



The Impact of Non-normative Academic Trajectories of Higher Education Students over Their Self-development

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Abstract

The expansion of the higher education system in Brazil, from the 1990s, led to an increase in the number of enrolled students, from lower income backgrounds and other historically excluded groups. In public universities, however, this expansion was focused mainly on the enrollment of students. In general, it was not followed by consistent institutional policies that supported them throughout their academic trajectories. In this article, we start from the understanding that there is an expected trajectory for these students, which reflects a normative conception of human development, structured by values and beliefs related to the objectives of education. However, human trajectories do not coincide with stages and results institutionally expected. From the analysis of the biographic narrative of a black student who filed applications for (re)enrollment in a public university after two compulsory dismissals for non-compliance with academic performance standards, relying on the Dialogical Self-theory, the Educational Self-theory, and the Trajectory theory, we conclude Sara's pace of achievement of academic results does not correspond to the university normative standard, requiring specific pedagogical support; that the disruptive events experienced throughout her trajectory at university are eventually understood by her as opportunities for self-development; and finally, the study points to the necessity to overcome the exclusive meritocratic logic that preponderates over public universities currently, which omits the dissonance between norms and success conditions, given the socioeconomic and cultural diversity of students.

Keywords Dialogical psychology · Higher education · Disruptive events · Educational self · Meritocracy

Resumo

A expansão do sistema de educação superior no Brasil, a partir dos anos 1990, levou a um aumento no número de matrículas de estudantes vindos(as) de camadas populares e outros

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grupos historicamente excluídos. Nas universidades públicas, esta expansão, no entanto, focou-se principalmente na matrícula e, em geral, não foi seguida por políticas institucionais consistentes que os apoiassem ao longo das suas trajetórias acadêmicas. Neste artigo, nós partimos do entendimento de que existe uma trajetória esperada para estes(as) estudantes, que reflete uma concepção normativa de desenvolvimento humano, estruturada a partir de valores e crenças em relação aos objetivos da educação. No entanto, as trajetórias humanas não coincidem com as etapas e resultados institucionalmente esperados. Da análise de narrativas biográficas de uma estudante negra, que impetrou pedidos de (re)matrícula em uma universidade pública, após dois desligamentos compulsórios, por não cumprimento de normas relacionadas à performance acadêmica, apoiando-nos na Teoria do Self Dialógico, na Teoria do Educational Self e na teoria de Trajetórias, nós concluimos que o ritmo de alcance de resultados acadêmicos de Sara não corresponde ao padrão normativo da universidade, demandando apoio pedagógico específico; que os eventos disruptivos vividos ao longo de sua trajetória na universidade são por ela apropriados como oportunidades de desenvolvimento; e finalmente, o estudo aponta para a necessidade de superação da lógica meritocrática exclusiva que preside as universidades públicas, na atualidade, que omite a dissonância entre normas e condições de sucesso, dada a diversidade socioeconômica e cultural dos(as) alunos(as).

Palavras-chave Psicologia dialógica · Educação superior · Eventos disruptivos · *Self* educacional · Meritocracia

Introduction

Preventing higher education dropouts is one of the huge challenges of educational systems around the world, both because dropouts are cause of waste of money and because successful academic trajectories can fuel economic development and social mobility (Zajac & Komendant-Brodowska, 2018). At the same time, Ichheiser (2016) points out that the idea of academic success is one of those “obvious facts” that research in psychology and education should contribute to de-construct. The author warns that certain ideologies are so rooted in the society knowledge that they induce the researcher to establish their research problems along the lines of thought suggested by them. Thus, the study of non-normative development trajectories in higher education makes it possible to question what Lampert (2013) calls “ideology of academic success.” This concept aims to de-naturalize the objectives of education, showing that these are social and historical. Therefore, the so-called normative trajectories are not the best, but the ones that best reflect such objectives.

Brazil is a country in which higher education has historically been restricted to a small portion of the population; nevertheless, opportunities to access higher education have increased in the second half of the twentieth century, when different governmental initiatives contributed to an expansion of the number of both public and private colleges (Filipak & Pacheco, 2017). Most of Brazil’s higher education enrollments have however been concentrated in private institutions, both in a face-to-face environment and in e-learning (INEP, 2020), driven by affirmative compensatory policies such as PROUNI and FIES.¹ Regarding

¹ The University for All Program (PROUNI) consists in granting full and partial scholarships to students of higher education courses in private institutions. On the other hand, the student financing funds (FIES) are intended to finance, as a priority, higher education students enrolled in private institutions.

the policies for the expansion of vacancies in public universities, special mention should be made of the Stage I Expansion Program, of the Federal Government and the Program to Support the Restructuring and Expansion Plans of Federal Universities, acronym REUNI, both coordinated by the Ministry of Education. Stage 1 Program started at 2003 and aimed at the interiorization of state higher education by supporting the construction of new campi to existing national universities. As for REUNI, it was instituted in 2007 and provided resources to support the physical expansion and more vacancies for public higher education, meeting local professional needs (Mancebo et al., 2015).

The University of Brasília (UnB), in the Federal District (DF), was one of the national universities supported by these programs. UnB started in 1962 as soon as the new capital was constructed. Until 1968, it remained as the only college in the new capital, when two private higher education institutions were inaugurated. Only in 1995, a second community college was opened (Melo, 2009). Given its needs at the time, the university was provided with a good physical infrastructure since the beginning, but no other great construction or educational expansion was undertaken until this great expansion. So, thanks to funds provided by the REUNI program, UnB could expand beyond the main campus (Darcy Ribeiro) and three new campi were built in different regions of the Federal District, namely, Planaltina, Ceilândia, and Gama, between the years 2006 and 2008. Meeting the goal of expanding access to higher education and including historically excluded social groups, a significant change in the university's student profile was noticed since then, as well: Population segments that were previously underrepresented in public universities, in general, such as indigenous, black people, peripheral residents, peasants, quilombolas² and LGBTs improved their participation as undergraduate and graduate students.

In line with turning public universities more democratic, expansion also faced universities with unexpected challenges concerning student academic trajectories. Ressurreição and Sampaio (2018) point out that the contemporary expansion of higher education has encouraged studies aiming at this new student profile (Sampaio, 2011; Santos & Sampaio, 2012, 2013; Ressurreição et al., 2015; Fernandes & Lopes de Oliveira, 2015), which was significantly excluded from the access to higher education before social inclusive reforms. These studies examine the main strategies constructed by students belonging to non-hegemonic and minority segments to adapt to the meritocratic context of higher education; they search to understand how newcomers cope with the academic idiosyncrasies of the universities, how they integrate the experiences lived in this new context in their personal developmental trajectories and, as a consequence, many achieve successful outcomes while others do not. This is a very relevant research topic considering that dealing with diversity and improving a socially inclusive environment in public universities and community colleges remain as a big issue, what is evidenced by the high rates of failures and dropouts in post-secondary education around the world (Davidson & Wilson, 2016). Statistics show that problematic trajectories in higher education most frequently involve these specific social segments.

Zajac and Komendant-Brodowska (2018) created a typology of dropouts which includes dismissed (academic failure), premeditated (strategic or planned dropout), and disenchanting (unplanned voluntary withdrawal) and indicate that determining who are the dropouts is not a simple task, considering that former dropouts may (re)enrol and eventually graduate.

² Enslaved black Africans who gathered in ghetto communities called quilombos and resisted to the enslave regime that prevailed in Brazil until 1888. Some of the traditional quilombo communities are still present in virtually all Brazilian states.

In this paper, we address the topic of student attrition and their effort to get a (re)enrollment after compulsory dismissal for noncompliance with administrative norms related to expected academic performance and outcomes. Formal dismissal sets former students into an identity buffer zone, an unclear position in-between being and not being an undergraduate, that is, in the border experience (Marsico, 2018) of having and not having a locus into the university. The non-coincidence between institutionally expected trajectories and the real trajectories traced by these students—in special, the impact of their problematic academic trajectory over subjectivity—is part of the research interest of the first author who investigates young people's developmental processes along higher education.

The traditional scientific scenario within psychology reified the subject-object separation and kept social issues as something external to the subjects, considered as irrelevant to the understanding of psychological phenomena. Hence, topics such as gender, class, and race were barely studied by psychology and kept in a peripheral position as regards the understanding of mental life. The scope of the article is, therefore, the psychological investigation of developmental trajectories within the transition to adulthood, considering the results of an idiographic study about the academic career of a black woman.

About Trajectories and the Non-Coincidence Between Expected and Lived Trajectories

In this work, the construct trajectory is conceived of as the unique, unrepeatable dynamic synthesis of the multiple personal experiences lived along an individual's life course and perceived as one's own psychological unity in movement. Trajectory, thus, refers to the unity between the imagined past and the anticipated future, continuously (re)constructed within the fleeting present moment (Azevedo et al., 2020; Mendes Nascimento & Lopes de Oliveira, 2019). Thus, we see in this concept a strong theoretical alternative to other established psychological concepts as stage, cycle, age, etc. These concepts cohere with *teleological* models within the study of human development, models that conceive that future conditions of the psychological systems are already in the human beings in the present moment; differently, the construct trajectory is about *teleogenesis*, the idea that our present experience is regulated by our expectations and intentions as regards the future (Sato & Valsiner, 2010; Sato et al., 2014).

Human developmental trajectories are always and necessarily unfolded in time and context. The many cultural and socio-institutional contexts in which an individual participate represent a source of signs—rules, values, beliefs, expectations, desires, and images—and experiences that forge the limits of one's trajectory. The semiotic matrices mediate his/her self-understandings and affections, as well as how s/he feels and interprets external reality as part of his/her self-system. As time passes, and human developmental processes unfold, these affections and sense-making dynamics will obviously change. Thus, developmental psychology focuses on the dynamics of continuity/discontinuity along a time lapse and analyzes how disruptive experiences are internalized and integrated in one's self-trajectory (Sato & Valsiner, 2010).

Bruner (1996) called the normative values, expectations, and theories about how developmental trajectory should occur in regular conditions as “folk pedagogies” (p. 72). Following Bruner, in the analysis of specific educational contexts, Tateo (2018) at a time indicates that folk pedagogies play an important role in education as they express generally accepted teaching and learning practices and the rooted normative and prescriptive cultural understandings on human functioning and development. Folk pedagogies express the ways ingrained social

values feed the social expectations of the past generations toward the new ones. At the same time, if teachers just follow the folk pedagogies, they run the risk of ignoring the many challenges posed by the future and the student's own subjectivity, and both aspects have great importance to human development. Therefore, these issues lead to a dialogical tension in teaching and learning, a tension between the concrete person and the mean human being, an ideal version of the subject framed by culturally based educational ideologies (Ichheiser, 2016).

One example of the aforementioned tension related to higher education refers to the concept of a successful academic trajectory. Social values imported from the economy, politics, ethics, and other fields of societal interests intermingle with educational goals and are converted into semiotic webs that guide and circumscribe expectations toward concrete individuals' academic trajectory. For instance, meritocracy is intrinsic to the values system presiding liberal societies in a capitalist, based on competition, economy. But, meritocracy should have been out of the values system of public colleges in case we consider public facilities as inclusive, ethical contexts, for all. Despite that, in capitalist societies, meritocracy slid from the economy to education and was converted into a core value within universities, at least. Meritocratic principles will canalize academic trajectories and can eventually push students toward successful trajectory, or alternatively, to failure or dropout.

Not only meritocracy can represent a barrier for a successful, healthy, academic trajectory. Administrative norms and other bureaucratic rules define under which specific conditions a student will keep an active enrollment, how much time at most s/he can take to graduate, and other expectations s/he has to attend in order not to be dismissed.³ To sum up, there is an institutionally expected trajectory for students that, with more or less flexibility, will guide, canalize, and constraint his/her movements toward the future, in terms of the significance of the academic achievements as regards his/her personal trajectory as a whole. Nevertheless, for different social, economic, political, and also subjective reasons, however, individual student outcomes may not be aligned with institutional expectations, leading the outlier student to be compulsorily dismissed of the university.

As members of the Undergraduate Course Collegiate within the campi UnB Planaltina (first author) and Darcy Ribeiro (second author), the authors took part in a set of institutional decisions concerning critical issues related to undergraduate students with problems in their academic trajectories. Most of their reports referred to the applicant's inability to complying with minimum academic requisites, what usually culminated in the necessity that Collegiate, following the university rules, terminated them. Although this is a serious situation, this is not an irreversible one as terminated students have the legal right to apply for a second—and even a third—chance of a new enrollment to the same degree, at any time until 2 years after s/he was dismissed. To have his/her request taken into consideration, however, the applicant has to present a written report including the main reasons why s/he was unable to comply with academic obligations along the previous academic semesters and the improvements s/he gathered to cope with former personal difficulties and how to achieve a better academic performance in the future. The difficulties reported by students in the standard form are of many kinds (reconciliation of work demands and academic duties, lasting personal or family members' health problems, disenchantment with

³ At UnB, where the present study was conducted, academic norms prescribe the following conditions for undergraduate students: pass at least four subjects in two consecutive semesters; follow the course structure designed for their program in, at most, 50% more semesters than its designed duration; be approved in a compulsory subject, at most, in the third trial.

the course, economic problems, etc.). Despite their relevance, we are not interested here in the content of the requests; our main focus resides into how these arguments, which means conversing experience into narrative, are fabricated to sensitize and affect the reader in the aimed direction: the new enrollment in the university, meaning the recovery of the status of undergraduate student and the academic trajectory.

In this paper, we are interested in issues of social inclusion, human diversity, and successful academic trajectories in higher education, and we approach the topic on the basis of a case study of a student with a non-normative academic trajectory in a public college. The dialogical epistemology is a prospective framework to explore this topic, and it will be presented in the following section upon two complementary theories: the dialogical self-theory—DST (Hermans et al., 1992) and in the educational self-theory—EST (Iannaccone et al., 2013; Marsico & Tateo, 2018).

Dialogic Theoretical-Methodological Foundation

There is no consensual way to define dialogism, the basis of dialogic epistemology. According to Hermans and Salgado (2005), it is an ontology and an alternative epistemology, which claims the recognition that meanings and human existence are co-created and therefore generated in and from relationships. For Linell (2009), dialogism corresponds to a general epistemology that encompasses several dialogic theories present in human sciences. Such theories approach and distance themselves in various aspects, although they have in common the task of explaining how human beings relate to others, to the world, and to themselves, focusing on dialogical interactions.

Particularly inspired by the dialogism version based on M. Bakhtin, Salgado and Clegg (2011) list the six basic principles that define the dialogic epistemology: the relational principle, or *relationality*, which affirms the primacy of relations over isolated entities; *dynamism*, which refers to dynamic and procedural character of the psychological functioning; *semiotics mediation*, which claims that human processes are always mediated by signs; the *otherness* principle, according to which the so-called other is constituent part of the identity; *dialogicity* which states that all human relationships are dialogic, and depend on each other to happen, by means of dynamics of negotiation; and, finally, *contextuality*, which suggests that in order to understand dialogical relationships, the socio-cultural context must be included. Because of these characteristics, the dialogic perspective has specific implications for qualitative research: the consideration of dynamic, contextualized, and non-static relations, and the conception of truth as a multivocal and situated event, rather than a singular and logical representation of facts.

DST is one of the theories in the scope of dialogical approaches. It is anchored in three complementary theoretical axes: William James' theory of self; symbolic interactionism, elaborated by George Herbert Mead; and the elaborations around polyphonic novel, by Mikhail Bakhtin (Hermans et al., 1992). James' approach deals with an extended self, in which the other is seen as part of the self and not as something that is outside of it (Hermans & Gieser, 2012). Mead, like James, makes a distinction between I and me, but goes beyond the first one, introducing the concept of the "generalized other" (Mead, 1934). Contextualized in Mead's theory of inter-subjectivity, it arises from the author's refusal to reduce the role played by the social environment or the individual in the development of the self. The concept, although never fully elaborated in the studies published by Mead, describes as crucial the role played by the other to the development of self-consciousness (Dodds et al., 1997). In Bakhtin (2013), more

specifically in his study “Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics,” the notion of polyphonic novel is found, where he states that an individual can live in a multiplicity of worlds, having each world its own authors, telling a story relatively independent of the authors of the other worlds. In Dostoevsky’s work, there is not a singular author, but a multiplicity of voices that accompany and oppose to each other in a dialogic way. In this polyphonic scenario, the author’s voice is only one of the dialogic positions in interaction, says Bakhtin.

Based on the above ideas, Hermans and collaborators (1992) build a revised perspective on the concept of self in psychology, which has as its main mark the criticism of the harmful effects left by the tradition of Cartesian thought in psychological science. This is the main contribution of DST. While in the Western Cartesian tradition, the psychological unit is the individual mind, separated from other minds, self-contained and with a reflective role; the dialogic epistemic position, in turn, suggests an idea of self-situated on the border between the public and the private world; in the space between the person, the other, and reality; and which moves dynamically between these spaces, actively changing in the flow of time.

Iannaccone and collaborators (2013) tailored the concept of the educational self, conveying ideas coming from the Jerome Bruner’s (Bruner, 1996) elaborations on the crucial role of the educational experiences and school activities in the construction of the self-trajectory. It refers to a set of self-positions, specific alterities, and semiotic systems related to human experiences in the field of educational practices. This includes interpersonal experiences taking place within families, schools, and other social scenarios, as churches and sports centers, or any scenario that will play a central role upon the subject’s self-configuration along the life course. The authors make an important distinction between learning activities and educational activities. The former occurs intermittently, along with human development, including informal contexts and peers’ interactions. The latter, in turn, conveys specific characteristics, i.e., (a) promoting learning opportunities is its primary and most important goal, and (b) follow a set of norms and rules which are considered as part of the educational agenda of new generations within Western cultures, at least. The authors consider, moreover, that in contemporary capitalist societies, schooling has got a growing importance as a life-long project, so the elaborations upon the educational self concept have a huge heuristic value in the interpretation of phenomena of the kind we aim at this paper.

In the authors’ more recent studies, the concept of the educational self was expanded and associated with other concepts such as tension, dilemmatic field, border, and ambivalence (Marsico, 2015, 2016, 2018; Marsico & Tateo, 2017; Tateo, 2015). Elaborating on the concept of semiotic tension, for instance, the authors offer an image of the systemic and dynamic nature of the educational self, in place of such ideas as self-stability, permanence, and balance (Iannaccone et al., 2013; Marsico & Tateo, 2017). Differently from traditional psychological theories, in which tension is associated with instability, problem, or crisis, in the framework of EST, adequate tension levels are essential for the development of the self, of its relations with other selves, and its systemic and agentic evolution toward the future. The self does not evolve as an effect of a passive adjustment to environmental changes; its organization depends on an active participation in sociocultural practices, and this participation follows an affective, cogenetic logic. The concept tensegrity (Marsico & Tateo, 2017) means a new word after the fusion of “integrity” and “tension” in which tension becomes an intrinsic element of the psyche, responsible for both its integration and continuous improvements.

Considering the above-mentioned theoretical-methodological approach, the study analyzes developmental trajectories within the transition to adulthood, considering Sara's⁴ academic trajectory, who is a 27-year-old black woman. We start from an individual case study, produced on the basis of academic follow-up records, and a narrative life story interview with the student, who began to access the public university after implementation of the expansion policies. The student went through two processes of compulsory termination at university, both followed by requests for (re)enrollment, totaling thirteen semesters connected to the university as an undergraduate student, on a course with an expected minimum completion time of eight semesters, and a maximum of sixteen. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, the interview was conducted using the *Zoom* platform, in July 2020. The interview session lasted around 2 h and was recorded using the resources of the same platform. The video cameras of interviewer and interviewee remained activated all time long, and the fluid conversation was facilitated by the proximal relationship between Sara and the interviewer (first author), who formerly attended her as a school psychologist in the university.

The interview script covered the following axes: (1) sociodemographic data; (2) family life; (3) trajectory within elementary school; (4) admission into higher education; (5) events of rupture, dismissal, and return to university; (6) expectations of the future. Inspired by dialogical science, the researchers acted as active data co-constructors instead of collectors (Branco et al., 2020).

The study consists in the analysis of human development indicators highlighted in her narrative, in the interview context, and attendance records. To understand the dynamics that conform her trajectory of personal-academic development, we take the DST and EST as a basis, focusing on the rupture/transition events (Zittoun, 2009) related to episodes of university entrance, compulsory shutdown, and (re)enrollment.

Following the methodological indication offered by Emerson and Frosh (2004) in social research based on narratives, transcription and data analysis are contiguous and interdependent processes of co-construction, through which texts emerge and meanings are produced interactively. In this same direction, the dialogic approach (Hermans & Salgado, 2005) explains that a story is always told to a particular audience, with a certain communicative intent, at a given historical moment, and taking into account a specific spatial context. Dialogic analysis, therefore, affirms the need to include the storyteller and the listener in storytelling, contextualizing and spatializing the notion of self.

In the presentation and discussion of results, three layers of interrelated analysis are explored: (1) Sara's self-presentation; (2) the emergence of Sara's educational self in elementary school (ES), and (3) developmental processes and disruptive events in higher education (HE). Sara signed an informed consent form, and, during the interview, all conditions established by the ethical norms of research with human beings were considered.

Results and Discussion: Entailing Sara's Educational Self and Academic Trajectory

Sara's Self-Presentation

Sara presents herself as part of "*three generations of Sara*",⁵ which include her grandmother and a niece, the three baptized with the same first name. This way of referring to the name seems to inform about the semiotic importance of this intergenerational

⁴ Fictitious name.

⁵ Excerpts of Sara's narrative will be presented in italics.

information to her identity. Sara was born in 1992, in the administrative region of Taguatinga, in Brazil's Federal District (DF), but always resided in Planaltina, a city in the peripheral of the DF that belongs to the state of Goiás (GO). She lives with her mother (housewife), father (retired security guard), and sister (university student, 4 years younger than her).

School education seems to be an important and mobilizing value for Sara and the members of her family, despite the low level of education of the parents, a fact that probably contributed to their difficulties to identify, earlier, her learning difficulties. The father did not complete high school (HS) when younger but did it recently through a program of education for young people and adults, in a private institution. The mother, who was encouraged by Sara when she was at university, obtained the corresponding title to elementary education (ES), via a Brazilian national certification exam. In addition, the younger sister is a physiotherapy student in a private college, supported by public scholarship funding programs.

The symbol of “shyness” is used by Sara in her self-descriptions until adolescence, although currently, she notes some extroversion in contact with colleagues at university, an aspect that surprises her and to which we will return to later. Other characteristics that appear along Sara's trajectory is pro-activity that was not noticed by the first author in previous meetings she had with her outside the research situation, when she seemed shier. Now, pro-activity corresponded to an important position in Sara's self-system, sustaining her resilience in the face of disruptive, critical events, lived by as a university student.

In any case, the notion of plural self (multiple self) makes it possible to understand the coexistence of many I-positions, which may have predominance to each situated experience of the individual (Hermans, 2001), or mediating the relationships in which the person is involved (Berteau et al., 2012). Understanding the self in its dialogicity has shown an interesting epistemological path in the pursuit to explain the plural, relational, and often contradictory nature of the self in its continuous process of development (Freire & Branco, 2016), despite difficulties and barriers.

The Emergence of Sara's Educational Self in ES

The idea of the educational self is related to the dialogical processes that occur during social interactions in educational contexts, in which the *self* comes into contact with other voices, negotiating, rejecting, or accepting the different positions (Marsico & Tateo, 2018). This results in a very dynamic situation, emphasizing the fluid and dialogic nature of the *self*-definition processes (Iannaccone et al., 2013) which, in this sense, should be investigated as processes and not as products (Marsico & Tateo, 2018).

Sara's school trajectory before university took place, basically, in public schools close to her residence. In one of them, Sara was inserted into an age lag correction class.⁶ She reports that because she was very shy, her trajectory was not easy. This became complicated, according to her, in the two final years of Elementary School II (ES II), around the age of 15, when she discovered that she had keratoconus.⁷

⁶ In the transition from the second to the third grade of elementary school I (ES I), Sara was included in the Acelera Brasil project, an initiative carried out by Brazilian public schools in partnership with the Ayrton Senna Institute. This allowed her to study, over the period of 1 year, both third and fourth grades, and therefore move directly to the fifth grade the following year. For more information about the project, see <https://www.institutoayrtonsenna.org.br/>

⁷ Degenerative disease that causes the deformation of the eye cornea, making it thinner and curved, with the shape of a cone. In general, its symptoms appear around the age of 16, mostly the difficulty to short-distance vision and the sensitivity to light.

I sat in front of the painting and I couldn't see well [...] That was also what complicated the school issue, because I was already a difficult person to make friends with, and not being able to see very well, it hurt me a lot.

About this time, she narrates that because of her shyness and low vision, she did not have many friends at school. "I stayed in the room, in the middle of the room, alone, and my classmates were all in the corners. Today is quite different, where I stay in the small group of boys in my university classes." If she could not count on the friendship of her classmates, she had the friendship of books and the school librarian, with whom she says she had talked much more, when compared to time she spent talking with teachers. Thus, shyness constitutes an ambiguous sign inserted in a zone of tension in which while inhibiting social interaction, it catalyzes this other psychological function. "I was always there at the school library talking to the woman who took care of the books, I always went there, every week, I read a lot."

During high school (HS), it seems that Sara went through important processes of subjective change, which contributed to improving the quality of the relationship with schoolmates and were eventually incorporated into her educational self: "*I think the change had already started from me. I was tired of being that way like in elementary school (ES), with the classmates rejecting me. In HS, I already had a group of classmates*". Sara's sister became her contemporary at school, due to delays in her school progression accumulated in her early years of schooling. She mentions the two of them going to school together. Her sister's presence may have represented an instrument that helped Sara to find new subjective resources to better relate to her HS classmates. Finally, she mentions the change in the relationship with teachers. In the second year of HS, she took the initiative to seek out one of her teachers to talk about her academic performance. The teacher suggested that she should speak to the school psychologist, who, in turn, summoned Sara's mother to a meeting at the school. "*My mother was, in a way, even surprised, because I said: 'go on, mom, go and talk to the teacher', because of some problems I was having.*"

Here, we notice the emergence of a growing awareness of Sara about her school difficulties, and the fact that she is the one who alerts her mother and not only puts school and family in dialogue. She continues in search of pedagogical support, despite not having found a precise explanation about her difficulties from the school psychologist. "*So I had help from a teacher who had some projects in schools, who was one of the support teachers.*⁸ *Then during some days of the week I had a reinforcement class.*" This support is recognized by her as of fundamental importance for her to succeed in the Brazilian national high school exam (ENEM).⁹

In the second year of HS, she began to think of university as an alternative to continue her studies, after her mother presented University of Brasília (UnB) as a possibility be considered by her. Her mother heard about this university through conversations with people she knows, who were general service workers at UnB. Sara's mother, although she had never even visited any university campus, seemed to both understand and value the social significance of higher education (HE). Alerted by her mother, Sara noticed UnB posters

⁸ This is a project aimed at students with special educational needs—who are attended to by specialized teachers in pedagogical complementation activities—carried out in a different period of time to that of their normal school hours.

⁹ Test taken to evaluate HS students in Brazil. Its result serves to gain entrance to undergraduate courses in public and private universities. For more information, see <https://enem.inep.gov.br/>

for the entrance exam in her school and decided there was a strong opportunity for her to enter the university. Thus, UnB began to turn into an inner-created reality—initially in her imagination—which was fundamental for feeding prospects for the future.

Sara's growing motivation to reach higher education guides her, even before completing HS, to take her first entrance exam for UnB with the objective of gaining a space on the geology course, without success, however. From there, she began to face a sequence of difficulties, both those related to social and material conditions, reflected in her previous educational trajectory, as well as those arising from misinformation. As we will see, both aspects will be associated with all problems she will face as a university student.

Sara reported that she never took a preparatory course for the entrance exams to university. "I didn't know that there were preparatory courses that I could take. I came to know about these kind of things after I entered university but I had help from my teachers." In a country like Brazil—in which there is no universal right to quality public HE—over time, and given the growing interest due to the social value of this educational segment, there was an increase in the competition for vacancies. Thus, there was a proliferation of preparatory courses for the university entrance exam. These, even when provided free, are not always accessible to the young people from lower-income backgrounds, as they are often located far away from where the student lives, and/or offer insufficient vacancies. In contrast, students from middle and upper-income backgrounds often have access to good preparatory courses in private institutions. Many of them do not even need to attend these courses, since private HSs already include training for the university entrance exam. Thus, these HS students are privileged, having significantly higher chances of approval to their desired undergraduate courses, usually those courses that are well recognized socially and typically leading to higher salaries, such as medicine or law.

Development Processes and Disruptive Events in HE

Marsico and Tateo (2018) point out that the notion of educational self can serve to understand significant moments of the students' academic trajectories that lead to important ruptures and transitions, such as those involving, for example, the entrance into higher education. In this case, the position of self I as learner tends to stand out and gain relevance, in relation to the other positions present in the configuration of the self-system.

First Time Getting into University: I Want Geology, but I Accept Studying Natural Sciences

Sara's entrance into UnB Planaltina took place in the second semester of 2012. The campus is characterized by offering teachers training courses in many disciplines and other courses in the areas of environmental management and rural economy. As Sara did not achieve a score sufficient to access her desired geology course, and in order not to be idle, she decides to register for a degree in teaching of natural sciences (TNS) since she had performed three previous entrance exams already. However, the approval after the entrance exam was not celebrated by Sara, who admits that she did not want to be a teacher. Once in the university, she spent "*a lot of time questioning the fact of studying for a bachelor's degree to be a teacher.*" Due to these uncertainties and lack of motivation, even with an active enrollment in university, Sara persevered with getting on the geology course, having taken two more entrance exams, but did not pass any of them.

Students' entrance to HE has been studied by several researchers, such as Coulon (2008), as a disruptive event, especially when it causes significant developmental transitions, which can accompany the individual through life. Transitions can be considered as processes of change, catalyzed due to a significant rupture, and aim for a new sustainable adjustment between the person and its environment (Zittoun, 2009, 2014).

For Sara, however, the most profound and productive changes did not occur at the beginning. Not finding identification with the course, Sara ceased to establish an intentional and affective relationship with the university, and, as an effect, what stand out are the difficulties and barriers. Unlike the schools she had gone through, in which she found some kind of family reference,¹⁰ at university, it was "*all new*" for Sara. She mentions that she did not have clear information about the course she was attending "*All I knew was that it meant I would be a science teacher.*" The first semester of school was delayed by a long strike of public sector workers, and the period of classes was shorter. Due to failures in institutional communication, she was not adequately informed about academic rules and minimum performance requirements, which negatively impacted her academic performance from the beginning. She mentioned enormous difficulties in disciplines of exact sciences and, finally, a dental problem suffered in the third semester of course. As a result, she failed in all subjects in the course's third semester and was compulsorily dismissed from the university, losing the right to enroll in any subjects. Sara only became aware of this when she tried to do the regular enrollment for the fourth semester and was unsuccessful "*I did not even know what compulsory dismissal was.*"

She soon started a process requesting to restart the course. In the process, an explanatory statement for the dismissal must be presented and the proof of resources available to the student to achieve better performance in the future. In her process, Sara omitted all the aspects highlighted in the interview, referring only to her health problem. Although the application form for re(registration) is inadequate¹¹ and offers limited space to explore deeply the reasons for compulsory dismissal, the base highlighted by Sara evoked analysis. Considering the dialogic epistemology, the complexity and tensions inherent in her development trajectory were simplified in the form. Sara was aiming only for approval of the request by the institutional agent, as a bureaucratic act and not as an effect of a dialogic argumentation, in which she had to be convincing.

In a different way, during the interview, Sara deepened the self-analysis of her academic trajectory and evoked, among other explanations, something that meets our previous interpretation: "*I was still, whether I wanted to or not, behaving like I was at school, thinking that someone was going to show up and say things for me, but I found that no, we had to go after it ourselves.*" Sara seemed to be moving from a more passive and accommodating educational self to one able to take responsibility for future steps at university.

¹⁰ HS, for example, attended at one of the oldest schools in the city, where her father and uncles studied and where her grandfather also worked, selling sweets in front of it. She mentions that, at first, she did not want to study there but seemed to be convinced by intergenerational issues, which meant that the school was seen as a relatively familiar and close space.

¹¹ Perhaps this is why, most of the time, the fundamentals usually follow a logic of linear monocausality, as in x caused y , assuming that in the absence of x , it is possible to resume the path institutionally expected at the point where it was interrupted/hindered by the action of x .

Second Time Getting into University: I Want to Study, I Do Not Want to Stay at Home Doing Nothing

In a large university such as UnB, about 30% of the available spaces for students correspond to undergraduate teachers' training courses in different areas. Historically, these courses, especially for evening classes, have represented an important way into higher education for young people from lower-income backgrounds. We can say, based on our experience working as school psychologist and as teacher of students from these courses, that in majority, the entry in courses perceived as less worthy or important—from the point of view of the elites—represents an opportunity for significant leaps in the social development of these groups. This is even more significant in countries where quality education continues to represent an important differential to the professional insertion of young people (Martins, 2018; Pereira, 2019).

After the first compulsory dismissal, Sara mentions that she missed a lot of the undergrad classes, disliked to stay at home and lost the financial aid she received from university due to her precarious socio-economic status. So, she applied firstly for (re)enrollment because *"I wanted to study, I did not want to stay at home, I did not want to miss the opportunity."* Yet, while she waited for the result of her application, she participated in university's free courses, keeping in contact with the campus.

When her application was approved, she mentions that she did not comment about the fact to anyone, as she felt ashamed. She felt that there was not much to celebrate, because despite the renewed motivation, the following semesters were extremely difficult. Students who return to UnB, after (re)enrollment, have a strict academic plan to comply with, defined by the course coordination, and the teacher who has been assigned as their mentor. In Sara's case, the plan provided for specific subjects which must be taken and passed, so that she would not be dismissed from university again. She passed some of the essential disciplines; however, she failed some others.

"I had great difficulty, because I did not understand many of the subjects that the teacher was explaining, since I had never seen them in HS." However, she did not mention these difficulties to the teachers, for fearing criticism and rebukes. Only one teacher was sensitive to the problems relating to content that Sara and most of her classmates experienced. The teacher tried to change the teaching methodology, but the students' difficulties continued, and the solution he pointed out was individualistic, encouraging them to overcome the difficulties on their own.

Walking the Tightrope: Symbolic Resources for Overcoming Difficulties and Risk of Dismissal

The moments of group study are cited by Sara as important, for the support that each student offered to the others. However, they often did not seem sufficient for her to overcome the difficulties. With the accumulation of difficulties, and by not finding solutions, she ended up suffering the second compulsory dismissal. At that time, Sara says that she had already been receiving clear institutional information and was aware of the academic rules. Later, she recognized that learning difficulties and misguided study habits led her to that situation. In the semester that preceded the second compulsory dismissal, she enrolled herself in a discipline on study techniques and personal organization. The experience increased in her what Goodman (2014) calls the fallacy of meritocracy: the idea that success is based upon the merit and effort of an

individual. From that experience on, she began to incorporate the meritocratic discourse that dominates the academic environment at universities. Thus, in the second (re)enrollment form, and also in her narrative in the interview, she argued that the second compulsory dismissal occurred because she did not study “*properly*,” and because she felt ashamed to “*ask for help*” from monitors and teachers.

Despite the difficulties, and the feeling of despair related to her performance, giving up or abandoning the course is no longer an option. Turning to the disruptive events experienced throughout her academic career, Sara recognizes opportunities for her development in them. Even though it took a few years, she says that she has learned that “*being isolated is not the solution*,” and that you have to accept people’s support when they are willing to help.

When she was interviewed for the study, Sara was preparing for the resumption of the first academic semester of 2020, in remote mode, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. She reports that in order to graduate, she needs to complete 80 credits, distributed over the next three academic semesters. In the case of Sara’s course, the maximum number of credits taken in a semester cannot exceed 30. Thus, passing 80 credits, considering the chains of prerequisites for each subject, represents a challenging puzzle. Adding the fact that at the end of the three semesters, she will have reached the maximum limit of stay at UnB; if she does not graduate in this period, she will be automatically excluded from the university, permanently. Unfortunately, Sara has not overcome her difficulties. She has been continuing to fail the same disciplines, which prevents her from enrolling in certain disciplines, since she has not accomplished the prerequisites.

What is important to point out, however, is that Sara now has a greater awareness of her challenges, and a better structured plan to deal with the risk of being irreversibly dismissed. She reveals that she will take the Brazilian national high school exam once again and search to recover the right to graduate, “*I don’t want to give up on it (the NS course), despite having an academic trajectory of failure*” Following just Sara’s discourse about future perspectives is not sufficient to infer if Sara refers to herself as a failure or just her academic career. The fact is that while the COVID pandemic persists in Brazil, the university administration suspended students’ compulsory dismissal, which may open new opportunities for Sara overcoming some of the problems that mark her turbulent academic career.

Concluding Remarks

In this article, we have discussed that the expansion of Brazilian HE to people from lower-income backgrounds and social groups which have historically been excluded—which has occurred since the 1990s—has brought numerous challenges to the academic trajectories of students. From an in-depth analysis of Sara’s narrative, about her life inside and outside the school, we seek to highlight the non-coincidence between her singular biographical trajectory, and the conceptions and general expectations of the university about the academic performance of students, which are mainly based on merit criteria. No matter how carefully conceived a trajectory is, various sources of rupture can arise when the planned meets the experienced. Disruptive events, such as the two episodes of compulsory dismissal experienced by Sara, represented moments of crisis, but also opportunities for catalyzing new developmental trajectories. This relationship between generality and particularity of

educational trajectories, addressed through the idea of educational self, is an important issue for developmental psychology and central to public policies in education.

Moreover, far from naturalizing non-normative developmental trajectories, we emphasize that they unfold from social and historical contexts. If a given academic path is considered as normative, appropriate institutional conditions would be necessary in order that such a path could be effective in the trajectory of each and every one. What is observed, however, is a paradox, based on a meritocratic logic, and as pointed out by Tateo (2018) based on Ichheiser (1943): the dissonance between norms and conditions of success.

Perhaps here, as suggested by Ichheiser (2016), we have come to the point of problematizing other “obvious facts,” and the notion of academic success itself. On a macro level (of educational policies), and micro (of individual trajectories that are built, in this case, in universities), it is necessary to question: which are the values and beliefs that have motivated people to attend universities who are from lower-income backgrounds and social groups which have historically been excluded? Under what conditions do these groups maintain themselves and achieve success in their university courses?

In an effort to approach these questions considering Sara’s turbulent trajectory in the university, we emphasize the necessity to overcome the exclusive meritocratic logic that preponderates over public universities currently, which omits the dissonance between norms and success conditions, given the socioeconomic and cultural diversity of students.

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