YOUTH, SCHOOL AND WORK: MIDDLE SCHOOL TECHNICAL EDUCATION'S MEANING[1]

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ABSTRACT: This paper is the result of a study about the relationship between youth, school and work and the meanings attributed by young students to Middle School Technical Education. A survey was conducted among young students/workers enrolled in public middle schools studying at night in Curitiba (Brazil) and its metropolitan area. It was developed in two stages: the first, quantitative and exploratory, included more than 4,000 students of 18 institutions; the second, qualitative, evaluated 4 fourth year technical middle schools' classes. Primary data was analyzed in face of the theoretical debates, educational legislation and theoretical and methodological discussions associated to the disputes for the last stage of basic education, allowing an approach to the meanings attributed by young students to middle school in general and, in particular, to technical education.
Keywords: Middle school technical education. Middle school. Youth and education. Youth, school and work.

JUVENTUDE, ESCOLA E TRABALHO: SENTIDOS DA EDUCAÇÃO PROFISSIONAL INTEGRADA AO ENSINO MÉDIO

RESUMO: O estudo que deu origem a este texto trata das relações de jovens com a escola e com o trabalho e dos sentidos que eles atribuem à Educação Profissional Técnica de Nível Médio. Empreendemos uma pesquisa empírica com jovens estudantes-trabalhadores matriculados no Ensino Médio noturno público em Curitiba e região metropolitana. Tal investigação foi desenvolvida em duas etapas: a primeira, de caráter exploratório quantitativo, contemplou mais de 4.000 estudantes em 18 estabelecimentos; a segunda, de caráter qualitativo, contemplou quatro turmas do quarto ano do Ensino Médio Integrado. A análise dos dados primários, à luz da produção dos campos teóricos relacionados ao tema, da legislação educacional e dos embates teórico-metodológicos e ideológicos que permeiam as disputas pela última etapa da educação básica permitiu uma aproximação com os sentidos que os jovens atribuem ao Ensino Médio em geral e à Educação Profissional Técnica de Nível Médio, em particular.
Palavras-chave: Educação Profissional Técnica de Nível Médio. Ensino Médio. Ensino Médio Integrado. Juventude e educação. Juventude, escola e trabalho.

FIRST REMARKS

When Michael Young (2007) led us into questioning "what are schools good for?," even if he was not referring specifically to the Brazilian educational scenario, he has worried us about the conformist role that we, as educators, play in the school that is offered to young Brazilians who now face the opportunities that Middle School provides as the last stage of basic education and possibly for most of them as the last opportunity for a formal education.

If the role of education "is paramount both to elaborating proper strategies to change the objective conditions of reproduction and for a conscious self-change of individuals," as pointed by Mészáros (2004, p. 13), it is crucial for the social subject to secure the necessary conditions for his or her social, political, cultural and economic inclusion within contemporary society.

This article presents the results of a qualitative research conducted with young (15-29-year-old) students of Middle School Technical Education (MSTE). This study has searched for the elements that might contribute to an understanding of the meanings that school and technical education have for the young students in the environment where their school and technical education takes place.

Our intention is to show the elements that form MSTE under the light of concrete reality, school and work experience and the meaning attributed to Integrated School by the young subjects that study in it. This exposition will be divided into three different stages: methodological explanation; educational, social and economic characterization of the students; and the meanings attributed to Integrated School by them.

METHODOLOGICAL EXPLANATION

The research included students from four different classes in four different public state institutions studying at night[2] in the city of Curitiba and metropolitan area. A questionnaire and focal groups were used as follows:

TABLE 1 – Characteristics of the establishment and public sample data

School	Middle School Technical Course researched	Students		
		Enrolled	Filled the questionnaire	Participated in the focal groups
A	Business	33	25	12
B	Logistics	11	7	8
C	Business	37	29	12
D	Information Technology	12	11	9
	Total	93	72	41

Source: Research data, organized by the authors.

The questionnaire was composed of 32 open and closed questions, distributed within three distinct blocks: one, with eight questions, focusing on the age group and family composition of the students and educational level of their parents or caretakers; another, with thirteen questions, aimed at gathering information about the past educational situation of the student, his or her opinions about the importance of the course and educational perspectives; finally, the third block, composed of eleven questions, investigated the work conditions during the course, the relationship between the course and work activities as well as professional perspectives.

The questionnaire provided the elements needed to characterize the public and the understanding of relationships, meanings and perceptions of the students regarding the offer of Technical Education as shown in the following Chart:

CHART 1 – Questions and analytical categories contemplated in the questionnaire
and explored in focal groups

Question	Category	Questionnaire item
Who are the young students of Middle School studying at night? Who is this working class youth?	Social characterization	3. Sex 4. Age 5. Marital status 6/7. Household composition 8. Parents' educational level and occupation
	Educational characterization	9. Type of elementary school 10. Time without studying 11. History of school failure 12. Reason for studying at night
	Economic characterization	22. Type of work in the beginning of the course 23. Type of work now 24. Age when started working 25. Time spent with work and school 26. Average monthly income 27. How is the salary spent 28. Specific training for the current function
What are the expectations of the young students in IMS?	Educational perceptions and expectations	13. Motivation for the current course 14. Differences Integrated Middle School X Regular Middle School 17. Expectations about the course 20. Satisfaction or regrets about the course 21. Educational plans for the future
	Professional perceptions and expectations	31. Professional plans for the future
What do the students think about school and the course where they study; what do they like the most and the less?	Relationship with the school	15. Favorite and least favorite subjects 16. Advantages of the course for work 18. Occasional job opportunities missed due to lack of Middle Education or technical course 19. Reason for classmates' truancy/dropout
What meanings do the school and work have for the students?	Meaning of school and work	29. Meaning of technical course for life 30. Meaning of work 32. Work and school today

Source: Designed by the authors

After the application of the questionnaire and preliminary data analysis, focal groups were used, a technique frequently employed in field works aiming at qualitative data gathering. According to Kind (2004, p. 125),

> Focal groups use group interaction to produce data and insights that are hardly obtainable outside the group context. The data gathered include the group process, taken as greater than the sum of opinions, feelings and standpoints of each individual. Even though, focal groups maintain the character of a data collection technique, which is *a priori* adequate to qualitative investigations.

In addition to allowing greater freedom for the researcher, focal groups regard the participants not only as objects and part of the study, but as subjects that may provide important information for the discussion. Since the relationship between the students and Technical Education and the meanings attributed by them to this training were investigated, the focal group technique was used with the aim of widening the possibilities of understanding this relationship, having in mind the qualitative approach with a large number of participants, in addition to allowing the development of questions that are not satisfactorily answered during the application of the questionnaire.

Thus, focal group sessions took approximately 60 minutes, considering the time of preparation, application of the technique (with audio recordings) and conclusion.

Both in the cases of the questionnaires and the focal groups, the School Board was asked to provide written authorization and part of the students were asked to sign a free consent form according to the human research ethical standards.

After these methodological remarks, the results will be presented within an ongoing dialog with theoretical approaches to the relationship between education and work.

SOCIAL, EDUCATIONAL, AND ECONOMIC CHARACTERIZATION

One of our objectives is to know who are the Middle School students attending night classes that have chosen Technical Education Integrated Middle School as their last stage of basic education.

The general results obtained with the questionnaires applied to the sixty-two students of the last year of Integrated Middle School show that males and females are equally represented in the group (50%), most of them are single (93%), without children (99%), living with parents or caretakers (89%). Among the parents and caretakers, 57% had completed Middle School.

The professional activities performed by the parents help to understand their educational, economic and social characteristics, which somehow impact on the relationship of the young students with the Middle School and the expectations they associate to Technical Education. In practice, these activities reflect the technical division typical of the capitalist production system, in which so called 'noble' and 'intellectual' functions are a privilege of those who have higher educational levels, leaving the rest of the workers to occupations of lower social status.

The concentration of the parents in so called lower-skilled jobs (71% of the fathers are factory workers, night-watches, truck drivers, tractor drivers, gas station attendants and others; and 47% of the mothers are baby sitters, janitors, cooks, waitresses and others), characterized by the use of physical abilities remind us that in capitalist society, these workers are historically devoid of the possibility of being included within the world of education or of studying and working at the same time. Crossing this line that keeps those with low educational levels in these work places is a challenge to the working class. According to Pinto (1986, p. 37), it is only "when manual labor stops being a stigma and becomes a simple difference within general social work that institutionalized education will stop being a privilege and start being a right concretely equal to all." Therefore, being destined to these functions mirrors low educational levels, which, conversely, feeds the cycle of devaluation of the worker by the productive system.

In relation to the activities performed by the mothers of the students, predominantly housewives and others, it should be considered that, throughout history, whereas the activities that were performed outside the house or focused on the production of goods and services were paid, housework was disregarded as professional activity, even though it requires as much effort and skill as any other.

These remarks show that the ideology that has restricted the idea of work to paid activities has reinforced the position of men in gender relations and, in addition to relegating housewives to the limbo of 'no activity', it has been leading us to ignore the unpaid work done by the workers and to suppose an interpretation of economic reality (ENGUITA, 1989) which tends to 'value' profitable activities and 'devalue' activities that, even though necessary and significant to collective life, "do not contribute" directly to the market.

This labor situation of fathers and mothers or caretakers explains why the researched subjects try to avoid these occupations as much as possible. A typical example of this student that tries to avoid the low occupational status and economic stereotype associated with the parents is that of an 18-year-old student who is a trainee at

a public institution. The daughter of a butcher and a maid, she aims to go to the university, learn foreign languages, study abroad and do something that her parents would be "proud of." In spite of her dreams and expectations regarding her professional future, she says that she would feel satisfied if, at the end of the course, she has a formal job in her area of expertise.

In smaller numbers, some students presented a better economic and social condition (10%), namely those whose parents had higher status jobs as self-employed persons (lawyers, accountants, economists) or occupied higher positions within companies. Among these students, there are those who had studied in private schools and are able to study in a pre-university preparatory course during the day while attending technical school at night. Even in these cases, such circumstances do not ensure that these students are free from poor work conditions, having in mind the competitiveness of the market and the exploitation to which young workers are subjected in the beginning of the 21st century.

In addition, so called 'intellectualized occupations' do not prevent workers from the degrading conditions of labor division somehow supported by the school system, even if these occupations are seen as enabling better days in the future. These occupations are also poor both in production and training within the school:

> The school degrades both manual and intellectual work. It degrades manual work because, from its supposed intellectual dimension and the association with the promise of mobility and escape from physical tasks, it presents itself as something devoid of intelligence and, then, of value: it is what those who have no value do, those whom the school deems devoid of any value. It degrades intellectual work since it presents it as a sad caricature, a set of routine tasks of no significance and distanced from the reality outside school. (ENGUITA, 1989, p. 237-238)

More than qualifying manual and intellectual work differently, the school qualifies the former and disqualifies the latter, subjecting the workers, according to Saviani (2002, p. 28), "to the bourgeois ideology under a petty-bourgeois disguise." In other words, the school can be both a marginalizing factor in relation to bourgeois culture, offering them only its by-products, and a marginalizing factor of workers within their own class when it distinguishes them from their original group as they progress within the educational system.

As a rule, therefore, working-class students whose parents have low status jobs represent the largest numbers attending night classes in Integrated Middle Education. Therefore, the students' concern and focusing of their academic efforts as a synonym to qualification are situated within the social context marked by structural unemployment as one of their greatest problems. The fact that the market does not

absorb all workers reaches, to a lesser or greater extent, all capitalist nations, but impacts most dramatically on workers in peripheral countries in face of the flexibilization process that is emphasized, in the recent Brazilian case, by the law of outsourcing.

In response to the broadening of the socioeconomically vulnerable group, governments have been creating policies that aim to compensate for the effects of unemployment and difficulties that the poorest young persons have to enter the work market. For Kuenzer (2006), this scenario originates what she calls 'subordinate inclusion', which characterizes the set of macroeconomic factors that mark the relationships between capital and work and determine the subjection of workers to a broader, more flexible and predatory relationship, as the author has observed in her study of Rio Grande de Sul footwear market.

> Workers until recently included through formal contracts are being progressively demobilized by the flexibilization of work and its relations, joining those who were never included either due to the lack of jobs or to the impossibility of having a formal job, particularly women who, doubly explored, have to carry the burden, in solidarity, of providing for the family and doing the housework. Through flexibilized social relations, these workers, previously associated to combative trade unions, are being denied as subjects of rights, from permanently reiterated discourses that not only justify exclusion, but also present it as positive. (KUENZER, 2006, p. 884)

Within the context of underemployment and precarious work, the search for Technical Education by workers reveal the other perverse facet of capital, which promotes a 'rapid' inclusion in the work market, exposing the workers to improper work conditions, mainly those who are finishing their basic education.

In addition to viewing school as job enabling, the students seek Technical Education with the aim of obtaining qualified positions that may signal the break with the past of precarious work conditions experienced by their parents, close relations or by themselves, as seen in the situation of the student Q1109,[3] who was eighteen years old at the time of the research, started to work at the age of sixteen, the daughter of an electrician and a hairdresser. She ascertains that she identifies with Technical Education because both the students' profile and the learning are different. Today she works as an administrative assistant thanks to her chosen course and, according to her, she says she finds "everyday people of old age who make less money than we do since they have little formal education." This case reveals the fear the students have of seeing themselves forced to follow the same path their parents went through in activities that are less valued by society.

It is important to remember that, even though the possibility of professional inclusion in less valued manual jobs does exist, which occurs even among the parents with higher educational levels (Middle School or more), the data about the positions occupied by the students (even trainees) show that administrative functions, such as secretary or office assistants, are still more valued. In their own evaluation, these conditions reflect the right choice offered by Technical Education and the course:

> […] I chose this course because it is a new course, there are […] very few qualified professionals in this area, and due to the demand generated by the World Cup and the Olympics […] the demand of logistics will exceed the professionals that are qualified today, that is, those who are trained, […] if one is qualified in this area of logistics, there is a big advantage, […] a good opportunity to have a good future in a big company, with this qualification. (FG2-02).

The discourse on the lack of qualified workforce stresses the idea that the technical course is the best option for those who want "to have a good future" and maybe have a position in a "big company." It is also not uncommon that students point to professionalization as one of the virtues of Middle School, contributing not only to the inclusion, but also to the permanence and growth in the company:

> I am working there for nearly three years, right? Then, when I started there, I started the course, then […] from the many trainees, only a few were left, […] so I think that those who succeeded, like, were those who had that better education, let us say so, the skill, the better performance to remain in the company. Then, I think that this professional course helped me a lot […] to grow in the company, to use the technical subjects, the whole learning here in the company. I think this has helped me to stand out. (FG3-12)

This testimony shows the importance attributed to the school and the role associated to Technical Education, which appears as an advantage to ward off the risk of vulnerability in times of intense competition among those who are looking for a job.

As had occurred with their parents, soon they need to submit to capitalist logic, which is now characterized by individualism, competition and one's own responsibility for 'successes' or 'failures' in relation to the place they occupy in the system, as discussed by Enguita (1989, p. 192):

> The school plays a double role here. On the one hand, it opens a path […] through which the position of individuals or groups within courses of action established and accepted can be improved without the risk of resulting in open conflict. It fundamentally allows professional groups to reinforce their position by controlling the possibilities of access to them, which are restricted through higher educational standards and, above all, allowing individuals to fight personally to change groups

to one of higher status. Actually, the school is today the main mechanism of meritocratic legitimization in our society since it is supposed to objectively select the more fit to more relevant functions, which are also associated to better rewards.

This role is reinforced by young students who seek school education as a possibility of qualified professional inclusion. Among the subjects researched, two groups are united in the school environment: those who study and use this condition to seek for a first opportunity of professional inclusion and those who work and seek school as a path to better conditions of work and income.

There is also a group of students who say they seek Technical Education as a real opportunity of completing Middle School, having in mind the difficulties they would face in regular Middle School. The student Q1103, for instance, who is twenty-one years old, has chosen Technical Education due to thinking that it is a better form of learning and that he would not be able to adapt to regular Middle School. The son of a night-watch and a general services assistant, this is how he justifies his choice: "It is like Middle School, but associated to a technical course. In addition, it takes four years; the advantages of learning more are greater, and we can have a good job, that of administrative assistant." This student has spent some time without studying before entering Middle School and has worked in a supermarket, but is today unemployed and aims to complete his studies as soon as he can, seeing it as an opportunity of a better job and better conditions for his family.

Another example is that of student Q3129, twenty-one years old and working as a bank clerk. She claims to have already failed Middle School due to delays, attendance problems and learning difficulties. For this motive, she believes that the fact of Technical Education having differentiated (technical) subjects is an advantage for those who want to complete Middle School.

Finally, the student Q2201, twenty years old and the son of factory workers (his father is a forklift operator and his mother is a welder) says he has failed once due to difficulties in learning. He leaves home at 5:20 AM to work until 2 PM. Part of his afternoons is free, but he goes to school at 6 PM and returns home only at 11 PM. For him, work brings a sense of personal realization. With his studies he intends to be a very good professional in order to be proud of the respect conquered in face of people.

Thus, all the students that were discussed are the children of poor parents who belong to the working class and claim to have some difficulty in learning, which would have determined their school

failure or interrupted their education for some time. Since they are young workers who study, they say that Technical Education fits their interests and possibilities for completing Middle School better.

MEANINGS ATTRIBUTED TO INTEGRATED SCHOOL

Along with the characterization of the students, the relationships they establish with the course, their perceptions about Technical Education in the perspective of their personal projects and the meanings attributed to them were also researched.

It is clear that Integrated School students associate Technical Education with possibilities of inclusion or improvement in terms of work and income. Sometimes the emphasis and enthusiasm in relation to technical courses is so high that students end up overvaluing their role as a safe conduct to obtaining a job or progressing in their studies.

> My brother, he studied mechatronics […] he is a metrologist and […] his first job after finishing his course […] was awesome! He was well paid, then other offers came and now he has a good job, having only the technical course, now he is studying mechatronics at the university, but he has only the technical course yet. (FG3-01).

The optimism indicates the admiration the students have in relation to the double function of Integrated School, which at the same time prepares for professional life and allows their progression to higher education.

Even in cases in which the primary concern is not the job, there are testimonies that show the students' satisfaction with the course due to various reasons. The student Q3103, for instance, whose parents have a higher educational level and who had her elemental education in a private school, even though she does not have to rely on her work to live, she tends her younger brother in the morning and studies at a pre-university preparatory course in the afternoon. For her, Technical Education presents more challenges since, even if its focus is not the university, the technical course has a variety of subjects and the teachers and the school are more demanding, increasing student responsibility. If she had to start Middle School today, she says she would prefer the same technical course she frequents today, which is explained by the fact that she is also studying at a preparatory course.

There is a considerable number of young students (44%) who, in addition to acknowledging and valuing Technical Education for its usefulness in relation to better work conditions, sees the last phase

of education as having an important role in preparing the student for life and work, which encompasses from simpler to subtler and more subjective aspects which are somehow meaningful for the student:

> I think that I will have access to things […] that I would not be able to learn anywhere else; we had a teacher […] he taught us how to read a resume, a thing that I had never done in my life—reading a resume. I keep thinking, imagine if it was in another course, would I learn how to do it? So, if it was a job interview, it will be good for the rest of my life, since I will never forget it, in this I will not fail at a job interview. (FG2-05).

Moreover, the advantages of Technical Education are not restricted to the development of technical skills or learning certain subjects, but include the incorporation of new ways of behaving and facing work and life in order that the chosen course may also contribute in that sense:

> […] I work in the field of organizational behavior. We have to have a better way of talking to people, of accepting their opinion […] as in public schools, our society today is not very much valued […] we are undervalued, whether we like it or not. And if I was studying at a regular Middle School, I would not have a certain way of addressing a person and talking to him exactly as it has to be done, and in management we have a way to live day after day, a respectful way, behavior, this changes a lot. (FG3-03)

The student's effort is aimed at clarifying that, if public school is generally undervalued, Technical Education may be a strategy to gain social and professional respect, enabling that what was originally a drawback (studying at a public school) becomes an advantage. On the other hand, his speech reinforces that school plays an important role in disciplining the workforce. The assimilation of the idea that there is an appropriate "way of being" in the search for space within the market shows the school's success in this regard.

In the path followed during nearly four years of Integrated School, even if the initial motivation was training for a job or even the preparation for university, other elements of the training process are perceived and valued by the students so as to recognize that life is above market work and school itself: "to get into the university, you have to study more than technical subjects; in fact, to go on with your life you have to study more than technical subjects, you have to know sociology, philosophy, maybe mathematics" (FG4-02).

Such manifestations show that the educational process is always an opportunity to advance. The student's speech, initially restricted to the interest in getting into the university or to preparing for a job, soon reveals some anxiety that points out to an interest or

curiosity, or both, that allows going from naivety to critical thinking. Due to characteristics of the very technique used, the focal groups allowed perceiving some anxiety, typical of young persons, which is stronger in the disposition to express opinions on subjects that go beyond the school environment.

In a further analysis of the data collected, it was observed that the students show little regret in relation to having chosen Technical Education (7%) and, in these cases, the frustration is related to perceptions that Technical Education does not prepare one to get into a university, that the courses take too long[4] and that there was no adaptation of the students to the technical courses chosen.

The perception about the relevance of Integrated School arises also from students who, in strongly criticizing its curriculum, having in mind the lack of compatibility of the subjects with the preparation for advancing in their studies, end up agreeing on the need of integrated education in certain cases, since

> It helps young students who, from early on, want to start working; it makes them work in a specific field on a regular basis; I think that this ends up bringing many young students who would be working irregularly; in other words, I think this also helps. (FG1-05)

The following testimonies confirm the idea that the course meets some specific needs of the young workers:

> […] In relation to this Law subject […] we have learned about labor rights, that 90%, 70% of company workers do not know what their rights are […] since we have this basic knowledge, we already know if what is being done […] by law is right or not. And we know whether it is being done within the laws or not, and we will know if we are being exploited, if the company is acting correctly or not. (FG2-02)

Then, we could ask: in what other situation would the poorer young workers be having access to this knowledge? Would they be in Middle School if it was not for Technical Education? As we can see, the meanings attributed to Integrated Middle School cannot be examined strictly on the basis of their functionality in relation to the work market, as is suggested by the speeches. Broader possibilities than those discussed within school environment, regarding work routine, should be taken into consideration as in the example cited, which implies recognizing that the education (and emancipation) of the worker begins within the very system, acknowledging him or her as a subject with obligations, but also rights.

But this does not mean that the conditions for the offer of Middle School Technical Education are better than those of regular Middle School. One of the constant problems is the absence of teachers

in the beginning of the school year, which compromises the quality of the studies, beginning with the lack of subjects. One student has complained that there is a frequent lack of teachers in the beginning of the year: "we often stay more at home than in school in the beginning" (FG2-02). Another student goes further, showing that Middle School is still very far from being a priority for governments, since the fact of not having an ongoing team of teachers is reflected in selective processes, which are compromised by hastened and short-term contracts:

> […] in state schools, I don't know for sure, but what we saw was […] the lack of teachers in the beginning of the year, we have suffered a lot from it in the first and second years. Ah! Let us get any guy, they are lacking, let us get! … And sometimes they were not what we needed at the time, they did not have that knowledge we needed to acquire in the first years. (FG2-03)

Another student was even bolder in her testimony, revealing that, if the problem begins with the lack of teachers to meet the demand, there is also the need of fulfilling the proposed activities:

> In my opinion, there are good technicians, but maybe not so good teachers […] I don't know how the teachers are selected, but I think criteria could be stricter; I think there is a syllabus that the teacher should follow and which is not always followed. We had a case here with the technical support teacher that was very complicated; he said he would teach us his subject, but he never did. I think that this is not only in our school, but in others […] I think there should be a closer scrutiny of the teachers' work. (FG4-02)

Here we meet the issue of teacher qualification and school work organization, which should embody methods of assessing performance and monitoring the objectives and subjects according to curricular guidelines. The students do not disregard the importance of the classes for their training and for advancing their studies, showing that they understand the real significance of school work and its specificity in the educational process.

The insufficiency of teachers or the deficiency of teacher training, or both, for the last stage of basic education, mainly for Technical Education, are two important challenges to be faced if Middle School is to achieve the desired social quality. In this sense, the lack of career perspectives within teaching has been having a negative impact on today students so much so that only three of the seventy-two researched are interested in becoming teachers.

In the particular case of Technical Education, the problem is worsened by the lack of specific training for the field of the course or, when it exists, the lack of teacher training for current or future teachers within Middle Technical Education. Considering

the inexistence of a policy that ensures the continuity of offers, the institutions also have difficulties in creating new vacancies for teachers, securing short-term contracts at best. Thus, the difficulties found in teaching are perceived by the students.[5]

The tiring workload comprising work and study is yet another problem, mainly when the student works and studies three-shifts, which, added to the time of moving between house, job and school, can take as much as seventeen to eighteen hours a day. This, however, does not prevent many students from organizing to keep working and studying:

> I have been working the whole day for one year, from 8 AM to 6 PM and, then, I come to school. Then, you first have to organize things, as your time, because if you start mixing job and school there comes a time when things do not work out, right? And it often happens […]; it is tiring, exhaustive, but if you have an objective, you can [reconcile]. (FG1-01)

In addition to the heavy workload, which takes the little time the students could have for themselves, the nature of the work presents an extra problem, having in mind the few possibilities of experience for youth, feeding the students with the expectation that school may rescue what is lost within the work environment:

> […] many work environments such as [a girl] said, are stressing and, sometimes, not places where you can develop your creativity, sometimes it is a work where you are repeating the same daily activities for a long time, you cannot even learn many things. I think that, when the student comes to a school, it is crucial for him or her to meet new things, to get in touch with a more […] dynamic world, a more creative world, to help in his or her training, not to be alienated in an activity. (FG1-05)

In spite of complaints, the students who complete the course feel satisfied, rewarded and even enthusiastic about it:

[…] by combining study and work, we learn […] we value what we are doing. I am certain that a person that receives everything […] will not have the same value as we, who work. Sometimes, we spend the night awake, studying to finish the monograph or other assignment that we need […] you have to value things […] what is best for your future. (FG2-02)

One explanation for this satisfaction is the sensation that the effort was not in vain, allowing the self-realization of the worker student insofar as, by the sacrifice of working and studying, he or she is able to help at home and meet some needs typical of youth:

> […] we buy something with a part of the money of our salary, that amount that we use for […] helping the mother to pay the electricity bill, do one thing or the other. Sometimes we even have to manage our own money in order to have something spare in the end of the month. To buy something, to go out. Very important. (FG3-03)

In addition to preparing for work and for life, school education enables the meeting of other needs of the young student-worker. In this sense, the relationships he or she establishes within the educational environment reinforce the bond with the school and its training process, highlighting the classmates and teachers as important elements in this development. Despite the difficulties of combining study and work, the limitations related to the lack of preparation to the university, the need of one more year to conclude Middle School and also the lack of integration among the subjects, the students that are able to complete the course seem satisfied with the results and understand that integrated Technical Education meets their expectations as young workers.

If the young students cannot clearly perceive how much the technical course will "weight," they are "certain" that it will have some importance for building, maintaining or improving their occupational situation. These references are in agreement with what was observed in other studies about the relationship of the young students with the school, as observed by Castro and Abramovay (2002, p. 154):

> Even if critical reflections on the relationship between formal teaching and engaging in the work market in an ambiguous manner are registered, young students, and their parents, also search to value school education as fundamental to achieve good positions within the work market: "Because the first thing that is demanded to get a job is education; it is important even to be a garbage collector."

Also noteworthy is the fact that some students affirm their option for Technical Education to be part of a strategy to check if the intentions of a career in the university will have the effects desired. In this sense, the chosen course gains in importance as a mechanism of anticipation of academic and professional experiences.

The student Q4305, who had enrolled in Integrated School to study Information Technology, says he has chosen this course in order to test her long-standing interest in the subject in face of her project of pursuing a university education. Necessity led her to accept a position as production auxiliary—a quite different field from that in which she wants to build a career. Nevertheless, she claims to be satisfied, differently from some students who criticize the course for its insufficiency in relation to the specific professional training in the field of Information Technology.

Another student, who took part in the focal groups, presented us with an answer that indicates the courses of Technical Education as adequate for those who actually see a technical course as a form of preparation for the chosen field:

> It depends on what he wants for his life, but if he intends to enter a technical course, I will support him […] all knowledge is valid. But if one doesn't want to work in this field and wants to go to university soon after Middle Education, [he should opt for regular middle education]. (FG4-02)

Thus, the students who compose the most representative group among the subjects of the research are characterized, in educational and socioeconomic terms, by having parents who belong to the working class, of low educational level and working within low social status jobs, having poor economic conditions, and by the decision to complete the technical course as a way of improving their work and life conditions.

Some students of better socioeconomic conditions present another relationship with school and work, as has been already observed in the first part of this article, but the daily effort to ensure a better life through work results in the conviction that, without Technical Education, the possibilities of overcoming current conditions would be even scarcer, whether due to the distance between the work market and the school environment or to the difficulties of following the same academic path when they do not intend to go to university or when they believe that this one path can be harming in face of their condition of student-worker.

> […] technical Middle School […] goes beyond the subjects […] that are already part of integrated education. It has subjects that will prepare us for another training or for a specific job […] that will qualify us for the work market, provide something more. It was worth it, since the course enabled me to find the field that I like and in which I want to work; if it wasn't for the course, maybe I wouldn't know what, where and in what I want to work. Then, the course helped a lot. (FG4-08)

Two elements stand out in the perception of this student: the understanding that Integrated School encompasses technical subjects that go beyond those usually offered in regular Middle School and the perception that the focus of the course helps in qualification, identification of opportunities of professional inclusion and orientation for the work market. These elements show the student's conviction that Technical Education would ensure a similar education as regular Middle School and, at the same time, place him in a better condition in relation to the work market.

The notion of the importance of integrated Technical Education is shared by other students, who advocate its permanence, even with the deficiencies pointed out, having in mind the usefulness for those who do not want, do not intend or cannot continue with their studies:

> [...] I think that [IMS] should not end, because [...] many people cannot go to university, it is not easy for them to enter into higher education, they do not have this access, and a technical course can provide you with opportunities, not as many as a university course, but it can be good for your inclusion in the market work. (FG4-02)

Phrases such as "cannot go," "it is not easy for them," and "do not have this access" to higher education materialize situations that go from the lack of economic conditions to the difficulties inherent to the possibility of entering and remaining in the course, revealing the difficult reality that characterize the most vulnerable sections of the working class, who cannot dream of a better future while life conditions demand them to be pragmatic in relation to the education they should pursue more immediately—Technical Middle School.

Some students also claimed that they would prefer regular Middle School if they could turn back time (17%). These subjects were marked by a better financial condition and determination to go to university, which explains the association of work not to necessity, but to self-actualization and independence.

This helps us to understand that the courses offered in integrated Technical Education are more meaningful when they reflect an option of the students, not of the parents, and when they are in tune with their professional expectations. In addition, the relationship they have with work and with the need of working impacts on the opinion they have of Technical Education so that a greater adhesion to technical courses and its possible advantages is directly linked to the fact that work and the need of income lie within the students' most immediate horizon. Soon enough, the young student who needs to work values more the courses of Technical Education than the one who is focused only on the studies or who, even having some sort of paid activity, does it not out of strict necessity.

The testimonies of the poorer students reflect the immediate need of professional expertise for inclusion in the work market as a result of their class's social experience— that of not having any other way of obtaining income unless by selling their work force and in conditions that escape their preferences. Therefore, despite the discourse that naturalizes the lack of qualification of workers as the cause of labor and economic vulnerability, it is possible to find, within the contradictory school space in which integrated Vocational Education is found, socio-historical conditions that contribute to show to the young students the double character of capitalist society. This character is manifested in the need that millions of these young students have of reconciling work and studies so soon in their lives, and that if the first 'option' has not been abandoning school altogether.

Here Dubet's ideas (2008) on the responsibility of the school concerning equality of opportunities should be presented:

> The school should secure *individual equality of opportunities*. In relation to the register of the usefulness of studies in the first place. This does not mean a concession to the "mercantilization" of culture and education, but a reminding that school qualification is very useful to those who acquire it, since diplomas are more or less well 'paid' in the market work […] A school that had to determine the entire path followed by the individuals, even if it is a fair school, would be in charge of an overwhelming task and would have little possibility to contribute to the widening of social justice. Therefore, we should seek equality of opportunities in the school and at the same time be suspicious of its consequences, since it may develop big social inequalities. (DUBET, 2008, p. 14)

If it is not within the school's reach to correct social injustices or fight the effects of capitalism on the lives of the poorer, a first important step would be that of allowing access of all to school knowledge, which can greatly contribute to unmasking class society.

Technical Education may, then, both be functional to the productive system and open new life and work horizons to the students when it widens the understanding of socio-historical reality. This will depend on the conditions in which this work is performed and a set of factors associated to the formative act, such as adherence to the purpose of social inclusion subordinated to the logics of capitalist society or, on the other hand, the understanding of the revolutionary character and the possibility of individualization of the social subject in building a new collective organization, more humane and just.

Regardless of individual projects, the students of Integrated Middle School show solidarity within the school environment. Even those who do not immediately depend on the job think that the IMS has this function. Those who currently show no interest of entering the university are sensitive to the lack of concern of the school in tending those whose projects include a university education.

If there is a tendency of part of the society to stereotype young students as alienated in relation to their future and the problems of the world, it is also important to recognize an effort of many to subvert this logic and create other possibilities, as discussed by Castro and Abramovay (200, p. 174):

> […] young students are part of and circulate within different institutions, such as family, work market and school; they are producers and consumers of shows and news, being produced by and producing forms of being and thinking. On the one hand, they respond to the appeal of consumption, competitiveness, individualism and power fixation—marks of a time, of a generation—but many develop critical thinking, look for solutions and resist, even if the horizon of possibility for the poor is limited.

Therefore, despite the limitations of Middle Education and Technical Education in the perspective of the working class young students' demands,[6] universal access to the last stage of basic education is a struggle and a path that cannot be abandoned are we not to waste the opportunities of a qualitative change in the socioeconomic situation of young workers who are at the door of work inclusion and a wider school education.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The research whose results were partially presented in this article had as objective characterizing the young students of Middle School Technical Education studying at night in the public network of Curitiba and its metropolitan area. In addition, the meanings attributed by the young students to this educational modality were also researched.

Other studies had shown that young students search for professional training as well as preparation for university in the Middle School, partly out of their own choice, but also urged by their parents and society.

However, we did not have specific studies about Middle School students studying at night, most of them included in the work market, in Technical Education. The studies aimed at Integrated Technical School students were even scarcer.

In the case of the State of Paraná, the *locus* of the research, it should be remembered that the legislation demands that Integrated Middle School take four years, which is in itself a limiting factor for the interest of society in face of the capitalist logic of productivity and the immediate conversion of time into money, which implies shortening the time of education.

Thus, this gap in empirical researches draws attention to the need of approaching young student-workers (supposedly interested in a quicker and more instrumental training) in order to collect the meanings they attribute to Middle School Technical Education. This becomes more important when the statistics related to Middle School show the inability of educational public policies to be translated into more enrollments. Therefore, a set of critiques by intellectuals linked to divergent theoretical approaches about the inadequacy of legislation and, therefore, the paths and curricula available to the last stage of education today in Brazil are perceived.

The results obtained in the research allow us to confirm the hypothesis that our young students of Technical Education look for improving their chances of inclusion and/or permanence

in the work market. This observation, however, does not allow us to establish a linear relationship between technical training and professional inclusion, since the relationships between school education, professional training and young people's experience have been showing tensions and changes as indicated by the students' testimonies in our research and the studies about employment and unemployment among young people.

More than simply associating "Technical Middle School" to the needs of work and income, the students researched show that they know the limits and possibilities of technical education. The limits include not preparing for entering the university; problems related to the distribution of subjects within the school curriculum and their lack of integration; the additional year in relation to regular Middle School; the frustration in case of poor adaptation and/or identification with the course or the technical career proposed.

The possibilities include the variety of subjects, the workload, higher than that of regular Middle School, and the differentiated treatment by the school and the teachers; the training aimed at life and work, considering the direct relationship between technical courses and the young student-workers' daily life; the compensatory effect of Technical Education, having in mind that public schools are usually undervalued by society and the work market; the strengthening of the bond with the school, which arises from narrowing the relationships with classmates and teachers; the possibility to choose a specific technical course that works as a preparation for future career possibilities; the advantages offered by Technical Education to those who do not feel secure in following the same path as regular Middle School students, which are focused on entering the university.

From the limits and possibilities pointed out by the students researched, it can be concluded that there is a need to reflect about the intentions of public policies that leads to the widening of enrollments in Technical Education and the conditions in which it materializes in daily life, marked by the poor infrastructure of night classes in public Middle School.

As a conclusion, it should be observed that it is important to reflect more about the meanings attributed to Integrated Middle School by its students, most of them young workers who seek school to obtain the training that can ensure a future that will allow them to change present reality and who are trying to escape the future that was forced on them by capitalist meritocracy—having to work early in life to live, having to make a super-human effort to study and, finally, looking for personal motivation not to be abandoned by the school.

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NOTES

[1] Translated into English by Adriano Moraes Migliavacca (Lecttura Traduções).

[2] For this research, an initial survey was performed with Middle School students studying at night in public schools in Curitiba and metropolitan area that had the participation of 18 schools and 4,143 students. The schools were chosen for offering regular (non technical) Middle School, technical Middle School, integrated Middle School (integrated offer of Technical Education and Middle School) and Middle School in the *Proeja* modality. Based on initial indexes of this exploratory research, four fourth-year classes and the last year of Integrated Middle School were chosen: two more and two less numerous. The schools listed in Table 1 were chosen according to this criterion and these data were analyzed in this text.

[3] Here we identify the students researched with a code beginning in Q to indicate those who answered the questionnaire and FG to indicate those who participated in the focal groups.

[4] The need of more time to course completion is a characteristic of Integrated School in Paraná's public network. The four institutions researched had curricula of 4,000 lesson hours and 3,333 clock hours, distributed between general and specific subjects.

[5] Since teaching is not the object of this study, we suggest reading the works of Araújo (2008), which deals with teacher training for technical and technological education; Mathias (2011), who offers a journalistic work in which he tries to answer who is the teacher of technical education; and Kuenzer (2011), who studies teacher training for Middle Education.

[6] For a more thorough development of this issue, we suggest the article *O ensino médio no Brasil: desafios à matrícula e ao trabalho docente*, by Costa (2013).

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