn them into possible criteria for guiding public policy. Affirmative actions are defined by them as “redistributive measures that aim to allocate goods to specific groups, that is, those discriminated against and victimized by past or present socioeconomic and/or cultural exclusion” (Daflon; Feres Júnior; Campos, 2013, p. 306).

In characterizing the process of constructing affirmative action policies in Brazilian universities, Daflon, Feres Júnior, and Campos (2013) highlight the groups served by such policies, emphasizing that students from public schools represent the largest target group. Among the 70 universities with quota systems, bonus points, or increased seat allocations, 60 (85%) targeted this group. This is followed by Black and Brown students (58%) and Indigenous students (51%).

In seeking reasons for this structuring, Daflon, Feres Júnior, and Campos (2013) point to several factors, including structural aspects of education in Brazil, such as the fact that the most highly regarded basic education institutions are private, while the highest-quality higher education institutions are public, free, and state-funded—leading to high competitiveness. For instance, the Medicine program was the most competitive course in Brazil in the 2024 Fuvest university entrance exam (Fuvest being the foundation responsible for admissions to prestigious public universities), with a ratio of 117.7 applicants per seat in São Paulo; followed by Medicine in Ribeirão Preto with 86.6; and Medicine in Bauru with 78.2 (Fuvest [...], 2023)..

This context, according to the authors, disadvantages those who were not educated in private basic education institutions, which are focused on ensuring the continuity of education for individuals for whom such continuation is taken for granted. That is, “poor students are denied educational opportunities, as public basic education does not prepare them to compete

intensely with the middle and upper classes for a place in high-quality public higher education” (Daflon; Feres Júnior; Campos, 2013, p. 310).

Another point raised by Daflon, Feres Júnior, and Campos (2013) is that there is a preference for social affirmative action policies, revealing a possible resistance in some sectors of society to accepting race-based affirmative action, tied to the notion of a “racial democracy.” Thus, the issue of poverty tends to be prioritized and more socially accepted, to the detriment of recognizing racial inequality.

The authors also discuss the role that mainstream media assumes in relation to affirmative actions in Brazil, especially in light of the absence of a broader and more detailed overview of institutional actions, as well as the implementation of these policies, which occur in different ways through racial identity verification committees, photograph analysis, or a combination of both procedures. In all cases, these bodies assume autonomy to approve students’ participation in programs (Daflon; Feres Júnior; Campos, 2013). In this sense, the media could play a relevant informational role by presenting the procedures for operationalizing affirmative actions committed to addressing, in terms of public policy, socioeconomic inequalities, the marginalization of certain groups, and racial inequality.

From a critical perspective, selection processes that require only candidates’ self-declaration, according to the authors, contribute to biased interpretations that apply their own newsworthiness criteria, thereby reinforcing controversies over the procedures for defining candidates’ racial identities by the mainstream media (Daflon; Feres Júnior; Campos, 2013).

Why are there criticisms of affirmative actions, defined as supposedly ineffective, as questioning others’ competence, or as unfair? Along this line, would popular preparatory courses also be considered dispensable or lacking legitimate function? Ideologically, it is significant that we internalize incompetence, and the concept of meritocracy supports this notion. In the specific case of admission to higher education, the “merit” of the admitted student cannot disregard their starting point. The fact is that there is a competition that may be described as unfair, since some are “starting” many meters ahead in a race that has been structured (in terms of maintaining the *status quo*) for their benefit. Souza, Ferreira, and Santos (2021, p. 41) address the legal consciousness of white racial superiority in their text and affirm: “In Brazil, the ideology of meritocracy has a long history of exclusion, restricting opportunities for the majority of the Brazilian population, who are Black, in favor of its white minority. Access to education and the resulting possibilities for entering professional careers illustrate the process

of creating inequalities.” We highlight the importance of public policies for affirmative actions aimed at public school students and involving the racial dimension, which often coincide: Black students from public schools. The challenges of accessing public higher education are addressed by Miranda (2021), who surveys the meanings attributed to affirmative actions when a member of parliament proposes a bill on the subject.

The author identifies that the target groups of affirmative action policies mentioned in the 28 bills submitted between 1995 and 2012 (the period leading up to the approval of Law No. 12.711/12) are predominantly public-school students, followed by Black individuals, Indigenous peoples, and residents of the locality where the university is located, respectively (Miranda, 2021). When analyzing the justifications for choosing the target groups, Miranda (2021, p. 92) finds that although public school students are the majority beneficiaries, “the debate raised by the justifications focuses on the issue of income inequality. Of the 28 bills, 19 mention this factor as an impediment to university access.”

Returning to the previously mentioned issue of overlapping categories, this is addressed in Miranda’s work (2021, p. 97), who notes in her analysis a kind of evasion of the racial issue, with a stronger emphasis on the strategy of quotas for public school students. Thus, “federal deputies and senators freely associated these students with low income and race, understanding public education as a space predominantly occupied by low-income Black individuals.”

The author further states: “federal deputies and senators understood affirmative actions as a constitutional mechanism for guaranteeing rights. Moreover, this type of policy enabled the democratization of public higher education” (Miranda, 2021, p. 100). In the perspective of democratizing access to continued higher education, the following section shares the case of a preparatory course that was created within a public university, aimed at public school students.

Popular Preparatory Course at a Public University

In light of a reality marked by inequalities inherent to the economic system, it is evident that youth from wealthier social classes outperform those attending public schools in accessing Higher Education. Pereira, Raizer, and Meirelles (2010) emphasize that

[...] gaining a place at a public higher education institution (HEI) – whether federal or state – becomes virtually unattainable for those who did not have access to sufficient

educational, familial, emotional, and affective resources to overcome the competition" (Pereira; Raizer; Meirelles, 2010, p. 87).

In this context, popular preparatory courses emerge as a potential means of preparing for university entrance exams and/or the ENEM. As such: "Aiming to reduce inequality in access to higher education courses and responding to a societal demand, the first popular pre-university courses (PPCs) emerged in the mid-1980s" (Morais et al., 2020, p. 05).

According to Vicente (2022, p. 153), the role of popular preparatory courses is defined as: "by recognizing the historical legacy of educational inequality in Brazil, they seek to contribute to access to Higher Education, especially for the most vulnerable sectors of the population." Thus, they are established to support low-income students in gaining access to Higher Education and continuing their studies at this level.

Despite facing difficulties in terms of both structure and funding to address the educational gaps of students from public schools, popular preparatory courses persist with a social mission, aiming to reduce the barriers between the university and these students.

Pereira, Raizer, and Meirelles (2010) point out the objectives of these courses, warning of the need to recognize that:

[...] these alternative spaces do not inherently have the capacity to bring about structural change, as they work with a segment that has at least managed to complete high school. Perhaps the greatest merit of popular preparatory courses lies in highlighting the meritocratic and unjust nature of university entrance exams, which, according to the analysis undertaken, exclude a significant number of individuals who, one way or another, completed high school and have the right to continue their education" (Pereira; Raizer; Meirelles, 2010, p. 94).

It was under these premises that the Pró-Enem popular preparatory course was established. The *University-Society Integration Program Pró-Enem* is a popular preparatory course initiated by students of UFMT in 2016. It is an extension program encompassing projects in nearly all subjects tested by ENEM, with the exception of foreign languages, and includes partnerships with other UFMT *campuses*, such as Araguaia, Sinop, and Cuiabá. Project registration was decentralized across the relevant academic units and approved by their

respective collegiate bodies (Department and Academic Council). The document registering the course lists the projects involved in the program, as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1 - Projects Comprising the Pró-Enem University-Society Integration Program

Name	Start	End	Status
PRÓ-ENEM Física e Biologia - 2024	01/05/2024	31/12/2024	Approved by the Outreach Administration of the CUIABÁ campus
PRÓ-ENEM Matemática (Cuiabá)	01/04/2024	31/12/2024	Project Report submitted to the Department of Mathematics. First Instance Evaluation.
PRÓ-ENEM Física (2024-2028)	04/04/2024	31/12/2028	Approved by the Outreach Administration of the CUIABÁ campus
PRÓ-ENEM Linguagens (2024-2028)	09/03/2024	31/12/2028	Approved by the Outreach Administration of the ARAGUAIA campus
Núcleo Pedagógico - PRÓ-ENEM	01/05/2024	31/12/2024	Report approved by the Department of Teaching and School Organization. Awaiting evaluation by the Board.
Núcleo Pedagógico - PRÓ-ENEM	01/03/2024	30/04/2024	Report approved by the Department of Teaching and School Organization. Awaiting evaluation by the Board.
PRÓ-ENEM Geografia - 2024	01/04/2024	31/12/2024	Approved by the Outreach Administration of the CUIABÁ campus
PRÓ-ENEM Linguagens (2024)	01/05/2024	31/12/2024	Approved by the Outreach Administration of the ARAGUAIA campus
PRÓ-ENEM Física & Biologia (2024 - 2025): Desenvolvendo Materiais Pedagógicos	01/08/2024	31/07/2025	Approved by the Outreach Administration of the CUIABÁ campus
PRÓ-ENEM Linguagens - Desenvolvendo Materiais Didáticos	01/08/2024	31/07/2025	Approved by the Outreach Administration of the ARAGUAIA campus

Source: Document registered with the Extension Chamber under PROCEV/UFMT (2024).

As previously mentioned, the preparatory course has been active since 2016; however, the table presented reflects the most recent registration update. It is important to note that both the program and its constituent projects are required to register annually and/or semiannually

through the PROCEV⁵/UFMT public call. In earlier periods, registrations were completed from the program's inception, with the present analysis focusing on the most recent update.

This student-led initiative emerged following the termination of the *Cuiabá-Vest* program, a popular preparatory course offered by the municipality of Cuiabá – MT. That course served as a supplementary educational initiative, supporting students and graduates from public schools.

In light of its closure, the need arose to provide assistance to these students—who no longer had access to a publicly funded preparatory course—by gathering a group of university students committed to the cause. This target audience lacked the means to afford private preparatory courses.

It is important to distinguish between popular and private preparatory courses. The latter tend to serve more privileged individuals and focus on areas of high social prestige such as medicine, law, and engineering—fields typically dominated by high-income and white social groups (Vicente, 2022). The author argues that a significant gap exists between these privileged groups and all other students competing under regular conditions. In this regard, the unique value of popular preparatory courses lies in their "potential for social, political, and ethical transformation, going beyond the mere socialization of capital toward human emancipation" (Vicente, 2022, p. 158).

A preliminary inquiry with the course's early coordination team revealed that the project was initially conceived by a chemistry student at UFMT, who received support from a PhD professor at the university's Institute of Physics. In informal interviews, they shared that, after the initial idea, they began contacting faculty members at the Cuiabá campus to gather support and develop the initiative. A connection was established during a meeting of the Institutional Program for Teaching Initiation Scholarships (PIBID) in Physics, through which the professor and the student partnered to develop the project. The initiative was launched at the end of 2016 as an intensive preparatory course for public school students, under the professor's coordination.

The 2016 edition of the project was a one-month intensive, held on Saturdays leading up to the ENEM. At the conclusion of that pilot, the founders reported facing numerous challenges and uncertainties, particularly related to the educators' difficulty in addressing

⁵ Dean of Culture, Outreach, and Community Engagement.

classrooms with diverse knowledge levels and the students' insecurities. This prompted the realization that a year-long course was necessary.

Thus, in 2017, the initiative became an extension project within the *Physics in the Cloud Program*. That year, the project ran throughout the academic year on Saturdays, similar to its current format. In 2018 and 2019, the program achieved a more structured form. In 2018, it was formalized as a UFMT extension project. In 2019, the project benefited from basic resources necessary for offering classes—resources that had previously been unavailable when classes were held in Classroom Block VI (Modules I and II), lacking even basic teaching supplies like whiteboard markers, chalk, and erasers.

Recollecting this period, the current coordinators—who have been volunteers since the beginning—recall that from 2016 to 2018, many contributors purchased teaching materials using personal funds, as the project had no external funding or fixed budget.

Consequently, 2019 marked a significant milestone in the institutionalization of Pró-Enem. That year, several students achieved high ENEM scores, leading to a substantial number of admissions into UFMT—47 students entered through the SISU system.

In 2020 and 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted the project's activities. In response to health guidelines and social distancing mandates, the *Pró-Enem* classes transitioned to a remote format, using platforms such as *Google Classroom* and *WhatsApp* study groups.

Only in late 2021, following the easing of restrictions by the State of Mato Grosso, did the project resume in-person classes—known as "aulões"—at a state public school, *Escola Estadual Dione Augusta Silva Souza*. With the return of face-to-face activities, the 2022 edition of the project resumed Saturday classes in its original format, offering subjects such as History, Philosophy, Sociology, Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Language Studies, Essay Writing, and Special Activities. In addition, the project partnered with the question bank platform *Estuda.com* to provide students with enhanced preparation tools for the ENEM.

The Special Activities course is considered a distinctive feature of Pró-Enem. While it does not directly cover ENEM or entrance exam content, it is designed to explore students' academic experiences. This component also includes emotional support through group

discussions and sessions with psychologists, acknowledging the emotional challenges involved in taking such high-stakes exams.

Throughout its nine years of operation, the program faced numerous challenges—pedagogical, structural, and socioeconomic in nature. These dimensions were central to the development of the preparatory course. As a UFMT extension program, Pró-Enem served only students from public schools who were in their final year of high school or were recent graduates.

According to the project documentation submitted via the PROCEV/UFMT public call—which forms the basis of this analysis—the program's objective was to support public high school students in preparing for the ENEM. To achieve this goal, the preparatory course proposed to: offer weekly classes for students from public schools in Mato Grosso covering ENEM-related content; establish a connection between the university and public school students, especially those from peripheral areas; and promote dialogue to encourage students to view public universities as spaces that belong to them as well.

As a program designed for public school students, Pró-Enem did not include private school students in its target audience, even if they were scholarship recipients. The understanding was that private school students had access to infrastructure and resources that were far less available in public schools—particularly in the context of ENEM and university entrance exam preparation.

This assessment is not speculative; it can be observed in the advertising strategies employed by private institutions. Promotional materials, often shared on social media or displayed on large-scale billboards, publicly celebrate the success of their students in competitive national exams and in fields of high social prestige. In defining the role of popular preparatory courses, Vicente (2022, p. 155) characterizes them as “initiatives that foster bonds among participants through collective actions aimed at effectively transforming the shared fate of specific groups and historical-social contexts.”

The main objective of *Pró-Enem* was to prepare students for the ENEM and university entrance exams with a strong social commitment, helping students understand both what and why they are studying. The program sought to integrate academic content with students' lived

experiences, believing that such contextualization would promote critical thinking and enable students to reflect on the realities they face.

As Pires *et al.* (2023) affirm, referring to the transformative potential of popular preparatory courses, Pró-Enem fulfilled an essential social function by enabling public school students to engage with content and exam formats, thus enhancing their chances of accessing higher education.

Vicente (2022, p. 152) argues that barriers to access remain, even with affirmative action policies, student financial aid, and scholarship programs: “whether due to lack of employment prospects, the difficulty of balancing work and study, insufficient university retention policies, among various other factors.” Her insights reinforce the understanding that, while popular preparatory courses may not transform systemic structures, they offer a means of coping with their harsh realities.

The Pró-Enem program concluded its activities in 2024 with a strong record. According to its final report, the program ended the year with 54 students admitted to four public universities (UFMT, the State University of Mato Grosso, the Federal University of Goiás, and the Federal University of Maranhão). Admitted students enrolled in a range of degree programs, including: Medicine (2), Law (2), Electrical Engineering (3), Architecture and Urban Planning (2), Nutrition (1), Film and Audiovisual Studies (1), Pharmacy (1), Journalism (3), among others.

According to the program’s final report, the approval rate was 69.73% among students who completed the entire academic year and 20.70% relative to the total number of students enrolled throughout the year. These results corroborate the findings of scholars in the field (Miranda, 2021; Morais *et al.*, 2020; Vicente, 2022), who emphasize that popular preparatory courses play a significant role in enabling public school students to access higher education.

Final thoughts

The inequalities present in Brazilian society are acknowledged by public policies themselves. Affirmative action, therefore, functions as a means of addressing these disparities by providing greater opportunities to those who have been historically marginalized. The term affirmative action is particularly fitting, as it concerns individuals who are often led to believe they are incompetent, when in reality, they are not competing under equal conditions. It is not

a matter of underestimating someone's abilities or asserting their incompetence—as some critics claim—but rather of making access to certain spaces possible, as is the case with both affirmative action policies and popular preparatory courses in the context of access to higher education.

The importance of popular preparatory courses becomes evident in light of the inequalities experienced by youth during their secondary education. The case of the preparatory course presented here is particularly noteworthy, as it ceased operations despite achieving a considerable university entrance success rate and generating positive outcomes throughout its years of existence. However, the challenge of recruiting student volunteers increased year after year.

The difficulties in sustaining the initiative prompt reflection on its impact within the local context, especially considering that such projects serve as tools for addressing the educational inequalities faced by students in public schools. It is also important to recognize that participation in a popular preparatory course is itself a complex issue for students who lack the means to commute—even for those who have already overcome the barrier of dropping out of high school.

This scenario highlights the need for further research on this topic and a deeper understanding of the impact that popular preparatory courses have on the lives of these young people. Such an inquiry is essential to advancing the construction of a more equitable, democratic, and inclusive education system—and, consequently, a less unequal society.

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