

Symbolic challenges of the university: students' perspective on permanence¹

Desafios simbólicos da universidade: a perspectiva de estudantes sobre a permanência

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ABSTRACT

This article is part of the discussions about social inclusion in public universities, specifically about university permanence. With the contributions of Pierre Bourdieu's sociological theory, we analyze the perceptions of students about their experiences related to university permanence, delving into the symbolic mechanisms present in student journeys at a federal public university. The methodology employed for the research used questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with undergraduate students enrolled in different periods and courses. The research results indicate that there is recognition of the relevance of financial aid to enable attendance, but students raise symbolic challenges that interfere with staying in the university. The symbolic dimension is present in the students' accountability for their performance, related to the academic difficulties with the required cultural content and the teachers' practices that little help students with greater gaps in academically profitable cultural capital. We consider that the data from the interviews, as well as the suggestions indicated by the students to improve permanence, reveal arguments present in the university field. Therefore, the presence of new agents enables changes in the disputes of the field, which presents symbolic limits conducting the proposal of social inclusion in an institution that tends to consecrate the relations of force in society.

Keywords: Higher education; university permanence; university field; social inclusion.

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¹ This article comes from a research project funded by the São Paulo State Research Support Foundation) (Case No. 17/24909-9)

RESUMO

Este artigo se insere nas discussões sobre a inclusão social nas universidades públicas, especificamente sobre a permanência universitária. Com as contribuições da teoria sociológica de Pierre Bourdieu, analisamos as percepções de estudantes sobre as suas experiências relacionadas à permanência universitária, aprofundando os mecanismos simbólicos presentes nos percursos estudantis em uma universidade pública federal. A metodologia empregada para a pesquisa utilizou questionários e entrevistas semiestruturadas com estudantes universitários, matriculados em diferentes períodos e cursos na graduação. Os resultados da investigação indicam que há o reconhecimento da relevância de auxílio financeiro para possibilitar a frequência no curso, porém os estudantes levantam desafios que são simbólicos e que interferem na permanência universitária. A dimensão simbólica está presente na responsabilização do aluno pelo seu desempenho, relacionado às dificuldades acadêmicas com o conteúdo cultural exigido e às práticas dos professores que pouco auxiliam os estudantes com maiores defasagens de capital cultural academicamente rentável. Consideramos que os dados oriundos das entrevistas, bem como as sugestões indicadas pelos estudantes para melhorar a permanência, revelam disputas presentes no campo universitário. Portanto, a presença de novos agentes possibilita alterações nas disputas do campo, o qual apresenta limites simbólicos para efetivar a proposta de inclusão social em uma instituição que tende à consagração das relações de força na sociedade.

Palavras-chave: Educação superior; permanência universitária; campo universitário; inclusão social.

Introduction

Higher education in Brazil was developed to train the ruling class in society, contributing to the reproduction of the social structure. Cunha (1980) indicates that even before there were universities known in their current operating structure, higher education courses in Brazil were destined to the cultural formation of the Brazilian elite and to the filling of prestigious positions in labor relations. In a context of unequal access to school and legitimized culture, this historical remnant unfolded in the twentieth century with a university public consisting of whites, children of families earning more than ten minimum wages, from parents with higher education and graduates from private school (RISTOFF, 2016). In this scenario, the training produced in higher education focused on the inculcation of values and references of a minority group in society, but dominant in the possession of material and cultural goods that enable their position of domination.

The main changes in the configurations of entry and diversification of the Brazilian university social profile took place at the beginning of the 21st century. At first, these changes were conducted in isolation in each institution, but it was the expansion and social inclusion policies in the federal higher education network that expanded the

access of students coming from strata historically excluded from the public university (PORTES, 2014; RISTOFF, 2016). Law 12.711/2012 (BRASIL, 2012), known as the Quotas Law, was essential for the regulation of the entry of students with social vulnerability, which strengthened the concern with university permanence (DIAS; SAMPAIO, 2020; HERINGER, 2020; NUNES; VELOSO, 2016).

Despite the common association with community affairs actions and economic aid offer (DIAS; SAMPAIO, 2020), we understand that university permanence refers to student support in different spheres of academic life to provide an appropriate environment for the success of studies until the completion of the course (NUNES; VELOSO, 2016). A university permanence program should be aimed at all students, not only those with social vulnerability, because it is a matter that complements the welfare support and the material dimension (HERINGER, 2020).

In such a university context, the contributions of Pierre Bourdieu's theory enable the understanding that the social space is permeated by symbolic exchanges, which are supported by incorporated classificatory schemes that structure the same social space. And, more specifically, we consider that Bourdieusian theory helps us to understand other dimensions beyond the material conditions of students' subsistence.

Admission to university positions students in a symbolic space with classifications about conduct, resourcefulness, languages, rules, and elements being in dispute at this school level. The university institution belongs to an educational system with conditions for the inculcation and reproduction of a cultural arbitrary that contributes to the relations between groups or classes that originated the educational system itself. The inculcation of cultural arbitrariness is accomplished in the production of definitions, modes of vision, and cultural references that should be as close as possible to the society that will be reproduced (BOURDIEU; PASSERON, 1975). In this sense, it is a sociological proposal that investigates the most deeply buried structures that constitute the social universe, as well as the mechanisms that tend to ensure its reproduction or transformation (WACQUANT, 2005).

From the structural constructivist perspective, Bourdieu (2004a) considers that the social world contains objective structures capable of guiding and coercing people's practices and representations. The development of these structures contains two dimensions: the schemes of perception, thought and action; and the social structure, composed of disputes between different social groups (BOURDIEU, 2004a). Praxeology, therefore, refers to a relational sociology, articulating material and symbolic elements for the understanding of the object of study. Bourdieusian symbolic materialism requires a double look, which analyzes the objective conditions, but without disregarding the subjective properties. It is from the correspondence between social and mental structures that the effectiveness of domination is made possible (WACQUANT, 2005).

The correspondence between these structures is understood through *habitus*, field, and capital. The key concepts in Bourdieusian sociology are used relationally because

each concept acquires meaning in relation to the other. The *habitus* is a principle that generates practices and contains classification and judgment schemes that structure both the action and the perception of agents. In other words, the *habitus* is a disposition of the agent to act; however, this disposition is not conscious and rational, but is the result of the incorporation of experiences and social references. The *habitus* is a concept that refers to the adjustment of the agents' aspirations to the objective chances of success. The incorporation of objective chances leads to dispositions that engender spontaneous actions and behaviors adjusted, again, to the objective conditions themselves. Moreover, the *habitus* is a scheme of appreciation of practices, favoring to understand and accept the world (BOURDIEU, 2004a; 2021).

The experiences that structure the *habitus* are grounded in the fields where agents act. The social world is organized in various microcosms, with their own principles of valuation, rules, and conduct, maintaining a relative autonomy with each other. The field is unequally structured through the distribution of the capital valued and disputed in the symbolic game. Each agent occupies a specific position according to the volume and weight of capital that he or she holds and that is in dispute in order to reach dominant positions. The dynamics of the field is a dynamic of forces to preserve or transform its own structure (BOURDIEU, 2004b).

Capital is an acquired property that confers a certain distinction to an agent in the field in which it is situated. This property can be material, as in the case of economic capital, or relative to culture, to social relationships, to the authority to impose rules, among others. Each field establishes the property that will be valued and, mainly, used as a trump card to obtain advantages. In this sense, every form of capital is also a symbolic capital, because it is based on the recognition of the value of the property that is at stake, distinguishing the agent from the others (BOURDIEU, 2001).

Based on these contributions of Bourdieusian theory, we understand that social inclusion can bring symbolic challenges as important as the obstacles of the material dimension for university students from different social backgrounds, especially in a historically elitist and excluding institution. Thus, this article aims to analyze the perceptions of students about their experiences related to university permanence, delving into the symbolic mechanisms present in student journeys at a federal public university.

The data discussed in this article come from broader research, funded by FAPESP (Case No. 17/24909-9), which investigated university permanence at the Federal University of São Carlos. The participants who contributed to the research are students enrolled in various periods and in different undergraduate courses. The common element among them is that they attended the Tutoring Program for Academic Monitoring of Undergraduate Students (PAAEG), an institutional action that offers academic and pedagogical support in disciplines with high dropout and failure rates.

The 41 students who participated in the research answered an online questionnaire with questions about their family, social and school background, as well as about

their specific impressions regarding university permanence. After this questionnaire, twelve students accepted the invitation to participate in semi-structured interviews, aiming to describe their experiences and perceptions about their academic trajectory. In this article, we present a selection of the results obtained in the interviews that help us to understand the symbolic dimension of the university that challenges students to conclude their studies.

The students interviewed were given fictitious names to preserve their identities. The twelve students interviewed (freshmen, seniors, and graduates), were enrolled in Biological Sciences, Materials Engineering, Electrical Engineering, Chemical Engineering, Statistics, Physics, Physiotherapy, Pedagogy, and Chemistry.

Regarding the main social characteristics², the group of students interviewed is composed of 50% young people who self-declare as black and mulatto, 50% are children of parents with low schooling and who did not enter higher education, 75% are from public schools, 75% entered the university through quota policies, and 50% have family incomes lower than or equal to 1.5 minimum wage. This information shows us how the profile of the university student in public institutions has changed in relation to its historical path, bringing greater visibility to the importance of regulatory policies on admission (RISTOFF, 2016) and studies that investigate the current scenario of the university that has changed its nature as a specific institution for the formation of the Brazilian elite.

Social characteristics are also relevant to the understanding of the interviews. According to Bourdieu (2004a), the points of view are visions of a particular social position, i.e., the view that each agent has of the social space depends on its position in this very space. Studies on the categories of perception and appreciation should also consider an objectivist reading in relation to the participants' positions (WACQUANT, 2005), which makes it possible to understand what information is raised and why these agents say it.

The interview transcripts were systematized and categorized based on Bardin's Content Analysis (1977). With this methodological approach, the data contained in the transcribed interviews were organized based on the identification of what and which thematic units were raised by the interviewees. According to Bardin (1977), this is a method of organizing empirical data, and its application to the interview is dependent on the speech of the research participants and the researcher's interpretation from the established objective. For this, the content of the interviews was separated into elements (stage, inventory), classifying them according to what is common among them to obtain a certain representation of the data. Since these were semi-structured interviews, the content analysis used considered both a priori categories, established in the script of

² The specific social characteristics of each student are described in the authors' research, which can be viewed in Mattos (2020).

the data collection instrument, and a posteriori category, based on the level of depth and variety in the interviewees' answers.

The data obtained were interpreted through the theoretical contributions of Pierre Bourdieu, helping to understand the strength of the mechanisms of social reproduction and symbolic domination. We also included national research on student experiences and college permanence. Thus, the next sections of the article address perceptions about university permanence and, soon after, the contributions, limits, and suggestions for improvement considered by students in their university paths.

University permanence: beyond subsistence

We started our investigation with the hypothesis that university permanence has other dimensions besides material conditions and financial aid. To raise the discussion about the possible dimensions, we asked in the interviews what students understand about university permanence.

The main answer from the participants refers to the economic dimension of permanence, as exemplified by Heitor, a Materials Engineering student: "The economic issue weighs a lot. I, for example, wouldn't be here if I didn't have a housing scholarship, a food scholarship, that kind of thing. I wouldn't be able to stay" (Heitor, Materials Engineering).

Heitor's speech highlights the need for financial aid to enable the participant's studies in higher education. Almeida (2014) advocates the importance of these public institutions for financially disadvantaged students. The author's study evidenced that free tuition encourages many young people from working-class backgrounds to seek out public universities. However, Neves and Anhaia (2014) point out that carrying out studies in the public sector does not imply the absence of expenses for students, "[...] since they need to spend resources to purchase teaching materials, for transportation or for food" (NEVES; ANHAIA, 2014, p. 387).

The authors' research showed that 54.5% of the participants who studied at a public university could not afford the costs, as can be seen in Heitor's speech, which highlights the vulnerable situation of many students. Therefore, financial aid actions are fundamental for a proposal of university permanence to provide the use of study opportunities and course attendance. A university permanence program requires the offer of scholarships or aid that allow students to survive in the course, since "The need to work to provide for one's own livelihood can diminish participation in academic life" (CAVICHIOLO, 2019, p. 73).

Despite the great weight of the material dimension, the perception of university permanence linked to academic issues was also present for undergraduates, as highlighted by Tomás, a physics student: "There are many people who drop out due to grades. You don't pass two or three subjects and then you end up dropping out.

Tomás' statement demonstrates the impact of low grades and failing grades on staying in the university. In the same way, Lorena, a Biological Sciences student, mentions the symbolic consequence of low academic performance:

The fact that education is distant from some people, is further away to reach, is a hindrance to permanence, because in my class I saw three people dropping out. Dropping out because they started getting low grades, because they had never gotten low grades in their lives, they started thinking "what am I doing with my life? Is this what I want?" When, in fact, it could be what she wanted (Lorena, Biological Sciences).

We believe that this symbolic effect caused by the academic dimension refers to the naturalization of cultural arbitrariness, which legitimizes certain contents and culture as the best, the correct one that should be learned. Bourdieu and Passeron (1975) clarify that the contents and the pedagogical work are not neutral and universal but are the product of a social group. The function of an institution belonging to an educational system is to perform a work of inculcation that must last long enough to produce a durable formation, that is, a certain *habitus* in its students.

The *habitus* produced in the school institution is perpetuated in the practices of the agents, manifesting the principles of cultural arbitrariness. It is a transferable *habitus*, which engenders practices with principles inculcated in different social fields, and it is an exhaustive *habitus*, because it reproduces in the various practices the cultural arbitrary of a group or class. In other words, the educational system inculcates values and cultural references that guide the agents' modes of vision and division in the various fields. It is a process of intellectual and moral integration of the students in favor of a group, benefiting and legitimating the culture that the dominant agents enjoy and transmit to their children spontaneously, osmotically, with a natural appearance (BOURDIEU; PASSERON, 1975).

The processes of naturalization and legitimization of a culture refer to the symbolic violence analyzed by Bourdieu and Passeron (1975). This type of violence is in the imposition of meanings, imposing them as legitimate. This imposition conceals the power relations that are at the basis of pedagogical action, that is, of producing a *habitus* that privileges a social group. The symbolic efficacy of school action and selection on power relations lies in the recognition by the dominated of the legitimacy of domination.

The ignorance of the school mechanism on the selection of agents is essential for it to be strong because it is difficult to fight what cannot be seen. Symbolic violence is only exercised because the categories of perception that recognize the legitimacy of symbolic power are inculcated in the agents, that is, there is a complicity between the domination and the dominated. Bourdieu (2021) clarifies that the term complicity does not mean that the agents wish to be dominated, but involves ignorance of the arbitrary nature and recognition of symbolic power:

The term ‘complicity’ is dangerous because it carries, as I have said several times, the risk of suggesting the idea that the victim consciously applies his own punishment, when, in fact, this complicity can happen simply through the form of an ignorance, under the effect of not knowing that what is done against us is done against us. The most absolute form of complicity with violence is that which occurs when we do not know that we suffer it: an ignored violence is a symbolic violence - that is the very definition of symbolic violence (BOURDIEU, 2021, p. 192).

By reproducing the cultural arbitrary in the production of *habitus*, the school system reproduces the power relations that are at the basis of school power. Therefore, it is an institution that corresponds to the material and symbolic interests of dominant groups, since it tends to reproduce the unequal structure of distribution of cultural capital among groups, contributing to the reproduction of the social structure (BOURDIEU; PASSERON, 1975).

The role of the school in Bourdieusian sociological theory is central, as it establishes the relationship of the symbolic dimension as an effective mode for domination and social reproduction. The control over the ways of inculcating classificatory schemes and definitions of the social world is a strategic action to guide the agents’ practices. The dominated enter the symbolic game of the field and contribute to domination because their own dispositions have already been dominated (BOURDIEU, 1996; WACQUANT, 2005).

In the same way, the participants of our research are also in this process of symbolic domination. With the data from the interviews, we verified that the students do not perceive higher education as the result of a cultural arbitrary defined by certain social groups. Eight of the twelve participants reported that the choice to attend higher education is based on the belief that the diploma enables social ascension, fostering the *Illusion* of these agents.

Illusio is a Bourdieusian concept related to the agent’s belief in the dispute of the field. The *Illusio* is what enables the agent to value the symbolic game of the field, indicating that its dynamics are important and that they deserve to be disputed. It is an enchanted relationship with the game because, in particular, it is not perceived to be a game, since the agent’s mental structure is compatibilized with the social structure (BOURDIEU, 1996). Therefore, the research participants maintain the *Illusio* that the university game is worth playing, that by going through this field they will expand their knowledge and will be fit for more valued functions in the labor market. The *Illusio* about university education is so strong that it does not open the possibility for questioning how and on what this education is based, making the participants accept its importance for social ascension and feel responsible for solving their academic challenges. According to Bourdieu (1996, p. 139): “If [...] you have a spirit structured according to the structures of the social world in which you are playing, everything

will seem evident to you and the very question of whether the game is worth playing is not even asked.” In this sense, the participants do not perceive higher education as a violence, but they understand that the unease generated in the university field can affect the permanence of students.

The uneasiness generated by this violence, is discussed by Bourdieu and Champagne (1998) as the exclusion inside the institutions. The authors identified that there are a number of social conditions that are related to both schoolwork and student performance, enabling a process of continuous self-elimination and within institutions. Schubert (2018) clarifies that the lack of fit of the working-class *habitus* with the educational field, which generates malaise and diluted self-elimination, as well as holding these individuals responsible for poor performance is a form of symbolic violence, as it reproduces and legitimizes the hierarchy of social classes.

The symbolic violence in holding the student accountable is in the imposition that he or she must be fit enough to understand what is transmitted, and this demand is realized through the paradox of the school institution. The paradox lies in the devaluation of the pedagogical actions used to teach academic culture, actions that are too “primary” or “scholastic” for the university. That is, since intellectual values and prowess are recognized as innate, pure, and correct, the resourcefulness with free culture vis-à-vis school content is inclined to demonstrate gifts and abilities of students from the privileged classes, while students from the lower classes (because they undergo a slow acculturation process) attain free culture through methodical efforts. In this sense, Bourdieu (1998) adds that the contempt for what is explicitly and methodically schooled aims to convey that intellectual prowess is the student’s gifts and abilities, justifying their approval.

The students who drop out due to poor performance, as reported by Tomas and Lorena, are those who have accepted the school sanction that they are responsible for their low results, convinced by the ideology of the gift that they are incapable of staying and succeeding at university. In this respect, the university uses the recognition of its “neutrality” to select for socially conditioned aptitudes but masked as gifts or merit. This mystification of the social into the natural benefits the reproduction of social inequalities:

In addition to allowing the elite to justify themselves in being what they are, the ‘ideology of giftedness’, key to the school system and the social system, contributes to locking the members of the disadvantaged classes into the fate that society marks out for them, leading them to perceive as natural inabilities what is but the effect of an inferior condition, and persuading them that they owe their social fate (increasingly closely linked to their school fate as society rationalizes) - to their individual nature and their lack of gifts (BOURDIEU, 1998, p. 59).

This mystification manifests itself in the pedagogical practices of university

professors, which are also associated with the conditions of permanence, as reported by students Valentina, Pablo, and Pedro:

Wow, the first thing is to change the issue of the teachers. There are many teachers that you see that are here, but they are not here to teach you. You realize that they want to teach the subject, but, you know, they throw [the content] like this... (Valentina, Physiotherapy).

It's a lack of methodology. I think that, many times, their [teachers'] class is good, but it doesn't correspond on the test. Or the test is too easy, and their class is not good. Then you are losing, you are not learning. It has to be a reasonable test, a good class. Difficult tests, bad grades. Bad grades are stress, and this is a problem for students to stay in school (Pablo, Physics).

So, we have to improve the teaching methodology. [...] I believe that you can't just say "Oh, it is difficult, it is difficult, you have to study and study and study...", I already know that. Now, it helps me to like what I am doing, helps me to love, helps me to see the beauty behind what I am doing (Pedro, Electrical Engineering).

With these statements, we infer that the ideology of gift permeates the pedagogical practice in the participants' experiences. Students perceived little support from teachers in the teaching and learning process, feeling responsible for their own performance. We agree with Honorato (2015) when he states that teachers need to understand that learnings are not natural and proper for those who are empowered. "Not being natural, 'academic work' must be taught, rather than seen and demanded as innate 'talent' and 'aptitude' and/or as a 'family and basic education problem'" (HONORATO, 2015, p. 112). However, the data pointed out by the students affirm that the pedagogical practices are not being worked to help the student in their academic difficulties, interfering with the university permanence.

These positions of university professors in relation to training and academic work are part of a well-functioning school system when its public are its heirs, those with favored social characteristics. When there is a large influx of "new" students with social disadvantages, there is a crisis in this system, manifested through the concept of "falling level" or loss of "excellence" of the institution (BOURDIEU, 1998). In this way, the valorization of the field in which one acts is accomplished by masking the explanations of its own functioning, camouflaging the cost of investment of each agent and the game played in the relations (BOURDIEU, 1996), mystifying the formation and the academic work.

When there is no such concern with teaching "academic work," the professor manifests that his role is to transmit the content and that learning is the student's responsibility, strengthening the meritocratic perspective that is the basis of the university field. However, meritocracy and the ideology of the endowment collaborate with the reproduction of social inequalities by privileging those who already possess

the *habitus* of being a student and the economic and cultural resources that support their permanence in the university. In this sense, it is not enough to have policies of inclusion and expansion of access to the university without considering changes in the institutional functioning, as highlighted by Valle (2015, p. 129), “It is necessary to prepare to face the pitfalls of a system that proclaims formal equality but puts into practice devices - legitimate because naturalized - of selection and elimination.

The intention of this article is not to blame the teachers, mainly because the agents are not completely conscious in their practices. The praxeological study considers that agents’ actions are guided by a reasonable conduct without having reason, an intentionality without intention, a social sensibility about what agents are and what they should do in relation to the position occupied (BOURDIEU, 2021). We emphasize that the process of consecration in a field is also an object of constant dispute and tensions, which serves as guidelines and constraints for certain conducts.

In Bourdieusian theory, the rules and definitions of valorization are not fixed, especially in a field that is maintained based on the representations that the agents have about themselves. In his work on the university field, Bourdieu (2011) analyzes the struggle for classifications and grounds used to value certain capitals in the relationships between agents, showing the strategies used in the composition of symbolic power in academia. Like other fields, university professors find themselves in a place of symbolic struggle to determine the conditions and criteria of belonging and legitimate hierarchy to acquire the specific benefits secured by the field. In this sense, Bourdieu (2011) indicates different types of capitals that are articulated in the university field, involving both performances in research sectors, including intellectual notoriety, and belonging to political-institutional spheres, such as positions of rector and pro-rectors.

The performance in the university field is involved by these symbolic disputes, in which the various sets of individuals (constituted in groups), defined by these different criteria of valorization, claim, and strive for the recognition of their classifications and ways of acting. Such a clash is based on the claim to construct their properties as legitimate, making them specific capital. In other words, it is a dispute over the laws of price formation characteristic of the university market and to thus increase their chances of profit (BOURDIEU, 2011). As dominant in the university field, professors believe and trust its functioning structure, enshrining their own positions and imposing their definitions and properties in the symbolic game. Therefore, professors also do not see that academic work is a learning process, because their *habitus* are so adjusted to the field that the “basics” are seen as self-evident, without the need for discussion (BOURDIEU, 1996). This situation is further intensified in an institution characterized by its particular inertia in conserving and transmitting the legitimized culture of a society (BOURDIEU; PASSERON, 2019).

Another important issue is that the work of the professor is not solely responsible for the symbolic violence present in the university field. We recall that the imposition,

the delimitation, and the way the education system deals with pedagogical action corresponds to the interests of the dominant groups and/or classes in society (BOURDIEU; PASSERON, 1975). However, we believe that the teaching practice can ease the uneasiness generated by the symbolic violence of the field and favor the inclusion of students, especially for those who feel unable to graduate. In this way, we also agree with Pedro's conception about university permanence: "For me, staying at the university is not only about staying, but also about you wanting to continue having the desire to stay" (Pedro, Electrical Engineering). This desire to stay, as we observed in the data collected, is influenced by the material and symbolic conditions to stay at the university.

Contributions, limits, and possibilities of institutional actions

Although commonly known as part of the "Theories of Reproduction," Pierre Bourdieu's proposal is for a sociology of probabilities. His studies sought to unveil the tendencies, the sociologically possible chances for the events of social phenomena. His sociology is not an exact prediction of what will happen, because, due to the constant dynamics of disputes in the fields, there is always an indetermination that makes change possible (WACQUANT, 2005). As agents entering the university field, students, especially the "non-heirs", bring new possibilities to the university, resisting the field impositions and entering the dispute to configure it closer to their *habitus* (BOURDIEU, 2004b).

Based on this understanding, we asked the students if the university contributes to their permanence. In the questionnaires previously applied, 53.7% of the participants recognize that the university contributes to the permanence of the students, while 26.8% do not believe that the university contributes to the permanence of the students, and 19.5% could not answer. In the interviews, the students' main recognition is in the actions of the university in terms of economic aid, based on the contribution of scholarships: "Yes, because UFSCar has things here all universities have. The issue of housing grants, scholarships, all those things" (Laura, Pedagogy).

In the same way, 46.3% of the participants in the questionnaire said they had some kind of assistance grant, with the food grant being the main resource provided to students (88.2% of the participants receive some kind of assistance grant). Such assistance is essential to support the conditions of permanence of students since most courses at UFSCar are full time. In addition, Honorato (2015) presented the difficulties of low-income students in providing food, since at the university investigated by the author there was no university restaurant or other form of food assistance.

On the other hand, the university also has limits to student permanence, which were pointed out by the participants of the interviews. The main one refers, again, to the lack of support from professors:

I think UFSCar offers a lot of scholarships, they have a lot of incentive, both in terms of food, as well as that activity scholarship. I think there are many things like that, but it is something that the university offers, the professors don't help much (Diana, Chemical Engineering).

In other words, while the university has advanced in providing financial resources for students, it has still encountered limits in teaching, at graduation. The teacher's work has already been pointed out as fundamental for university permanence by other researchers (FERNANDES; OLIVEIRA, 2019; PORTES, 2014; VAZ, 2018). In Portes' (2014) research, it was raised that, during their academic trajectories, the students surveyed encountered professors who contributed little or nothing to their university experience and who did not know how to deal with students who were not considered "standard students." In light of this, the author notes that the professor is essential not only for training, but for the construction of knowledge necessary for membership and for opening the horizon of academic possibilities for students.

University teaching, however, also faces formative challenges. Already in the late 1990s, Masetto (1998) warned about the traditional absence of pedagogical training among university professors in Brazil, because the priority was to hire professionals with European backgrounds and with outstanding scientific performances. According to the author, this lack of formative requirements for teaching promoted the belief that "those who know, automatically know how to teach" (MASETTO, 1998, p. 11), so there was no perception that student learning was the central objective of undergraduate courses. This situation has little differentiation today.

The research of Oliveira and Vasconcellos (2011) and Pryjma and Oliveira (2016) point to the amateurism in the pedagogical practices of university professors, who have solid academic training, but little training for teaching. Undergraduate teaching has been based on trial and error in solving conflicts in an individualized manner, without in-depth reflection for the redefinition or qualification of these practices. This problem requires formative proposals from higher education institutions to substantiate and change the dimensions of teaching and learning. The absence of pedagogical training signals the complexity of teaching since the experience as an undergraduate student becomes the basis of teaching for many university professors. This base, as Masetto (1998) warns, is based on professionals who also had no teaching training.

Moreover, we understand that the complexity of university teaching can be considered in relation to the different courses and areas of knowledge that occupy different positions in dispute in the university field. Since there is little pedagogical training and no institutional backing for teaching practices, university teachers are limited to initial training at the university. Even with the presence of common elements, the difficulties of teaching also have their specificities in each undergraduate course, indicating that this challenge cannot be treated homogeneously. A professor of engineering may have a different difficulty from a professor of education because

their training, understanding, and strategies about teaching are diversified in the area of knowledge in which they work.

Due to the limits of our research, we did not advance in the analysis about the complex and heterogeneous pedagogical difficulties among university teachers of different areas of knowledge³. What we emphasize is the strong relationship that teaching performance shows with university permanence, especially in its symbolic dimension, because “[...] the responsibility for failure and professional success is more linked to the profile of students than to the pedagogical work and the reflections arising from the practices” (PRYJMA; OLIVEIRA, 2016, p. 855).

Despite the importance of faculty performance, Vaz (2018) states that there is still a silencing in scientific research on the work of university professors in relation to affirmative action policies. Vaz’s (2018) research indicated that the teaching work in the university maintains linear and hierarchical practices, not bringing some knowledge about the social reality. Therefore, the author argues that the democratization of higher education will only be effective when they combine the teaching work with affirmative action policies. It is from this committed work that the university will be able to fulfill its social role, especially in times with fascist ideals surrounding the Brazilian society (VAZ, 2018).

The research of Fernandes and Oliveira (2019) evidenced that there is still resistance on the part of professors to modify their practices to help the student who does not fit the ideal model (that is, the student who already holds cultural capital and a *habitus* for the university). The teachers, for already occupying a prominent position in the university field, value their practices and believe that it is the student (quota or non-quota) who must study and try, according to the transmitted orientations. The authors consider that such perceptions found among teachers can confirm the reproductive process of teaching by treating equally students who are socially unequal, strengthening the ideology of the endowment demystified by Bourdieusian theory.

It is important to consider that teachers’ actions are also guided by a *habitus*, detailed by Silva (2005) as teacher *habitus*. Teachers’ actions are developed during the exercise of their profession, but they are also influenced by the school culture. In our research, we understand that the teacher *habitus* of university teachers is also influenced by the culture of the scientific field. Fernandes (2019) clarifies that this field produces knowledge from the logic of the market (commodity-knowledge) through the meritocratic ideology, reinforcing academic productivism and the intensification of teaching work. These configurations of the scientific field affect teaching practices, tending to lead teachers to develop greater investments in research activities, being more profitable in the field, than pedagogical practices (FERNANDES; OLIVEIRA, 2019).

The students also pointed out their suggestions for improvement for permanence.

³ This may be an interesting topic to be studied further in future investigations.

Again, the pedagogical practice was the most cited element, as observed in the student's speech: "[if] the teachers understood that they are there to help us, which is a union thing and not a competition thing, I think it would be easier" (Diana, Chemical Engineering). Nunes and Veloso (2015) point out the difficulties that college students may experience in the teacher-student relationship, which is always particularly important for the student's adaptation to the new challenges arising from the academic environment. For the authors, the teacher can motivate the student in the option for the chosen course, besides creating a favorable climate for the construction of learning and motivating the student to enjoy with satisfaction the course he or she is taking.

Moreover, the symbolic dimension of university permanence is related to the ratings of the professors who exercise a function of legitimization and recognition of the students who are fit to be approved and stay in higher education. The work of Bourdieu and Saint-Martin (1998) indicates that teachers' perception, appreciation, and practices are organized by systems of classification. These classificatory principles are related to the logic of the university field and the division of society, converting social classifications into school classifications. The representations that teachers have about themselves and about students carry social values, grounding school taxonomies that define as excellence the qualities of agents that are socially dominant. In this way, the homology between the structures of the educational system and the teachers' mental structures, the symbolic boundaries related to social boundaries, are the "[...] principle of the function of consecration of the social order that the educational system fulfills under the appearance of neutrality" (BOURDIEU; SAINT-MARTIN, 1998, p. 196).

Thinking about a university tenure program that includes the symbolic dimension, therefore, requires a rethinking about teachers' classifications and their own principles of vision that influence beliefs about their role and their practices at the university. We emphasize that the student experience, especially of non-grantees, faces symbolic challenges in relation to ignorance about the rules, language, and symbolization of the practices that make up academic space and performance. These challenges highlight the contradiction of an institutional *habitus* and university culture that seek to increase diversity but maintain symbolic reproductions that preserve boundaries contrary to social inclusion (LIMA, 2020).

Another suggestion cited by students to improve institutional actions for student permanence refers to the importance of welcoming throughout the first year in the university course. According to Cavichiolo (2019), the welcoming well designed by the institution can be favorable for university permanence, especially for students entering through the Quotas Law.

It is also noteworthy that effective strategies to welcome entering students are basic needs to improve social inclusion. The presentation of the entire academic space, the rules, and regulations, and especially the opportunities for scholarships, participation in projects, internships, in addition to monitoring resources and

pedagogical reinforcement would enable improvements in academic performance, dropout and retention of these students (CAVICHIOLO, 2019, p. 121).

The relevance of the welcome is in revealing how the institutional space functions, the norms, procedures, and university culture that govern the conduct of the agents. This initial informational action can help the insertion of the student, especially for those who do not know how it works. In addition, the first year of graduation is the one with the highest dropout rate at the university studied (UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DE SÃO CARLOS, 2018), being an important year to be worked on so that students can understand the new teaching and learning processes (ALMEIDA, 2014). Therefore, planning the reception actions to favor the adaptation phase can be an essential element to provide the university permanence (NUNES, 2016).

Listening to students is an alternative suggested by the student Heloísa so that the university can consider their needs when designing actions of welcome and permanence:

To do these surveys to see what the students think, to try to identify the main problems and propose solutions, like what we are doing now. That this reaches them. That is why my participation and the students' participation is especially important. It is a way to arrive and provide something better. A better university (Heloísa, Statistics).

Student Heloísa's speech demonstrates that an interviewee also has his or her own objectives when participating in research, performing his or her interpretation of the purpose of the investigation (BOURDIEU, 2008). In this case, especially because the interview was conducted between agents with close positions⁴, the participant feels that scientific production is a legitimate means in the field to bring visibility to the challenges faced in university permanence. Similarly, Cordeiro and Cordeiro (2015) highlight the importance of investigations conducted with students to know the difficulties faced by them, seeking to solve and monitor academic development. In other words, it is the academic daily life that enables the measurement of what needs to be improved in university permanence. It is necessary to know the diversity present in the profiles of students, which is made present in the current universities by the Quotas Law, to provide university permanence. According to the authors:

Permanence as an institutional policy, a commitment that the institution assumes to prevent/decrease the evasion of students, needs to go beyond the mere concern with numbers and create a space for relations at the university that considers the diversity and difference that constitute the profile of the students, so that it performs its social function of promotion and exercise of citizenship

⁴ At the time of the interview, the interviewer was a graduate student.

(CORDEIRO; CORDEIRO, 2015, p. 834).

Thus, we understand that university permanence involves other dimensions besides economic aid actions. Students understand and experience symbolic factors that may influence them to remain in or drop out of the university. Among these factors, we see academic difficulties and pedagogical practice as important developments, especially since they are determining factors for approval in subjects and progression in the courses.

Final considerations

This article aimed to analyze the perceptions of students about their experiences related to university permanence, seeking to deepen the symbolic mechanisms present in the student trajectories at a federal public university. We identified that students recognize the importance of economic aid for their subsistence at the university, this being a fundamental element in a university permanence program. However, students also raised symbolic issues that influence their student journey.

The symbolic dimension of permanence is present in the accountability of the student for his or her performance, related to the academic difficulties with the required cultural content and the practices of the professors who do little to help students with greater cultural and educational lags. The suggestions presented for overcoming these limits of the university refer to the engagement of the professors in the pedagogical work, the welcoming to the entering students, and the realization of research that considers the perceptions of the students about the challenges of university permanence.

We recognize that these points were made by students with social characteristics close to what is considered as “new students” (HERINGER, 2020), because they come from social classes that were historically excluded from public universities and with the absence of a *habitus* that will favor their insertion in this space of disputes (MATTOS; FERNANDES, 2022). In this sense, they are agents who do not possess the required dispositions, causing feelings and actions of inadequacy, displaced, on the contrary, in bad placements, especially when it comes to a field that tends to the consecration and reproduction of power relations in society. Still, it is also these agents who can struggle with the forces of the field, seeking resistance and modifications in its structure to conform the field to their own dispositions (BOURDIEU, 2004b).

The students’ speeches show that new disputes are being raised in the university field, disputes that only occur due to the presence of new agents, indicating the importance of regulations in the entrance to public universities. As already mentioned, our intention is not to blame faculty members and institute rivalries with students. The contributions of Pierre Bourdieu’s sociological theory enable us to understand that the mechanisms

of reproduction do not refer to conscious and individual practices, but to symbolic struggles involving our categories of perception and appreciation, guiding us to value and act within the limits of cultural arbitrariness.

The data and suggestions of the students included in this study, as well as the Bourdieusian analysis, show us that there are symbolic obstacles to social inclusion in public universities. We believe that overcoming these challenges and the changes that are still necessary refer to an institutional work for the insertion of the “new students”, contributing to the transformation that is occurring in the historical elitist and excluding structure of Brazilian higher education. For this, it is interesting to ally symbolic actions with financial aid, since changing the distribution and the relative weight of the forms of valued capital modify the structure and the disputes of the field (WACQUANT, 2005). On the other hand, there is the challenge of stipulating new classifications about the definition and functioning of the university. It is these classifications that organize the perception of what this institution is and how it should function, thus organizing the university field itself. Therefore, the proposal for change also goes through the symbolic dimension, in the dispute for the form of vision about the field and the practical operations that produce and reproduce the social groups (BOURDIEU, 2004a).

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Text received on 05/11/2022

Text approved on 08/24/2022