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Thinking of the democratization of Higher Education in Brazil in terms of access, success and belonging

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Research Domains

Higher Education policy (HEP)

Abstract

When thinking of Higher Education in Brazil, one might assume the resources/capacity to secure universal access are lacking. However, between 2003 and 2023, the annual offer of HE spots in the country increased so as to surpass the number of young people aged 18-24.

Meanwhile, two seemingly counterintuitive situations have arisen: first, that what could be considered "democratization of higher education" should be provided mainly by the private sector and second, that since recruitment is low and drop-out rates are high, the percentage of idle spots in both types of institutions is alarming.

Using the Brazilian scenario as a case study, I present Jane Roland Martin's critique of the ideal of the educated person (1985) and Iris Marion Young's replacement of atomic autonomy with relational empowerment (1990; 2002) as frameworks to conceptualize the democratization of HE so as to foster not only access, but also success and belonging.

Full paper

When one considers the exclusionary history of education in Brazil, one might think that that the greatest obstacle to the democratization of higher education (HE) is still the lack of installed capacity and/or resources (public or private) to guarantee places for all. However, between 2003 and 2023, the annual offer of HE places in the country increased more than 12 times, from 2 million to 24.7 million, while total enrolment increased from 4 million to almost 10 million.

Along with this expansion of higher education, two seemingly counter-intuitive situations arise, at least at first glance: first, the fact that the so-called "democratization of higher education" should be driven mainly by the private sector: of these almost 10 million

students, 75% are enrolled in private institutions, while the free and more prestigious public institutions hold 25% of the total enrolment.

A second somewhat surprising fact about the way in which higher education has expanded in Brazil is that the number of places available is much greater than the number of incoming students, and even candidates. Even in the public sector, historically more competitive and selective, only 57% of the HE spots offered in 2023 were filled, while in the private sector this number drops to 19%. Given that dropout rates are high in both types of offer (over 50%), the percentage of vacant places in both types of institutions is alarming.

In this context, it is worth asking: What explains this lack of attraction and retention of students in higher education, even when it is public and free of cost? And what can be done to reverse this situation? From a social justice and public policy perspective, it is necessary to think both in terms of how to provide access to previously excluded groups, and how to support them in their educational journey so that they feel that it contributes to their success and life project. In this sense, my proposal is to have look at how numbers have shifted in the last two decades both in terms of admission and enrollment on the one hand, to retention and conclusion on the other, so as to think of ways to move from enrolment to actual graduates.

I argue in this paper that the answer to these questions necessarily involves a deeper investigation of what it means to "democratize" higher education, in order to think about ways in which it is still undemocratic, and how it can be more plural and conducive to social justice. Using the Brazilian higher education scenario as a backdrop, I present Jane Roland Martin's critique of the ideal of the educated person (1985) and Iris Marion Young's politics of difference (1990; 2002) as theoretical tools for thinking about the democratization of higher education in order to promote not only access, but also success and belonging for more and more people, both young people and those who seek higher education later in life.

Following Martin and Young, I suggest that to think of universalizing higher education involves thinking not of university not as a universal "university for all", but to make diversity and plurality as explicit as possible, so as to have higher education for/of/by many. Thinking about pluralities, of people, of ideals, of epistemologies, allows us to better think about strategies for access, permanence, success, and belonging in order to guarantee higher education for as many people as possible. Democratizing higher education means not only democratizing access, but also thinking about how it contributes to democracy (BOSIO & GREGORUTTI, 2023). To do so, we must also democratize the ideal of education, from exclusion to inclusion, and from isolation to belonging. Part of this effort involves thinking about ways not only to guarantee access, but also to value attributes and the canonical representation of previously excluded groups, whether due to gender, race, class, sexual orientation, ability, age, among others. Thinking about higher education structures as dynamic and relational, rather than static and isolated, helps us think about ways in which we can empower different actors in the academic world, including students,

teachers, administrators and public policy makers, in order to think about higher education in a more inclusive and plural way.