



BRAZIL'S NEW HIGH SCHOOL REFORM: STUDENT VOICES, CURRICULUM CHANGE AND EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITY

A REFORMA DO NOVO ENSINO MÉDIO NO BRASIL: VOZES ESTUDANTIS, MUDANÇA CURRICULAR E DESIGUALDADE EDUCACIONAL

LA REFORMA DE LA NUEVA EDUCACIÓN SECUNDARIA EN BRASIL: VOCES ESTUDIANTILES, CAMBIO CURRICULAR Y DESIGUALDAD EDUCATIVA

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.19477396



Maria Alice Nunes Costa¹
Ana Carla de Oliveira Pinheiro²
Cecilia Cortés Rojas³
Daniel Teixeira dos Santos⁴

ABSTRACT

This article examines how public upper secondary school students in Brazil, with a focus on Rio de Janeiro's Serrana Fluminense Region, perceive and assess the New High School reform implemented in 2024, seeking to understand what these perceptions reveal about curriculum, educational inequality, and the legitimacy of the reform in territorially unequal contexts. The study adopts a mixed-methods approach and combines 300 valid questionnaires administered to third-year upper secondary students across 14 municipalities with 14 focus groups conducted using the Photovoice methodology. The analysis combined descriptive statistics, thematic coding, and integration of quantitative and qualitative data. The findings show that students' assessments of the reform are not scattered or

1 Doutora em Planejamento Urbano e Regional (IPPUR/UFRJ). E-mail: mariacahaves@id.uff.br

2 Doutora em Sociologia Política (UENF). E-mail: anacarlaopinho@gmail.com

3 Doutora em Ciências Sociais (UCH). E-mail: cecortez@id.uff.br

4 Doutor em Geografia Humana (USP). E-mail: teixeiradaniel@id.uff.br





random, but rather organised around relatively consistent clusters: criticism of the emptying out or disorganisation of content, questioning of teaching methods, the perception that the school is insufficient to prepare them for entry into higher education and for the future, the search for supplementary learning outside school, limited understanding of how the New High School reform operates, and perceptions of unequal comparison with private schooling. The findings also show that culture, arts, and sport emerge in students' accounts as relevant dimensions of a broader school education. The study argues that the New High School reform should be understood not merely as a formal curricular reorganisation, but as a policy whose intelligibility and legitimacy depend on how it is appropriated and judged by its intended subjects. By foregrounding student voice, the article contributes to debates on curriculum change, educational justice, and public upper secondary education in Brazil.

Keywords: New High School Reform; Educational Reform in Brazil; Rio de Janeiro's Serrana Fluminense Region; curriculum reform; educational inequality; student voice.

RESUMO

O artigo analisa como estudantes do ensino médio da rede pública no Brasil, com foco na Região Serrana Fluminense, Rio de Janeiro, percebem e avaliam o Novo Ensino Médio implantado em 2024, buscando compreender o que essas percepções revelam sobre currículo, desigualdade educacional e legitimidade da reforma em contextos territorialmente desiguais. A pesquisa adota abordagem quali-quantitativa e articula 300 questionários válidos, aplicados a estudantes do 3º ano em 14 municípios, com 14 grupos focais realizados com uso da metodologia Photovoice. A análise combinou estatística descritiva, codificação temática e integração entre dados quantitativos e qualitativos. Os resultados indicam que a avaliação estudantil da reforma não se distribui de forma dispersa, mas se organiza em núcleos relativamente consistentes: crítica ao esvaziamento ou à desorganização dos conteúdos, questionamento do método de ensino, percepção de insuficiência da escola para preparar para o ingresso no ensino superior e para o futuro, busca de formação complementar fora da escola, baixa compreensão do funcionamento do Novo Ensino Médio e comparação desigual com a escola privada. Os achados também evidenciam que cultura, arte e esporte aparecem, nas falas juvenis, como dimensões relevantes de uma formação escolar mais ampla. O estudo sustenta que o Novo Ensino Médio deve ser analisado não apenas como reorganização curricular formal, mas como política cuja inteligibilidade e legitimidade dependem da forma como é apropriada e julgada por seus destinatários. Ao privilegiar a voz dos estudantes, o artigo contribui para o debate sobre mudança curricular, justiça educacional e ensino médio público no Brasil.

Palavras-chave: Novo Ensino Médio; Reforma Educacional no Brasil; Região Serrana Fluminense; reforma curricular; desigualdade educacional; voz estudantil.

RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza cómo los estudiantes de bachillerato del sistema público brasileño, con especial atención a la región montañosa de Río de Janeiro, perciben y evalúan el nuevo currículo de





bachillerato implementado en 2024. Busca comprender qué revelan estas percepciones sobre el currículo, la desigualdad educativa y la legitimidad de la reforma en contextos territorialmente desiguales. La investigación adopta un enfoque de métodos mixtos (cualitativos y cuantitativos) y combina 300 cuestionarios válidos, aplicados a estudiantes de tercer año de bachillerato en 14 municipios, con 14 grupos focales realizados mediante la metodología Photovoice. El análisis combinó estadística descriptiva, codificación temática e integración de datos cuantitativos y cualitativos. Los resultados indican que la evaluación estudiantil de la reforma no es dispersa, sino que se organiza en torno a temas centrales relativamente consistentes: críticas al vaciamiento o desorganización de los contenidos, cuestionamiento de la metodología de enseñanza, percepción de la insuficiencia del centro para preparar a los estudiantes para el acceso a la educación superior y para el futuro, búsqueda de formación complementaria fuera del ámbito escolar, escaso conocimiento del funcionamiento del Nuevo Secundario y comparación desfavorable con los centros privados. Los hallazgos también muestran que la cultura, el arte y el deporte aparecen, en el discurso juvenil, como dimensiones relevantes de una educación escolar más amplia. El estudio sostiene que el Nuevo Secundario debe analizarse no solo como una reorganización curricular formal, sino como una política cuya inteligibilidad y legitimidad dependen de cómo sea apropiada y valorada por sus beneficiarios. Al dar protagonismo a la voz del alumnado, el artículo contribuye al debate sobre el cambio curricular, la justicia educativa y la educación secundaria pública en Brasil.

Palabras clave: Nuevo Secundario; Reforma Educativa en Brasil; Región Serrana Fluminense; reforma curricular; desigualdad educativa; voz estudiantil.

INTRODUCTION

Upper secondary education occupies a strategic position in the Brazilian educational system. It is at this stage that disputes over curriculum, the right to knowledge, preparation for the future, and the public role of the school itself become concentrated. The changes introduced by the so-called New High School reform brought these issues back to the centre of debate, affecting not only the formal design of the reform but also the core of school experience: what schools should teach, what kind of education they should provide, whom curricular flexibility serves, and to what extent recent changes expand or restrict the concrete opportunities available to public-school students.

With Law No. 14,945 of 31 July 2024, this debate was reopened on new terms, bringing general basic education, curricular pathways, and the articulation with vocational and technical education back into focus. Curriculum reforms, however, do not end with the legal





text. They acquire meaning in the everyday life of schools, where they are appropriated, interpreted, and assessed by those who experience them.

It is at this point that students' perceptions become analytically central. For a long time, debates on educational policy were conducted mainly from the perspective of policymakers, administrators, specialists, and normative documents. Although these dimensions are indispensable, they are not sufficient to understand the social reality of a reform. Schools are not merely sites for policy implementation; they are also spaces of interpretation, tension, and meaning-making. In the case of a recent and controversial change such as the New High School reform, listening to students does not simply mean adding illustrative testimonies to an already established discussion. It means recognising that student experience constitutes a central dimension of the policy's intelligibility. The sociologically relevant question therefore shifts from how the reform was conceived to how it is lived, understood, and assessed by its intended subjects.

This shift becomes even more important in contexts marked by territorial inequalities and long-standing limitations in educational provision. In the Serrana Fluminense Region of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, public upper secondary education is shaped by municipal differences, institutional precariousness, unequal access to cultural and educational resources, and youth trajectories strongly conditioned by territory. In such contexts, curriculum changes do not operate in a social vacuum. They affect concrete schools, situated youth, and future horizons already strained by prior inequalities. Analysing the New High School reform through the voices of public-school students in this region therefore makes it possible to observe not only the reception of the reform, but also the ways in which it is articulated with perceptions of quality, preparedness, insufficiency, inequality, and recognition.

It is within this framework that the central question of this article is posed: *how do public upper secondary school students in the Serrana Fluminense Region of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, assess the New High School reform implemented in 2024, and what does this assessment reveal about the reform?*



To answer this question, the article adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining 300 valid questionnaires administered to third-year public upper secondary students in 14 municipalities of the Serrana Fluminense Region of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, with 14 focus groups conducted using the Photovoice methodology. The research design combines descriptive breadth and interpretive depth, bringing together quantitative trends and qualitative clusters of meaning produced by the students themselves. This strategy makes it possible to examine not only what young people think about the New High School reform, but also how they critically construct this assessment on the basis of their school experiences.

The findings show that students' perceptions of the New High School reform are not scattered, but organised around relatively consistent clusters: criticism of the emptying out or disorganisation of content, questioning of teaching methods, the perception that the school is insufficient to prepare students for entry into higher education and for the future, the search for supplementary learning outside school, difficulty in understanding how the reform itself operates, comparison with private schooling, and demands for a broader education that includes culture, the arts, and sport. Taken together, these elements suggest that, in the context investigated, the reform tends to be experienced less as an expansion of opportunities and more as a process marked by pedagogical fragility, curricular uncertainty, and a loss of formative density.

Based on this problem, the article argues that the New High School reform should be analysed not only as a formal curricular reorganisation, but as a policy whose legitimacy depends on the ways it is appropriated and assessed by its intended subjects. By foregrounding student experience in a territorially unequal context, the article seeks to contribute to debates on curriculum, educational justice, and public upper secondary education in contemporary Brazil.





1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The analysis of the New High School reform cannot be restricted to the legal text, the formal curricular design, or the normative debate conducted among policymakers, administrators, and specialists. With the enactment of Law No. 14,945 of 31 July 2024, the reorganisation of this stage once again brought into tension the distribution between general basic education, curricular pathways, and its articulation with vocational and technical education, placing the public meaning of the school curriculum back at the centre of debate. Educational reforms, however, do not end at the level of prescription. They gain materiality in everyday school life, where they are appropriated, translated, negotiated, and often contested by subjects situated in unequal institutional and territorial contexts. It is at this point that students' perceptions cease to be secondary and become a central analytical route for understanding the social legitimacy of the policy, its concrete effects, and its lived limits.

This formulation finds support, first, in the “student voice” literature, which repositions students as qualified interpreters of school and of the reforms that affect them. Cook-Sather (2006) argues that student voice does not refer merely to a repertoire of consultation techniques, but to an epistemological and political shift. Rather than treating students as passive recipients of change, the point is to recognise them as subjects capable of producing relevant knowledge about school experience, curriculum, and reform processes. In a similar direction, Levin (2000) argues that educational policies and reforms lose democratic depth and explanatory power when they dispense with the participation of those who are their main intended subjects. From this perspective, student voice is not reduced to the expression of opinions; it acquires the status of an epistemological category, shifting students from the position of objects of intervention to that of subjects who interpret, qualify, and potentially contest the meanings of school.

This discussion is further developed by Fielding (2001), for whom listening to students only acquires critical force when it moves beyond instrumental use and begins to challenge hierarchies, pedagogical priorities, and institutionalised forms of authority. His





argument is decisive because it prevents a trivialised appropriation of the idea of “giving students a voice.” In this horizon, listening to them does not simply mean collecting impressions about school, but admitting that their interpretations may challenge the organisational and curricular foundations of the school institution itself. In the same direction, Rudduck and Flutter (2004) argue that consulting students expands the intelligibility of teaching and learning processes, provided it is not treated as an episodic or decorative gesture, but as a practice that reconfigures the production of knowledge about school life. The theoretical value of student voice thus lies less in the rhetorical inclusion of the student in the debate than in the recognition that student experience reveals dimensions of reform that remain invisible to an exclusively technical, administrative, or legal gaze.

However, it is not enough to assert the importance of students’ “voice” in generic terms. Lundy (2007), in a reinterpretation of Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, warns that voice, in isolation, is insufficient: substantive participation requires four articulated dimensions—space, voice, audience, and influence. This is a particularly fruitful formulation because it transforms a normative principle of listening into an analytical architecture of participation. It is therefore not enough for students to be invited to express themselves; institutional conditions must also exist for them to formulate their perspectives, express them, be effectively heard, and have some degree of influence over decision-making processes. The strength of this conception lies precisely in preventing student listening from being converted into a subsequent legitimising ritual or into a merely symbolic gesture of inclusion.

In light of Lundy, the centrality of student voice in the debate on the New High School reform acquires a more rigorous meaning. The theoretical question is not simply whether the reform mentions young people, invokes protagonism, or mobilises the vocabulary of choice. The decisive question is whether it recognises students as effective interlocutors in the definition, interpretation, and evaluation of the policy. In this way, student voice operates not only as an interpretive resource for school experience, but also as a criterion of the democratic legitimacy of the reform itself. Policies formulated in the name of young people may retain





low participatory density if they do not institutionally incorporate their word, their audience, and their influence. The problem thus ceases to be only pedagogical and also becomes political: who is able to speak with weight about school and about the reform that reorganises their formative experience.

The second axis concerns curricular reform as “policy in enactment”. Ball, Maguire, and Braun (2012) show that educational policies are not implemented in a linear way; they are enacted, that is, performed, translated, and reworked by actors situated in specific school contexts. This notion shifts the analysis from the purely legal level to the terrain of concrete mediations: available resources, institutional histories, professional cultures, organisational arrangements, and territorial inequalities. Rather than assuming that policy “arrives ready-made” at school, the policy enactment approach shows that its effective form depends on the interpretations and accommodations produced within institutions. A recent curricular reform does not exist only as a normative text; it acquires social existence as it is translated into concrete practices, priorities, temporalities, and classifications.

Converging with this perspective, Spillane, Reiser, and Reimer (2002), as well as Spillane (2004), propose understanding implementation as a process of sense-making, in which school actors assign meaning to policies based on their cognitive and organisational repertoires. Implementation, from this perspective, is not a merely administrative problem, but an interpretive process. This is theoretically decisive for the study of the New High School reform because it prevents its evaluation from being limited to the internal coherence of the legislation or to the reform’s declared intentions. Curricular policies that alter the distribution of school knowledge, reorganise pathways, and promise flexibility must also be examined in terms of their practical intelligibility: how they are understood, what experiences they produce, what tensions they trigger, and what meanings they assume for those who live through them. Students’ perceptions, in this framework, are not external to the policy; they are part of the very process through which the reform is socially constituted.

The third axis articulates curriculum, justice, and youth. In contemporary curriculum debates, Young (2013) criticises approaches that shift curriculum too far toward generic





competences, immediate preferences, or students' fragmented experiences. By contrast, he argues that the school has a public responsibility to guarantee access to what he calls "powerful knowledge." His contribution is particularly important to the debate on the New High School reform because it restores the central question: what knowledge should schools guarantee to all, regardless of social origin, territory, or trajectory? Young's analytical strength lies in showing that the democratisation of education cannot be conceived against knowledge, but through the right of access to forms of knowledge that broaden intellectual, social, and political horizons. This makes it possible to theoretically requalify the debate on curricular flexibility: the issue is not merely to diversify pathways, but to ask whether the reorganisation of schooling preserves or weakens the common right to knowledge.

This discussion gains broader reach when articulated with Fraser's theory of justice (2008), for whom contemporary conflicts involve at least three dimensions: redistribution, recognition, and representation. Applied to education, this formulation makes it possible to argue that curricular reforms may fail not only because they distribute formative opportunities unequally, but also because they disregard the experiences and social positions of their intended subjects and restrict their capacity to participate in defining what counts as valid education. The problem of curriculum, therefore, is not merely technical-pedagogical. It is also a problem of justice: who has access to which forms of knowledge, who is recognised as a legitimate subject of policy, and who can participate in defining the public meanings of schooling. Fraser's contribution is especially fruitful because it prevents the debate on the New High School reform from being reduced to a controversy over institutional design and reinscribes it within the broader terrain of disputes over equality, recognition, and voice.

Finally, incorporating the debate on youth prevents the student from appearing in the framework as an abstract and homogeneous category. Dayrell (2003) proposes understanding young people as social subjects whose relationship with school is shaped by experiences, belongings, sociabilities, expectations, and particular ways of constructing meaning. This perspective is theoretically strategic because it shifts the gaze from the formal pupil to concrete, situated, and heterogeneous youth. Upper secondary education then ceases to be



conceived merely as an administrative stage of schooling and comes to be understood as a space in which education, recognition, future projects, and social experience are articulated. Thus, students' evaluation of a recent reform such as the New High School reform cannot be treated as a superficial reaction or episodic resistance, but as a situated production of meaning rooted in youth trajectories and socially constructed expectations.

Taken together, these three axes support a central thesis: the New High School reform must be analysed not only as curricular prescription, but as policy in enactment, whose legitimacy depends on how it is appropriated, understood, and judged by its intended subjects. In this context, student voice ceases to be secondary and becomes not only an empirical resource, but also an epistemological and political category for examining curricular intelligibility, educational justice, and the democratic density of the reform. By articulating student voice, policy enactment, and curricular justice, the theoretical framework of the article makes it possible to understand why student experience is not an illustrative supplement to the analysis, but a constitutive dimension of the social reality of the policy.

2. METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining a structured questionnaire with focus groups using the Photovoice methodology. On the quantitative side, 300 valid questionnaires completed by third-year public upper secondary students in 14 municipalities of the Serrana Fluminense Region of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, were analysed. The instrument contained 74 closed-ended questions distributed across dimensions such as student profile, family situation, learning, relationship with school, vulnerabilities, life in the city, and future perspectives; 18 items allowed multiple responses. The quantitative analysis relied on descriptive statistics and tests for the comparison of proportions.

On the qualitative side, 14 focus groups were conducted, one in each participating school, covering the same empirical universe of 14 municipalities in the Serrana Fluminense Region of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and generating a corpus later organised in NVivo. The





analysis was structured around 65 thematic codes distributed across 15 categories, which made it possible to capture recurrences, tensions, silences, and differences across school and territorial contexts.

The most innovative aspect of the qualitative strand lay in the integration of focus groups and Photovoice. Rather than using photography as an illustrative resource, the study incorporated it as a language of data production, expression, and analysis. Although the methodology is in dialogue with its classic formulation in Wang and Burris (1997), it was mobilised here through an original path of critical expansion developed by Costa (2020, 2021), in which Photovoice is understood as an “archaeology of gazes and invisibilised forms of knowledge,” articulated with the sociology of absences, the evidentiary paradigm, the optical unconscious, and photography as expression. From this perspective, Photovoice goes beyond merely documentary or linear uses and operates instead as a critical, aesthetic, and participatory practice capable of making visible silences, traces, details, and symbolic layers of social experience. Photography thus ceases to occupy an accessory position and becomes organically integrated into the focus group, expanding the field of what can be seen and said. As Costa (2026) argues, when conversation and photography are brought into articulation, the real becomes more legible because it reveals different layers of the same phenomenon; the image ceases to be an appendix to the text and begins to dispute the status of data, argument, and language.

Quantitative data collection was carried out through a digital form accessible by computer or mobile phone, with multiple-choice questions designed to capture both students’ characteristics and their perceptions of school, territory, opportunities, and the future. In the qualitative component, focus groups were conceived not only as a data collection technique, but as a collective device for the production of meaning. From this perspective, the interest did not lie exclusively in individual opinions, but in the ways agreements, disagreements, hesitations, and disputes emerged within the conversation itself. As Costa (2025) argues, the richness of the focus group lies precisely in its relational dimension: each statement acquires





meaning in relation to the others, and the researcher does not merely collect contents, but interprets the collective scene in its social thickness.

Quantitative data were analysed through descriptive statistics and tests for the comparison of proportions. Qualitative data—both speech and images—were organised and coded in NVivo within an analytical architecture that made it possible to integrate verbal and visual materials into a single system of categories. The use of the software proved consistent with the methodological conception of the study itself, as it enabled cross-reading between photographs, narratives, and emergent themes.

3. RESULTS

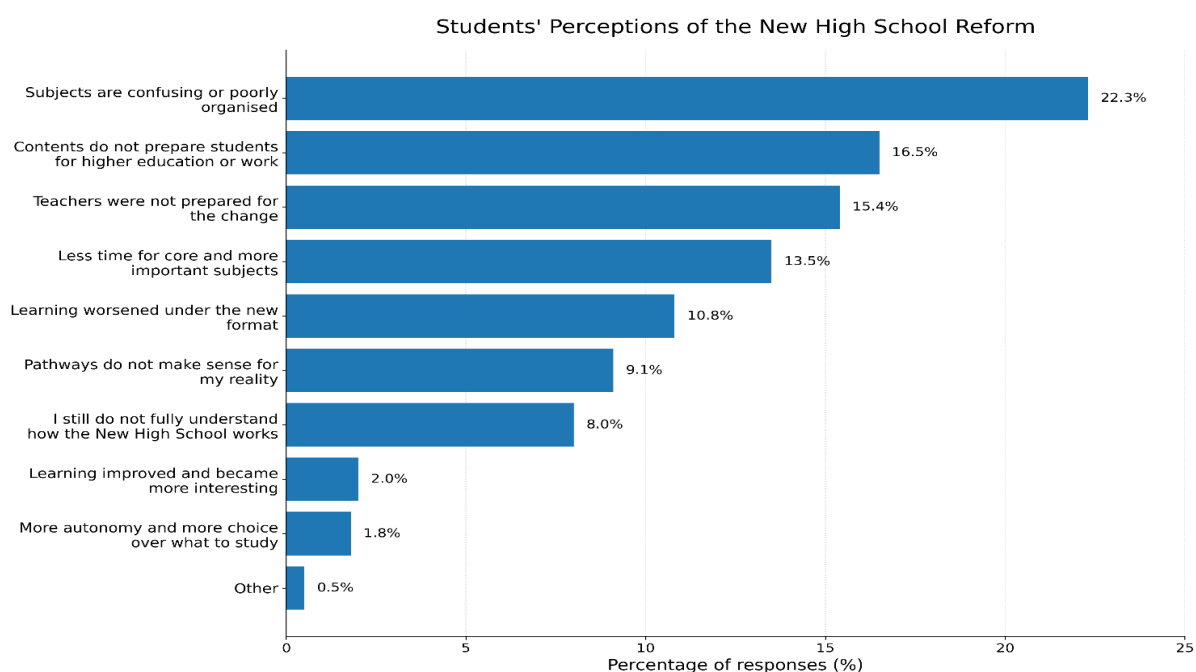
3.1 Quantitative trends in students' assessment of the New High School reform

The quantitative results indicate that students' assessment of the New High School reform implemented in 2024 is predominantly critical. Graph 1 shows that students' responses are concentrated mainly around perceptions associated with the weakening of content, the school's insufficiency in providing academic preparation, and the need to seek supplementary learning outside the school environment. Also prominent are references to difficulty in understanding how the reform operates, criticism of teaching methods, and perceptions of inequality in relation to private schooling. Rather than a scattered distribution of opinions, what emerges is a relatively consistent pattern of negative assessment, suggesting that the New High School reform is perceived less as an expansion of opportunities and more as a curricular reorganisation marked by pedagogical fragilities and formative uncertainties.





Graph 1. The New High School reform implemented in 2024, in the opinion of students in the Serrana Fluminense Region, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 2025.



Source: Prepared by the author based on the quantitative results of the study.

This quantitative pattern gains greater depth when read in conjunction with the qualitative material. The responses marked in the questionnaire not only indicate general trends, but also correspond to the meanings developed by students in the focus groups. The integration of these two levels makes it possible to observe that what appears numerically as the frequency of responses is translated, at the level of lived experience, into recurring perceptions of a loss of curricular density, low policy intelligibility, the insufficiency of public schooling, and unequal conditions of education. Because the methodological design of the study combines 300 valid questionnaires and 14 focus groups across 14 municipalities, this convergence strengthens the consistency of the findings and prevents the quantitative strand from functioning merely as an isolated description or the qualitative strand from appearing as an illustrative commentary.



3.2 Qualitative clusters of student criticism

At the qualitative level, students' perceptions of the New High School reform are likewise not dispersed, but organised into relatively consistent clusters of criticism and evaluation of school experience. First, students' accounts converge around a perception of the emptying out or disorganisation of content, associated with the view that reorganised subjects and curricular components “do not add anything” and were “introduced for the sake of it.”

Second, criticism emerges regarding teaching methods, indicating that the problem is not limited to what is taught, but also concerns how teaching is delivered and experienced in everyday school life. Added to this is the perception that the school, on its own, is not sufficient to prepare students for entry into higher education and for the future, which encourages them to seek preparatory courses, private courses, and learning opportunities outside school. Unequal understanding of how the New High School reform itself operates also appears, suggesting low intelligibility of the reform among its intended subjects. Finally, students' accounts reveal that this assessment is shaped by comparison with private schooling, by perceptions of inequalities in access to educational resources, and by criticism of the lack of culture, the arts, and sport, understood as relevant dimensions of a broader school education. Taken together, these elements indicate that, at the qualitative level, the New High School reform is experienced less as an expansion of possibilities and more as a process marked by a loss of curricular meaning, pedagogical fragility, and formative insufficiency.

Table 1. Analytical consolidation of the qualitative results on the New High School reform.

Qualitative cluster	Recurring evidence in students' accounts	Analytical meaning
Subject content	“they took away subjects we used to have”; “it was left unfinished”; “these subjects do not add anything”	The New High School reform is perceived as a reorganisation that empties out content and weakens the consistency of school education.
Teaching methods	“the method does not help either”; “the way it is being delivered does not help”; “learning got worse”	Student criticism is directed not only at content, but also at the concrete way teaching is delivered and



Search for knowledge outside school	“I have to take a prep course outside school if I want to succeed”; “if she studies only at school, she will not get anywhere”; “those who know, know why they are taking a prep course”	experienced in everyday school life. The school is no longer perceived as a sufficient educational space, leading students to seek compensatory strategies outside it.
Understanding of the New High School reform	“I still do not really understand how the New High School works”; “nobody explained it properly”; “we are just doing it”	The policy shows low intelligibility for its own intended subjects, which weakens both its appropriation and its everyday legitimacy.
Preparation for higher education and the future	“It is not enough”; “school will not help students pass the ENEM”; “we have to focus on the ENEM or study outside school”	The usefulness of the New High School reform is measured, above all, by its ability to prepare students for higher education and for the future.
Inequality in relation to private education	“Wow, are they really going to compete with me?”; “students in private schools can pay for writing classes, maths classes, and literature classes”	Criticism of the New High School reform is shaped by social comparison and by the perception of inequality between public and private education.
Culture, arts, and sport	“there is very little court space”; “there is no cinema”; “there is no theatre”; “only football... there are others, private, ballet, karate... but they are private”; “there is a lack of sports resources”; “there are other private courses... but they are private”; “the cultural events we used to have in the city included the literary festival, which ended precisely because there was no support”; “it is very limited. The only thing the school gives us to have fun is the court...”	The scarcity of facilities, activities, and institutional support shows that student criticism goes beyond the formal curriculum and extends to the conditions for a broader cultural, artistic, and sporting education.

Source: Prepared by the author based on the qualitative material produced in the focus groups.

Note: The students’ quotations were originally in Portuguese and have been translated into English by the authors for the purposes of this article.



Table 1 synthesises the main qualitative clusters identified in the focus groups and shows that student criticism of the New High School reform is not concentrated on a single aspect of the reform. On the contrary, it articulates content, teaching methods, preparation for the future, policy intelligibility, inequality between school sectors, and the lack of broader conditions of education. This systematisation is important because it shows that students do not formulate a generic rejection of change, but rather construct a relatively coherent reading of the concrete limits of the reform in public schooling. The table also shows that the usefulness of the New High School reform is often assessed by young people through a practical and socially significant reference point: its ability to provide consistent education, prepare students for entry into higher education, and offer more equitable conditions for future projection. More than simply bringing together examples of quotations, the table makes visible the relationship between empirical recurrence and analytical meaning, reinforcing that students' perceptions of the reform are structured, argumentative, and socially situated.

3.3 Convergences between the quantitative and qualitative findings

Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative results converge in the same analytical direction. The questionnaire shows that critical assessments are concentrated around specific dimensions, while the focus groups deepen the meaning of these perceptions and show how they are shaped through the concrete experience of public schooling. The articulation between these two levels indicates that, in the context investigated, the New High School reform tends to be perceived less as an expansion of possibilities and more as a curricular reorganisation marked by a loss of formative density, pedagogical fragility, low intelligibility, and insufficient capacity to prepare students for higher education and for the future.

This convergence is particularly significant because, from the outset, the study was designed to integrate descriptive statistics, focus groups using Photovoice, and thematic coding in NVivo. For this reason, the value of the findings does not lie merely in the juxtaposition of numbers and statements, but in the fact that both point to the same diagnosis:



the reform, as experienced by public-school students in the Serrana Fluminense Region, has not yet established itself as a clear, socially convincing, and pedagogically robust educational experience. The strongest result of this section, therefore, is not the mere enumeration of criticisms, but the demonstration that they display empirical consistency, qualitative recurrence, and analytical coherence when considered as a whole.

4. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that student criticism of the New High School reform cannot be reduced to discomfort in the face of a recent change, nor can it be read as an episodic reaction to a curricular reorganisation still in the process of adjustment. The data reveal something deeper: among public-school students in the Serrana Fluminense Region, there is a perception that the reform has weakened the intelligibility of school experience, reduced the density of curricular content, and made the school's ability to fulfil its public educational promise more uncertain. The core issue, therefore, lies not only in the existence of the reform itself, but in the way it is experienced by its intended subjects. In this shift, the problem ceases to be merely normative and acquires greater sociological relevance: what matters is understanding how an educational policy, once it reaches the school, is appropriated, translated, felt, and judged by those who experience it in everyday life.

At this point, the incorporation of the student voice perspective is decisive. Cook-Sather (2006), Levin (2000), Fielding (2001), and Rudduck and Flutter (2004) provide a theoretical framework that prevents student speech from being reduced to a peripheral impression or an illustrative comment. Students do not appear here as an accessory source of opinion, but as subjects capable of interpreting policy on the basis of their concrete experience of its implementation. This changes the analytical nature of the discussion. When they state that certain subjects “do not add anything,” that the curricular reorganisation was “introduced for the sake of it,” or that the school is no longer sufficient to prepare them for entry into higher education, these young people are not merely expressing dissatisfaction. They are





diagnosing a loss of coherence between the promise of flexibility, protagonism, and expanded opportunities, on the one hand, and the reality of an education perceived as diluted, disorganised, and insufficient, on the other. The force of these statements lies precisely in the way they reveal the policy from its point of contact with concrete school life.

This argument gains greater density when articulated with Lundy's formulation (2007). The author shows that participation cannot be reduced to the abstract existence of "voice," but depends on the articulation of space, voice, audience, and influence. This framework is particularly fruitful for analysing the New High School reform because it shifts the discussion from the rhetorical repertoire of youth protagonism to the substantive problem of participation. The data suggest that students were called upon to live through a reform whose foundations were not always sufficiently explained to them and over whose definition they exercised no effective influence. In this sense, recurring incomprehension regarding how the New High School reform works is not a secondary detail. It signals the democratic fragility of the policy itself. A reform that alters school time, pathways, content, and expectations without producing intelligibility among its intended subjects reveals a deficit not only of institutional communication, but also of political recognition. Students are called upon to adapt, but are not fully recognised as legitimate interlocutors in defining what counts as valid school education.

It is precisely here that the literature on policy enactment offers an important analytical gain. Ball, Maguire, and Braun (2012) show that policies are not simply implemented; they are interpreted, translated, and materialised in specific contexts marked by institutional limitations, school cultures, inequalities, and local routines. Spillane, Reiser, and Reimer (2002), in turn, emphasise the centrality of sense-making processes in the practical constitution of policy. Read in light of these authors, the findings of this study suggest that the New High School reform appears, more than a formally instituted curricular reform, as a policy whose materialisation has been marked by low intelligibility and by fractures between official design and concrete experience. What students narrate is not merely disagreement with the text of the reform, but the sense of living in a school in which the links between





content, methods, objectives, and future aspirations have become more opaque. From this perspective, the policy does not fail only because it encounters difficulties of execution; it becomes destabilised because it loses its capacity to make sense to those who should recognise it as a formative experience.

This loss of meaning appears with particular clarity in criticism of the hollowing out of curricular content. Here, Young's contribution (2013) is central. By reframing curriculum debate through the lens of the right to knowledge, the author makes it possible to understand that the democratisation of education is not achieved through the mere flexibilisation of pathways, but through guaranteeing common access to socially powerful forms of knowledge capable of broadening intellectual and social horizons. The critical point, therefore, is not the existence of curricular differentiation in itself, but the risk that such differentiation will produce formative impoverishment precisely for those who depend most on public schooling as a means of access to knowledge. When students point out that part of the curriculum "does not add anything" or that content was removed without any replacement perceived as consistent, they indicate that the reform is experienced less as expansion and more as reduction. What is at stake, then, is not mere resistance to new pedagogical arrangements, but the perception that the school may be failing to secure what historically justified its centrality: relatively common access to knowledge that would not otherwise be available.

This problem becomes even more serious when viewed through Fraser's theory of justice (2008). The author offers a particularly fruitful analytical tool for interpreting the findings because it prevents the controversy surrounding the New High School reform from being reduced to a technical debate over curricular architecture. What the data suggest is that student criticism simultaneously mobilises the three dimensions proposed by Fraser: redistribution, recognition, and representation. There is an evident redistributive dimension when students perceive that the school, on its own, is no longer sufficient to prepare them adequately for entry into higher education and for the future, which increases dependence on external resources such as preparatory courses, supplementary lessons, and family support networks. This deepens inequalities, since it disproportionately benefits those who possess





greater economic, cultural, and informational capital. There is also a problem of recognition, insofar as the concrete experience of public-school youth does not seem to have occupied a central place in defining what would count as a desirable, relevant, and viable form of education. Finally, there is a problem of representation, because students appear more as targets of policy than as subjects with effective influence over its construction, interpretation, and evaluation. Viewed from this angle, the New High School reform cannot be analysed only as a curricular reform; it must be examined as an arena of dispute over educational justice.

The recurrent comparison with private schooling deepens this argument and makes the relational dimension of inequality explicit. Students do not evaluate the New High School reform in the abstract, but in confrontation with a structurally stratified educational system. When they ask, directly or implicitly, whether they will be able to compete on equal terms with students from private schools, they expose a decisive dimension of the problem: curricular reforms do not operate on neutral ground. In deeply unequal societies, changes in the organisation of schooling produce differential effects depending on the social position of subjects. This means that the same policy may be presented as innovation at the normative level while being experienced as disadvantage at the concrete level. Student criticism, therefore, expresses not only subjective insecurity; it translates a sharp perception that educational inequality may be reconfigured through the curriculum. The fear of future disadvantage thus appears as an index of social lucidity rather than youthful exaggeration.

It is also important to highlight that students do not restrict their evaluation to the curriculum in a narrow sense. References to the absence or insufficiency of culture, the arts, sport, and collective experiences reveal a broader conception of school education. This point is theoretically relevant because it prevents student criticism from being interpreted only in terms of instrumental preparation for examinations. What emerges from the data is a demand for a school with broader formative density, capable of articulating knowledge, sociability, belonging, expression, and a horizon of future. In this direction, upper secondary education ceases to be perceived merely as the final stage of basic education and reappears as a decisive space of youth recognition. The reform is criticised, therefore, not only because it alters





subjects or pathways, but because it seems insufficient in relation to what students understand a public school should offer as an experience of integral education.

The dialogue with Dayrell (2003) helps to consolidate this point. By conceiving young people as concrete social subjects rather than as a homogeneous or abstract category, the author makes it possible to understand that evaluations of the New High School reform are shaped by trajectories, expectations, territories, sociabilities, and unequal material conditions. Student criticism is not external to the condition of youth; it emerges precisely from the tension between the institutional promise of the school and the social experience of the young people who depend on it to project their futures. In this sense, upper secondary education does not operate merely as an administrative arrangement for the completion of basic schooling. It organises temporalities, produces expectations, distributes recognition, and functions as a symbolic mediation between present and future. When this mediation is weakened, what is shaken is not only confidence in a specific reform, but the very credibility of the school as an institution capable of sustaining horizons of mobility, belonging, and dignity.

The robustness of the findings lies precisely in showing that the problem cannot be reduced to isolated difficulties of transition, communication, or teacher adaptation. What can be observed is a deeper mismatch between reform design, concrete school experience, and young people's educational expectations. This mismatch helps explain why, in the context investigated, the New High School reform tends to be perceived less as an expansion of choice and more as an uncertain reorganisation of a school system already operating under historical conditions of inequality, precariousness, and institutional limitation. In this scenario, the promise of flexibility loses part of its emancipatory force and comes to be viewed with suspicion: flexibility for whom, under what conditions, and with what guarantees of access to knowledge? The question that emerges from the data is not whether the school should change, but what kind of change is compatible with curricular justice, formative density, and democratic legitimacy.

In this way, the main analytical contribution of this study lies in demonstrating that student criticism of the New High School reform should not be treated as a peripheral reaction





to policy, but as a constitutive element of its own social intelligibility. By articulating student voice, policy enactment, curricular justice, and the sociology of youth, the article shows that student experience is a theoretically significant site for evaluating educational reforms. What students reveal, with notable consistency, is that a curricular policy does not become legitimate solely through its legal formulation, its rhetoric of innovation, or its promise of flexibility. It must also produce meaning, guarantee substantive access to knowledge, recognise its intended subjects as legitimate actors, and sustain minimally equitable conditions of education. When this does not occur, the reform may exist in legal terms, but its pedagogical and democratic legitimacy remains in dispute.

CONCLUSION

This article has shown that students' assessment of the New High School reform cannot be treated as a circumstantial reaction to a recent change, nor as a simple form of youthful resistance to curricular innovation. In the context investigated, students' perceptions reveal deeper tensions between educational reform, school experience, and educational inequality. By analysing the voices of public-school students in the Serrana Fluminense Region, the study showed that criticism of the New High School reform is consistently organised around substantive issues: the fragility or disorganisation of content, pedagogical insufficiency, the low intelligibility of the reform, the perception of inadequate preparation for entry into higher education, and unequal comparison with private schooling.

These findings make it possible to argue that the central problem of the reform, within the universe investigated, is not limited to the formal architecture of the curriculum. What is at stake is the policy's ability to produce meaning for its intended subjects and to maintain public schooling as a socially recognised space of consistent education. When students state that school is not enough, that certain curricular components "do not add anything," or that it is necessary to seek outside the school what should be ensured within it, they make visible a mismatch between the design of the reform and lived school experience. The article's





contribution lies precisely in showing that this mismatch is not peripheral: it affects the pedagogical legitimacy of the policy itself.

The discussion also indicated that the New High School reform must be understood beyond the official vocabulary of flexibility and protagonism. In the case examined, the reform appears less as a substantive expansion of choice and more as a curricular reorganisation whose intelligibility remains partial and whose effects are perceived under the sign of uncertainty. In territorially unequal contexts, this uncertainty is not neutral. It tends to weigh more heavily on students who depend on public schooling as their main means of access to knowledge, institutional recognition, and future projection. In this sense, the article argues that the analysis of the New High School reform must be repositioned within the terrain of the right to knowledge, educational justice, and the effective listening to youth.

By foregrounding student experience, this study contributes to debates on curriculum and educational policy by showing that the legitimacy of a reform is not defined solely by its normative formulation or by its declared objectives. It also depends on the way it is appropriated, understood, and judged by those who live through it. Student criticism, therefore, should not be read as a marginal comment, but as a socially situated diagnosis of the current limits of public schooling and of the contradictions of a reform that, at least in the context investigated, has not yet established itself as a clear, equitable, and socially convincing formative experience.

As a research agenda, it will be important to follow the effects of the New High School reform over time, precisely because it is a recent policy that is still being consolidated and remains subject to changes in its implementation. Future studies may examine more precisely its impacts on school retention, performance, access to higher education, expectations for the future, and differences across territories, school networks, and modes of provision.

In terms of public policy, the article's results suggest several important implications. First, the reform needs to be accompanied by actions aimed at curricular intelligibility, with clear information for students and families about the logic of school organisation, its





objectives, and its pathways. Second, it is necessary to restore the centrality of the right to knowledge, preventing curricular flexibility from resulting, in practice, in the hollowing out of content and in greater dependence on external preparation strategies. Third, the findings indicate the need to strengthen public schooling pedagogically, with attention to teacher education, teaching conditions, and the quality of learning. Finally, student criticism of the absence or insufficiency of culture, the arts, and sport shows that the debate on upper secondary education should not be restricted to the rearrangement of subjects, but should incorporate a broader conception of education capable of recognising young people as subjects of knowledge, sociability, and the future.

AGRADECIMENTOS

Os autores agradecem ao Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico (CNPq), no âmbito da Bolsa de Produtividade em Pesquisa, e à Fundação Carlos Chagas Filho de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (FAPERJ), no âmbito do edital APQ1, da Bolsa de Pós-Doutorado Sênior e do Programa de Treinamento e Capacitação Técnica (TCT), pelo apoio concedido ao projeto “Os Desafios do Ensino Médio para Jovens da Rede Pública da Região Serrana Fluminense”. Agradecem, igualmente, à equipe do Laboratório de Políticas Públicas, Governança e Desenvolvimento Regional (LADER/UFF), cuja atuação foi fundamental para a realização da pesquisa, especialmente no trabalho de campo, na sistematização dos dados e nas reflexões coletivas que sustentaram este estudo.

REFERENCES

BALL, S. J.; MAGUIRE, M.; BRAUN, A. **How schools do policy: policy enactments in secondary schools**. London: Routledge, 2012.

BRASIL. Lei nº 14.945, de 31 de julho de 2024. Altera a Lei nº 9.394, de 20 de dezembro de 1996 (Lei de Diretrizes e Bases da Educação Nacional), a fim de definir diretrizes para o ensino médio, e as Leis nº 14.818, de 16 de janeiro de 2024, nº 12.711, de 29 de agosto de 2012, nº 11.096, de 13 de janeiro de 2005, e nº 14.640, de 31 de julho de 2023. Brasília, DF: Presidência da República, 2024.





COOK-SATHER, A. Sound, presence, and power: “student voice” in educational research and reform. **Curriculum Inquiry**, v. 36, n. 4, p. 359-390, 2006.

COSTA, M. A. N. A metodologia photovoice como arqueologia de olhares e saberes invisibilizados. **LexCult**, Rio de Janeiro, v. 4, n. 3, p. 36-56, set./dez. 2020.

COSTA, M. A. N. Fotografia como arqueologia de olhares e saberes. In: COSTA, M. A. N. **Qual o caminho do Brasil? Instituições, cultura e política no século XXI**. Curitiba: Appris, 2021. v. 1, p. 200-220.

COSTA, M. A. N. **Olhares da juventude serrana**. 1. ed. Rio de Janeiro: Letra Capital, 2025.

COSTA, M. A. N. Photovoice expanded: critical visual and participatory frameworks. **Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research**, 2026. DOI: 10.1080/13511610.2026.2628936.

DAYRELL, J. O jovem como sujeito social. **Revista Brasileira de Educação**, n. 24, p. 40-52, set./dez. 2003.

FIELDING, M. Students as radical agents of change. **Journal of Educational Change**, v. 2, n. 2, p. 123-141, 2001.

FLUTTER, J.; RUDDUCK, J. **Consulting pupils: what’s in it for schools?** London: RoutledgeFalmer, 2004.

FRASER, N. **Scales of justice: reimagining political space in a globalizing world**. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008.

JOERKE, G. A. Educação politécnica e a formação do currículo integrado no ensino médio. **Revista OWL (OWL Journal) - Revista Interdisciplinar de Ensino e Educação**, v. 1, n. 2, p. 82-95, 2023. DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.8164632.

LEVIN, B. Putting students at the centre in education reform. **Journal of Educational Change**, v. 1, n. 2, p. 155-172, 2000.

LUNDY, L. ‘Voice’ is not enough: conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. **British Educational Research Journal**, v. 33, n. 6, p. 927-942, 2007.



REVISTA OWL (*OWL Journal*)

www.revistaowl.com.br – ISSN: 2965-2634



SPILLANE, J. P. **Standards deviation: how schools misunderstand education policy.** Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004.

SPILLANE, J. P.; REISER, B. J.; REIMER, T. Policy implementation and cognition: reframing and refocusing implementation research. **Review of Educational Research**, v. 72, n. 3, p. 387-431, 2002.

YOUNG, M. Overcoming the crisis in curriculum theory: a knowledge-based approach. **Journal of Curriculum Studies**, v. 45, n. 2, p. 101-118, 2013.

Recebido em: 13/03/2026

Aprovado em: 26/03/2026

Publicado em: 08/04/2026

Revista *OWL Journal*, Campina Grande - PB, v.4 n.4 (2026) - ISSN 2965-2634

A Revista *OWL Journal* está licenciada com uma Licença Creative Commons Atribuição (CC BY)

