

THE SCHOOL FOR TEENAGERS: SIGNIFICATIONS AND MEANINGS DURING THE PANDEMIC¹

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ABSTRACT: This qualitative research aimed to understand and discuss, from the Historical-Cultural Theory, what meanings are attributed to school by adolescents from private and public schools in Uberlândia-MG during the COVID-19 pandemic. Nine high school students between 15 and 18 years old participated. Between September and October 2020, we carried out individual semi-structured interviews, remotely. Through content analysis, we built five categories about the functions assigned to schools by adolescents: 1) Space for socialization and preparation for life; 2) Content learning context; 3) Space for academic and professional (un)preparation; 4) Organizing place; 5) Support space. However, especially for students in public schools, the fulfillment of most of these roles is being insufficiently carried out during the pandemic, revealing the inequalities and injustices involved in access to education. Furthermore, the importance of guaranteeing the right to schooling for the integral development of adolescents is highlighted, providing for the appropriation of knowledge and critical reflection on reality.

Keywords: High school students; historic-cultural psychology; meanings and senses.

A ESCOLA PARA ADOLESCENTES: SIGNIFICAÇÕES E SENTIDOS DURANTE A PANDEMIA

RESUMO: Esta pesquisa qualitativa objetivou compreender e discutir, a partir da Teoria Histórico-Cultural, quais os sentidos atribuídos à escola por adolescentes de escolas particulares e públicas de Uberlândia-MG durante a pandemia de COVID-19. Participaram nove estudantes de ensino médio, entre 15 e 18 anos. Realizamos, entre setembro e outubro de 2020, entrevistas semiestruturadas individuais, de maneira remota. Por meio de análise de conteúdo, construímos cinco categorias sobre os sentidos atribuídos às escolas pelos(as) adolescentes: 1) Espaço de socialização e preparação para a vida; 2) Contexto de aprendizado de conteúdos; 3) Espaço de (des)preparação acadêmica e profissional; 4) Lugar organizador; 5) Espaço de apoio. Entretanto, principalmente para estudantes de escolas públicas, o cumprimento da maioria desses papéis está sendo efetivado de maneira insuficiente durante a pandemia, escancarando as desigualdades e injustiças envolvidas no acesso ao ensino. Ademais, destaca-se a relevância da garantia do direito à

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escolarização para o desenvolvimento integral de adolescentes, propiciando a apropriação de conhecimentos e a reflexão crítica sobre a realidade.

Palavras-chave: Estudantes de ensino médio; psicologia histórico-cultural; significações e sentidos.

LA ESCUELA PARA LOS ADOLESCENTES: SIGNIFICADOS Y SENTIDOS DURANTE LA PANDEMIA

RESUMEN: Esta investigación cualitativa tuvo como objetivo comprender y discutir, desde la Teoría Histórico-Cultural, qué sentidos le atribuyen a la escuela los adolescentes de escuelas privadas y públicas en Uberlândia-MG durante la pandemia de COVID-19. Participaron nueve estudiantes de secundaria entre 15 y 18 años. Entre septiembre y octubre de 2020, realizamos entrevistas individuales semiestructuradas, de forma remota. A través del análisis de contenido, construimos cinco categorías sobre las funciones asignadas a las escuelas por los adolescentes: 1) Espacio de socialización y preparación para la vida; 2) Contexto de aprendizaje de contenido; 3) Espacio para la (des) preparación académica y profesional; 4) Lugar de organización; 5) Espacio de apoyo. Sin embargo, especialmente para los estudiantes de escuelas públicas, el cumplimiento de la mayoría de estos roles se está llevando a cabo de manera insuficiente durante la pandemia, revelando las desigualdades e injusticias involucradas en el acceso a la educación. Además, se destaca la importancia de garantizar el derecho a la escolarización para el desarrollo integral de los adolescentes, previendo la apropiación de conocimientos y la reflexión crítica sobre la realidad.

Palabras clave: Estudiantes de secundaria; psicología histórico-cultural; significados y sentidos.

Introduction

The pandemic scenario has affected, impacted, and distressed us. In light of this, the following guiding question was posed for this research: What are the meanings of school for adolescents in private and public schools in Uberlândia, state of Minas Gerais, during the COVID-19 pandemic?

We start from the cultural-historical perspective, based on Marx's dialectical-historical materialism, which understands that human beings "[...] are formed and interact with their peers and their world in an inter-complementary relationship of exchange" (Vigotski, 1999, p. XII). Through these reciprocal interactions with the social, historical, and cultural context, they constitute themselves and construct the environment. Furthermore, according to Vigotski (1996), development is a process of constant self-movement, in which each stage differs from the previous ones through the endless emergence of the new. With this, we do not mean that development is linear and works from an evolutionary perspective, but rather that it occurs through revolutions from one moment to the next. The concrete content of a given developmental period is influenced by historical conditions (Leontiev, 2004).

In this sense, adolescence is a phenomenon constructed socially, culturally, and historically (Leal & Facci, 2014). It is not merely an age range between 12 and 18 years of age, as established by the Statute of Children and Adolescents (Law No. 8069, 1990), nor is it merely the period of puberty and physical changes.

Adolescence requires exclusive mediations for new qualitative formations to occur (Vigotski, 1996), such as: a) the rise of abstraction and conceptual thinking, higher psychological functions that enable adolescents to perceive themselves, understand others and reality better, and reflect on and act upon them; b) changes in established relationships, especially with those responsible, which may involve opposition; c) the social maturation of personality, through more intense participation in society and the socialization of personal language; d) the development of self-awareness, self-reflection, autonomy, self-esteem, and self-affirmation; e) the structuring of the personal meaning of life and worldview, which may include reformulating values and characteristics of oneself, others, and/or the context (Leal & Facci, 2014; Vigotski, 1996).

Elkonin (1987) describes two main activities of adolescence: 1) intimate personal communication – through which interaction with peers occurs, mediated by group rules, mirroring the relationships established between adults; and 2) professional activity/study – future-oriented action motivated, especially, by the dynamics of the adolescent group and established from the conception of the voluntary nature of the study activity, the mastery of its organization, the knowledge of the specificities of the work and its use to coordinate relationships with partners.

Thus, according to Vigotski (2001), adolescent development is connected to learning, creating possibilities for development, and this, in a dynamic relationship, fosters learning processes. Teaching plays an important role in helping students to assimilate and appropriate new knowledge. It is also important to note that the use of the term teaching-learning process stems from the idea that everyone involved is affected by learning and teaching (Nogueira, 2011). This process is based on the mediation of cultural signs and instruments, which are essential for subjects to acquire knowledge and develop. As Nascimento (2014, pp. 197-198) describes, “[...] the child’s path to the object passes through another person, that is, through what is communicated in terms of thoughts between people, between consciousnesses, about a given situation, problem or object, with the aid of speech [...]” Thus, through the other and through language, mediation enables the formation of higher psychological functions, such as voluntary attention, imagination, memory, logical reasoning, abstraction, and conceptual thinking. These functions favor learning (Vigotski, 2001).

In this sense, education and school are fundamental to the development and learning of adolescents. We understand the former as a broad phenomenon that occurs in various social spaces and relationships and is configured as “[...] the main process through which individuals objectify themselves as human beings by appropriating the goods produced by humankind as a whole” (Tanamachi & Meira, 2003, pp. 26-27), and thus, become humanized. As a place where education is possible, the school’s main role is “[...] the transmission, to new generations, of the acquisitions of human culture” (Leontiev, 2004, p. 291), that is, to provide socialization, acquisition and mastery of the knowledge necessary for the formation and humanization of students (Melo & Leonardo, 2019). Thus, as Paulo Freire explained, as a space for teaching, learning, relationships, and exchanges, the school has the potential to stimulate debates, reflections, and social transformation (Vaz & Bona, 2016).

In light of the drastic changes imposed by the pandemic, it is important to understand the significations and meanings that adolescents attribute to school. The former reflect the historically constructed reality of humanity, which is fixed as concepts and mediates the relationship of subjects with the world (Leontiev, 2004). The latter, in turn, refers to the personal significance created by each individual throughout their experiences and the

relationships established with objective phenomena (Leontiev, 2004) and is configured “[...] by the historical and social uniqueness of the subject” (Aguilar & Ozella, 2006, p. 227). It is worth remembering that “[...] for school learning to occur, students’ study actions must have a personal meaning corresponding to the motives and social significations of the study activity, in the sense of promoting human development” (Asbahr & Souza, 2014, p. 176).

Furthermore, it is important to understand that the schools, their significations and meanings, and adolescents are not separate from their context; on the contrary, they are established and influenced by the surrounding world, composing and transforming it. In this sense, it is necessary to understand the cultural and historical processes that permeate the capitalist, individualistic, unequal, violent, and repressive society in Brazil. Understanding that there is no single way to be an adolescent, but rather, there are different, unique, and contextualized ways to experience this period of life that vary according to ethnicity, gender, social class, and context. That is, it is necessary to know their needs and the concrete conditions in which they live their dilemmas, in order to understand this period of development, recognize possible mediations, and find interesting ways to establish a relationship with adolescents. Thus, we ask: what realities and circumstances have presented themselves to high school students and schools in the context of the pandemic?

Since the early months of 2020, the entire world, including Brazil, has dealt with the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic, caused by the novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2). The World Health Organization (WHO) recommended several measures to contain the virus’s spread and prevent the overloading of health services. These measures included isolating suspected and confirmed cases, practicing social distancing, wearing masks, washing hands and objects, and recommending that people stay home (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020). In Brazil, however, these measures were controversial, and few locations adopted these forms of prevention and containment of the pandemic.

Chaos, difficulties, and challenges have taken hold in various spheres of Brazilian society, stemming from the pandemic and the catastrophic management of our country’s (mis)government⁸. Economically, public agencies, commercial establishments, and businesses have closed, unemployment has increased (Nunes et al., 2021), and a rise in informality and precarious working conditions (Facci et al., 2021). Structural societal problems have intensified and become more evident, such as social and economic inequalities, which have increased the number of individuals living in poverty (Nunes et al., 2021), as well as gender inequality.

In this scenario, the educational environment, which is our object of interest, was significantly impacted. In-person classes were immediately suspended (Nunes et al., 2021; Vital & Urt, 2021), and the Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) modality was authorized and imposed through documents such as Ordinance No. 343 (2020), published by the Ministry of Education (MEC) on March 18, and Opinion No. 5 (2020) of the National Education Council (CNE), approved on April 28. Consequently, private educational institutions hastily initiated remote activities through Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs), videoconferencing platforms, and video lessons. These institutions attempted to provide quick services and solutions to the needs of their clients (students and families) while surviving market pressures. In contrast, public schools followed government committee and agency guidelines and programs and began remote activities a few months after the

⁸ We refer to the insane, barbaric, and authoritarian way in which the then-president of Brazil, Jair Messias Bolsonaro, managed the country as a (mis)government. He was elected in 2018 by the Social Liberal Party and began his term in 2019. Throughout the pandemic, the health guidelines recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO) were disregarded and ignored by the aforementioned president and other members of the government.

interruption of in-person classes. They made use of social networks (e.g., WhatsApp), phone calls (Nunes et al., 2021), printed assignments, and recorded video lessons and programs broadcast on TV.

An unprecedented way of thinking about and organizing schools, their functions, and educational processes emerged, in which, through technological mediation, “[...] an attempt is made to bring home the guarantee of real time, just as if it were in face-to-face teaching” (Bavaresco et al., 2021, p. 611). However, Barrense-Dias et al. (2021) point out that the suspension of classes was a shock that changed students’ lives and routines completely. Faced with this unusual scenario and the scarcity of published works addressing high school students’ perspectives on the role of school during this time, this study aimed to understand and discuss, from a cultural-historical theoretical perspective, the meanings that adolescents from private and public schools in Uberlândia, state of Minas Gerais, attributed to school during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methodological route

This was a qualitative research, as it sought to know and understand the significations attributed to phenomena in their natural environment, and was based on and reflected upon the dynamic process of interaction and dialogue between the researchers and the participants (Sionek et al., 2020). Furthermore, this research was grounded in the precepts of the cultural-historical theory, which understands that the method originates from the object studied and is constructed during the investigative process (Vigotski, 1995).

This study is part of a project titled *Impacts of Social Isolation on Adolescent Life and Identity*. Here, we describe the second stage of this longitudinal study. Nine students⁹ participated in the study: Alice, Carlos, Francisco, José, Luiz, Mateus, Max, Sally, and Violeta. Participants had to meet the following criteria: be between 15 and 18 years old, attend high school in 2020 at public or private educational institutions in Uberlândia, wish to participate in the research, and have access to an electronic device (computer or cell phone) with an internet connection. Those who did not meet these criteria were excluded from the investigation.

The research was conducted entirely remotely, considering the health risks associated with travel and in-person meetings. Dissemination took place in August 2020, targeting adolescents who were part of the researchers’ professional networks and who met the aforementioned criteria; therefore, a purposive sampling method was used. Contact was made via telephone and WhatsApp. After the adolescent expressed interest in participating, we contacted their legal guardian and the adolescent to present the research and request that they read and sign the Informed Consent Form (ICF) and the Assent Form (AS), respectively. The project was approved by a Research Ethics Committee – CAAE 34590820.7.0000.5152. It is important to emphasize that, throughout all stages, we sought to confirm the participants’ interest in continuing to contribute to the research and explicitly stated that they could withdraw at any time.

Next, we asked the adolescents to complete a questionnaire available on the Google Forms platform to collect general information and allow for more efficient planning of the next stage. Subsequently, we agreed with the adolescents on the date, time, and most convenient video conferencing platform for conducting individual semi-structured interviews. The interviews were guided by a script containing questions about the following topics: the COVID-19 pandemic, daily routine, school and studies, family life, relationships with friends,

⁹ Project approved by the Ethics Committee (number CAAE: 34590820.7.0000.5152).

and perspectives for the future. We focus here mainly on the answers to questions about school and studies, such as “How were remote activities carried out, and when did they begin? What was the study routine, and what was its quality?” We emphasize that the script served as a guide and that questions were asked based on the content that emerged from the participants’ speech. This approach prioritized dynamic interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee, as well as an active role for both parties in the interview process (Sionek et al., 2020). The interviews took place between September and October 2020 and lasted an average of 45 minutes. Here, we primarily address aspects related to the role of the school.

With the consent of the adolescents and their guardians, the interviews were audio-recorded, and the researchers were responsible for properly storing them. Subsequently, we transcribed the recordings, as proposed by Evangelista (2010). The transcribed text comprises the complex interaction between the oralist (researcher) and the collaborator (interviewee), who transform the experience (interview) into a final text (transcribed text) through successive creative stages and interpretations. Thus, the participants assisted in producing the transcribed text by reading and making changes (additions and removals) to the transcriptions. It is important to note that the content of the speech was preserved; however, markers of informality and orality were altered to written language with grammatical adjustments, thus textualizing the content of the interviews.

After gathering all the constructed material, a content analysis was performed, as proposed by Bardin (2011), which consisted of three stages: 1) pre-analysis – which consisted of a skimming and complete reading of the transcriptions; 2) exploration of the material – which included the elaboration of initial categories, which were rearranged into intermediate categories that, in turn, were integrated and originated the central categories; 3) interpretation and treatment of the findings for the inference of results, description and analysis of the thematic categories. In content analysis, it is crucial to understand and reflect on the discourse, considering the use of words, affected intonations, contradictions, and themes. This allows one to infer the intentions, values, convictions, and inherent precepts from the narrative (Bardin, 2011). Therefore, we aimed to understand the meanings and subjectivity behind the speech of adolescents, as proposed by Aguiar and Ozella (2006).

Results and discussion

The pandemic made it possible for students to have unprecedented experiences that redefined their relationship with schooling. Conducting the interviews prompted important reflections on the subject, as expressed by one of the research participants: “I don’t know, you know? I never paid much attention to the role of the school, I always just went and did what they told me, I never noticed what it (the school) did for me” (Carlos, 16 years old, 1st grade, public school).

Analyzing the interviews led us to five central categories that refer to the meanings of school during remote learning: 1) Space for socialization and preparation for life; 2) Context for learning content; 3) Space for academic and professional preparation or lack thereof; 4) Organizing place; 5) Support space.

Space for socialization and preparation for life

For all interviewees, the primary purpose of school is to enable socialization, teaching students to live together in a community and to establish bonds. It is described as a fundamental space for promoting interactions and creating friendships. As Violeta (15 years old, 1st grade, public school, emphasis added) expressed: “[School serves] much more to

‘learn how to live together in community’, because it is there that we have our first contact with people. ‘The first contact with the collective is at school’.”

This corroborates the findings of other studies, such as those by Melo and Leonardo (2019) and Leite et al. (2016), who found that living with classmates was the main motivation for continuing their studies. While this may not be the main meaning of school (Melo & Leonardo, 2019), we cannot deny the importance of intimate personal communication (Elkonin, 1987) and socialization for adolescent development (Leal & Facci, 2014).

In this sense, some participants related the aforementioned learning to preparation for life. This connection was highlighted in the following excerpt:

I think school is for us to ‘learn to live in society’. To learn to ‘understand real life’, what happens outside your home. [...] I think this is a very important part of school: ‘preparing us for the beginning of real life, what is outside the home’ (Sally, 16 years old, 1st grade, public school, emphasis added).

Although creating bonds was presented as paramount, participants reported with great distress that this function was not fulfilled during the pandemic. This dissatisfaction was expressed in an unparalleled way in Alice’s narrative.

I think that while I was in ‘face-to-face school’, I knew school played ‘an important role in socialization’, but I didn’t realize its significance until I was deprived of it. [...] ‘To feel now, with distance learning, what school is like without socialization, which is such an important part of a young person’s life, is very difficult’ (Alice, 16 years old, 2nd grade, private school, emphasis added).

In this category, we present statements that reveal that, although the participants consider the importance of teaching and learning knowledge, they give special relevance to ‘something beyond that’: social interaction and its potential to prepare us for life. According to them, this has not been effective during the pandemic.

Context for learning content

Of the total number of participants, eight explicitly or implicitly attributed to the school the role of enabling its students to acquire scientific knowledge and learn the subjects taught. However, the adolescents presented this function as secondary to socialization. We observed this understanding in the statement of Violeta (15 years old, 1st grade, public school, emphasis added): “I think school is for ‘education and acquiring knowledge, but not only for that’, it’s not just for us to learn the subjects”.

Thus, we believe that our research offers information that differs from research conducted before the pandemic (Melo & Leonardo, 2019; Marques & Castanho, 2011), which points to the negative view that young people have of the educational processes experienced at school. In the present study, most students expressed great concern about acquiring knowledge, though this is somewhat overshadowed by their desire to meet their classmates and teachers in person. This desire to learn may have been strengthened during the period of social isolation and class suspensions resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

We also highlight that, in general, the interviewees emphasized in their statements the essential nature of face-to-face communication, whether with the teacher or with other students, so that, in the mediated relationship with content, proper learning can take place. The relevance of mediation in the teaching-learning process and its limitations during the pandemic period were aspects highlighted by most adolescents. We emphasize here a statement that represents this well:

Here at home, there’s no one to explain the subject matter. I look for explanations online, but can’t find them. There’s always only the answer. And it ends up that when you are with the ‘teacher in person,

he explains the subject matter and shows more than one way to do the exercise. Which helps a lot!' (Sally, 16 years old, 1st grade, public school, emphasis added).

Although this was a common observation among the participants, we noted inequalities between public and private schooling processes. While students in the former receive an education mediated by the Tutored Study Plan (PET), a workbook created by the government of Minas Gerais with standardized content and exercises according to the school year, and a few weekly classes, private school students have classes Monday through Friday in all subjects with multiple evaluative activity proposals.

Furthermore, some students also discussed the important role of schools during the pandemic in disseminating information and raising awareness about COVID-19 and preventive measures. Unlike Marques and Castanho (2011) and Melo and Leonardo (2019), who reported a disconnect between the actual function of schools and how adolescents perceive them, we found that the meanings are articulated with the significations. In other words, the attribution of the meaning of socialization to educational institutions is linked to knowledge transmission.

Francisco (17 years old, 2nd grade, private school, emphasis added) questioned how schools have followed an unreflective content-based logic, that is, they have passed on content to their students without worrying about enabling reflection on it and/or allowing meaning to be attributed to it: "[...] The high school education system is horrible. I think it's horrible that they stuff us with content and then make us 'vomit' it out."

In this sense, as Melo and Leonardo (2019) argue, it is essential to establish a connection between the knowledge learned at school and concrete reality. This connection gives the act of studying meaning for students and enables the development of critical awareness and social organizational transformations.

Space for academic and professional preparation or lack thereof

Some participants from private schools believe that the main role of a school is to prepare students for university entrance by directing their studies towards selection processes, as evidenced by Luiz (17 years old, 3rd grade, private school, emphasis added): "I think the main role of the school is to 'prepare us for the ENEM' [National High School Exam] 'and for the entrance exams'".

In contrast to this, Mateus (17 years old, 2nd grade, private school, emphasis added) questioned the effectiveness of this role and the extent to which high school provides sufficient information for students to choose a profession. This doubt is expressed in the following excerpt:

The function of school, as I was told, is: 'It shows you the way, and you have to follow it, right?' So, it gives you the subjects and everything, and then you study, and then you see what you like. Sometimes I think a little like, 'How does this happen?' Because I've seen various things over the years, and I'm still 'not sure which course to choose.'

Interviewees from public and private schools acknowledged that preparation for the ENEM (National High School Exam) and university entrance exams has been nonexistent or insufficient, especially during the pandemic. This puts students from these institutions at a disadvantage when taking these exams and reveals unfair selection processes. We highlight an excerpt that discusses this issue:

'Inequality in access to education is significant.' I am in a better position than someone who lacks basic resources, such as internet access. However, I am in a much worse situation than someone who attends a private school and regularly attends classes every day of the week. [...] The ENEM exam is

for all of Brazil. Due to this inequality, many people will not have the opportunity to attend college because they will be competing with people who had access to thousands of opportunities during the pandemic (Violeta, 15 years old, 1st grade, public school, emphasis added).

Narratives such as the one above reveal that although the role of school in academic and professional preparation appears important, students from private and public schools expressed it differently. In the former's discourses, this function appeared as something realized in the school institution's reality. In contrast, the latter referred to it as something lacking in the daily life of public schools, despite its relevance. These are differences that highlight, as Violeta's statement above points out, the inequalities present in education, which are socially structured and intensified during the pandemic period.

Thus, the role of the school in preparing students for their academic and professional futures was evident in the statements of all eight participants. This is in line with what Krawczyk (2011) and Melo and Leonardo (2019) discussed: the extent to which high school has been configured as a springboard to the job market and university entry, linking itself to the expectation of a better future. This distances itself from its primary function of transmitting knowledge to foster student development.

Organizing place

For eight of the participants, the school served the purpose of organizing their studies and their lives. This role became more important during the pandemic. We observed this in students' narratives, which expressed the importance of establishing a routine when online classes began and the completion of school activities:

'Before online classes started, I studied very little'. During the first two weeks without classes, I treated it almost like a vacation. I was a bit sidelined. But 'after' the initial frustration with the new teaching model passed, 'I found it easier to organize my time and study routine'. Both during classes and to study the content outside of class (José, 16 years old, 2nd grade, private school, emphasis added).

'Before, there were no classes or activities from school'. So, I just helped my mother clean the house and make dinner. Then, I would either sleep or watch things on my cell phone. Now, since classes started, I do the following: I organize my house, do my schoolwork, and spend the rest of my time doing or watching something. '[...] Remote learning is at least a way for us not to completely stop learning' (Violeta, 15 years old, 1st grade, public school, emphasis added).

Other participants emphasized the organizing role of the school, noting that the absence of the physical school environment and face-to-face interaction during the pandemic made the routine monotonous and blurred the distinction between leisure and study time. This fusion of the institutional and private dimensions, resulting from the alteration of the notion of school time and space, is characteristic of remote learning (Vital & Urt, 2021) and was described as painful by some adolescents. Sally (16 years old, 1st grade, public school) expressed this sentiment, saying, "We get very exhausted because home is our place to rest, but now it's only for studying. So, 'we get tired inside our own house! Very bad' (strong intonation in the words)!" and Luiz (17 years old, 3rd grade, private school, emphasis added) said:

'I miss being at school in person and having a clear separation between my study space and my rest space'. [...] In remote learning, there is no such distinction. It's easier to procrastinate at home than it would be if I were at school.

In this sense, we need to consider the existence of a complex set of issues resulting from social isolation that make this moment more painful and prevent the school from

functioning as an organizer. This is something that Alice (16 years old, 2nd grade, private school, emphasis added) expressed:

'At the beginning of the pandemic, I had a well-defined routine'. But, after so many months of isolation without knowing when it will end, young people like me 'have lost the hope of improvement, enthusiasm, interest, and desire'. We have become so 'demotivated'. So, the routine I had no longer exists. I feel it's impossible to maintain. I wake up, go straight to class, and eat something there. [...] I keep thinking: 'I'm living the same day over and over again'. It doesn't make sense. I feel 'empty'. I 'miss having a solid routine' and making connections (voice breaks).

These statements reveal how much the school assumes the role of organizer in the lives of most participants through its physical location, activities, and the face-to-face contacts and relationships it fosters. The school enables experiences and learning that make the routine less monotonous and promote the development of students and a sense of progress. This demonstrates that we develop and define ourselves in relation to others and the world (Leontiev, 2004; Vigotski, 1999).

Support space

Seven of the total number of participants attributed the role of offering emotional and/or academic support to their students directly or indirectly to the school. In public educational institutions, this occurred through the welcoming attitude and willingness to help shown by some staff members. This is something that Sally (16 years old, 1st grade, public school, emphasis added) expressed:

The 'teachers give us a lot of support' whenever we need it. Even the 'principal is always willing to do whatever is needed'. Once, when I needed my school certificate, she went to the school and took the picture for me. She also did that for other students who needed it. 'It's a great support, without a doubt!'

Regarding this function of the school, Max drew attention to the importance of implementing this function in public educational institutions, especially during the pandemic:

'During the pandemic, public schools should provide more support to students and be more insistent' because many people are already giving up. [...] I think 'school should be like a second home, a place you can lean on' to learn (Max, 17 years old, 3rd grade, public school, emphasis added).

In the narratives of students from private schools, this role was mainly fulfilled through an investment in diverse content and activities. This was evidenced in the statement of Mateus (17 years old, 2nd grade, private school, emphasis added): "In my school, we can talk to the 'principal.' We tell him which course we are thinking of taking, and 'according to our scores and performance, he puts together a study plan'".

Thus, although students from both private and public schools emphasized the school's role in providing support, they described it differently. The former's discourses expressed support more indirectly, linking it to the availability of activities that help prepare for university admission. According to Leontiev (2004), meaning is created in the concrete conditions of life and in the subject's activity. Support and encounters with education professionals strengthen and renew the reasons for studying. In contrast, the latter group explicitly stated that support was related mainly to teachers' and principals' emotional engagement with the aim of assisting and encouraging students to study and remain in school. This emphasizes the essential role of affection and emotions in the teaching-learning process (Figueiredo & Leite, 2019).

Final considerations

This article aims to understand and discuss, from a cultural-historical theoretical perspective, the meanings that adolescents from private and public schools in Uberlândia, Minas Gerais, attribute to school during the pandemic. For all participants, the primary function of school is socialization. The interviewees also understood school institutions as spaces for academic and professional preparation, learning content, organization, and support. Therefore, even in the face of adverse conditions, the importance of ensuring the right to education for adolescents' integral development is emphasized, including cognitive, relational, and affective aspects, which foster the acquisition of knowledge and critical reflection on reality.

In general, adolescents, especially those from public schools, revealed that these functions were not fulfilled or were carried out insufficiently during the pandemic. This highlights the inequalities and injustices involved in access to education. Thus, our study provides information to help reflect on the meaning of school during the pandemic and isolation, plan actions to fulfill the function of transmitting knowledge during this time, and develop public policies that address this problem and provide socialization opportunities, even during remote learning, through collective study activities and/or activities that enable relaxed interactions and exchanges.

The present study had the following limitations: recruitment was restricted to people from the researchers' professional networks, and it was conducted entirely online. This excluded individuals without access to technological resources and the internet from the investigation, which meant that we had less access to the perspectives of public school students. On the other hand, the study had the following strengths: it provided insight into some of the schooling experiences of adolescents during the pandemic, offered a space for listening to participants, and offered information on conducting virtual research during times of public calamity. Finally, we suggest conducting studies that overcome the limitations of this investigation and propose practices to meet the needs of these adolescents in the post-pandemic period.

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Data Availability Statement: The dataset supporting the results of this study is available within the article.

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