



# What Is Citizenship and How Is It Practiced: The Views from Students in Porto Alegre

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## Abstract

This study aims to understand how high school students interact with the idea of citizenship, as well as how they understand this concept. We present a part of a larger survey with students from a public school in Porto Alegre, who answered a questionnaire containing questions about politics, rights and citizenship. From a thematic analysis, we present the results related to this last concept, showing impoverished constructions and ideas of obedience, morals, besides an idea of innatism regarding the citizen's role. In light of Arendt's theory, the consequences of the lack of spaces in the curriculum for building civic thought are discussed, as well as the obstacle that hybridization between public and private generates towards the path of participatory democracy and the entry of young people into the common world.

**Keywords** Citizenship · Civic engagement · Youth · Public school

## Résumé

O presente estudo objetiva compreender como jovens estudantes do ensino médio interagem com a ideia de cidadania, bem como a que forma entendem tal concepção. Apresentamos um recorte de uma pesquisa com estudantes de uma escola pública de Porto Alegre, que responderam um questionário contendo perguntas sobre política, direitos e cidadania. A partir de uma análise temática, apresenta-se os resultados relacionados a este último conceito, demonstrando construções empobrecidas e ideias de obediência, moral, além de uma ideia

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de inatismo quanto ao papel cidadão. Discute-se à luz da teoria arendtiana as consequências da falta de espaços de construção de pensamento cívico no currículo escolar, bem como o obstáculo que a hibridização entre público e privado gera para o caminho de uma democracia participativa e a entrada dos jovens no mundo comum.

**Palavras-chave** Cidadania · Participação cidadã · Juventude · Escola pública

## Introduction

The present work is a fragment of a larger, exploratory and qualitative research based on the Letters to the Next President project, by Elyse Eidman-Aadahl. This project aimed to strengthen the development of civic participation among young people, providing a welcoming and supportive space for youth writing, as well as the creation of media and publication of public issues and concerns on the part of this population. It allowed young people aged between 13 and 18 to give voice to their opinions and ideas on the matters that were relevant to them in the 2016 elections and was built by teachers for teachers and students. As an intervention proposal, it also provided the engagement of other partners interested in supporting the civic participation of young people.

The present study presents an excerpt of the results of the research carried out at a public school in Porto Alegre. The results will be discussed from Hannah Arendt's theory about the political role of education, as well as the idea of differentiating the public and private spheres in society. This excerpt presents the section of the questionnaire that concerns citizenship, with two questions: (1) What is citizenship in your opinion? and (2) How do you practice citizenship?

## Education, Citizenship and Politics: the Case of Brazil

In Brazil, the years 2015 and 2016 were an important historical marker for young people regarding the topic of their participation in the political sphere: the High-Schoolers Spring [Primavera Secundarista]. This student mobilization began in the state of São Paulo and spread to other Brazilian states, including Rio Grande do Sul. Under the influence of the Free Fare Movement [Movimento Passe Livre] of 2013, and also the Argentine and Chilean student experiences, the movement was generated as a reaction to the School Reorganization Project, created by the then governor of São Paulo, Geraldo Alckmin. The project proposed to divide schools into cycles, in which each school would be assigned a specific cycle, exclusively. The proposal was to segment the educational institutions into two different elementary school cycles and one high school cycle. A campaign was started for the "E" day, the day when students and their families would be informed about how the new model would work and how students would be transferred. In addition, the same project aimed to reduce the number of schools across the state, on the grounds of excess idle spots (Januário et al., 2016; Moraes & Ximenes, 2016).

The background of the protests of the High-Schoolers Spring was the discontent of users of the education system with the measures arbitrarily established by the State and opposition to the tone of inevitability and irreversibility on the part of government decisions directed to public education. In addition, students objected to the fact that the people

who would be directly affected by this change had not been considered as decisions were being made. It was a movement without leaders or associations with political parties and unions, with the intention of denouncing the deterioration of Brazilian education, seeking to gain the attention of the population – who largely supported the movement. Students were seen as the protagonists, organizing internal activities, cleaning and security in schools and promoting management based on assemblies for making decisions together (Weissbock, 2017). The demonstration reached 22 Brazilian states. With its growth, the High-Schoolers Spring involved students and university occupations, in addition to having the support of teachers throughout the country. The teachers also demanded the end of the decision that provided for the closure of activities in some schools, which would reduce the employment offer. Therefore, their claim was for democratic participation in decision-making by the main actors involved in this a project (Januário et al., 2016).

After this period, there was a growth in academic literature that registered an optimistic perspective regarding the relationship that students seemed to have establishes with schools (Januário et al., 2016; Moraes & Ximenes, 2016). This is in opposition to an idea that the precarious structure of public schools influenced the students' perception of not belonging to the school and of not being attached to their teachers. What happened was just the opposite: despite the unsatisfactory school and working conditions, students maintained a positive relationship with public schools, recognizing them as fundamental spaces for learning and social interaction, to the point of mobilizing to preserve them (Moraes & Ximenes, 2016). They also demonstrated an important capacity for political organization and mobilization, which also garnered the admiration of the Brazilian population (Januário et al., 2016).

Citizenship is mentioned because we understand that this term is what usually identifies each individual within a democratic society. The involvement of the population with issues of the public and common sphere is, in theory, a fundamental principle to ensure rights in society, as well as for citizens to have control over their own lives, regarding access to basic rights and the fulfillment of duties to guarantee the common good (Baquero & Baquero, 2007; Becker & Raveloson, 2011; Brasil & Costa, 2022; Galston, 2001). The present study understands citizenship as an attitude of a permanent critical view and a posture of increasing demand in the face of social phenomena that surround subjects in their daily life (Pesce & Oliveira, 2012).

A view to the participation of young people in citizenship has lacked, in the last decades, especially in Brazil, understandings that started from the perspective and demands of this population itself, which reflected in a trend of disbelief and skepticism regarding politics and democracy (Medaets et al., 2019; Mesquita et al., 2016; Rique et al., 2009; Rizzini et al., 2007). The definition of citizen participation is a behavior aimed at solving community problems. It is only through this participation that we can hope to influence government action and policymaking to improve society (Brasil & Costa, 2022; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Kahne et al., 2016).

As mentioned, for civic act to be possible, the democracy in society must be guaranteed. In the Brazilian context, democracy was guaranteed only after a historic milestone: the civil-military dictatorship, between 1964 and 1985. The practices of the government of the time were intended to strengthen the regime through authoritarianism, repression and the control of different aspects of social life, such as politics, economy, culture and education. Through words that defended ideals would ensure the well-being of all, the members of the government controlled several institutions, aiming at the domain and legitimacy of the regime and guaranteeing social obedience. Both psychology and education were areas that came under pressure during this period in Brazil (Nunes & Rezende, 2008).

In addition to the dictatorship, studies that point to an expression of constant discontent with the country's politics are also frequent in the literature. Studies point out that this discontent is influenced by a journalistic culture aimed at denouncing scandals, strengthening the distrust and distance on the part of the Brazilian population with issues of the political sphere and their representatives (Marcovitch, 2017; Meditsch, 2005; Rodrigues et al., 2012). For Miguel (2008), regardless of which explanation is given to the social distrust of politics, the media plays a crucial role. The media corroborates lay and intuitive judgments about a complex and heterogeneous institution on the part of Brazilians. According to Marcovitch (2018), the discontent and distrust of the population result in a demonization of politics purely and simply, without thought and exceptions. For the author, this is the social perception among Brazilians, and this disenchantment with democracy is already and will continue to be an aggravating factor for the country's political scenario.

## Building Political Subjectivity

Several processes can be triggered to foster the construction of political subjectivity. The literature mainly points to an understanding of the importance and responsibility of family and school for the initiation into democratic life (Baquero & Baquero, 2007; Dias & Menezes, 2009; Fuks, 2012; Rizzini et al., 2007). However, governments must also be held responsible for ensuring the participation of children and adolescents in the sphere of citizenship and democracy. In this direction, one argument found in the literature is that government programs developed for the participation of young people are, in a way, produced through an adult view of this population. Consequently, young people are understood as a group from a point of view that homogenizes them, instead of seeing them as a plural population (Rique et al., 2009; Rizzini et al., 2007). The generational difference causes adults to pass on to younger generations a series of principles that support a system that is already established. Implicit in this is an identification with the prevailing social order and an emphasis on replicating "things as they are," rather than looking at politics as a way of contesting these views (Watts & Flanagan, 2007).

In addition, the multiple ways of life among young people also make different possibilities for interaction with politics coexist. Not only the classic one, associated with the electoral process and political parties, but also one that is relational and for social transformation. The study by Mesquita et al. (2016) found little adherence to political parties on the part of the young people interviewed, justified by a disbelief in the potential of more traditional political experiences, due to the news broadcast of scandals related to politicians. The study also noted a perception of ineffectiveness of public policies in combating inequalities. The authors argue that the lack of interest in traditional involvement with political institutions does not necessarily mean alienation or depoliticization, but a criticism of a system that is not responding to the needs of this population.

On the other hand, social actors on the Brazilian conservative side argued about the "bad influence" and manipulation of teachers over students, an argument that would explain the student mobilizations of 2016. With this, different representatives of the political sphere and also representatives of Brazilian religious groups started movements against this mobilization, encouraging students to speak against teachers who expressed any kind of political position or opinions related to issues of sexual and gender diversity inside the classroom (what they called "gender ideologies").

Based on these perspectives, added to the conflicting territory of the social role of education in Brazil, the construction of a political subjectivity would be important because it is a mechanism for the production of resistance and thought about the relations of domination that target identity, homogenization and standardization (Maciazeki-Gomes et al., 2016). Consequently, it could strengthen both objective and subjective transformations in individuals and in different areas of everyday life. Therefore, a political identity can be a tool for effective participation in the public sphere through collective actions.

## Method

### Approach and Materials

This work presents the results of a qualitative and exploratory research. A questionnaire was generated, containing a trigger question based on the original project, followed by eight questions related to rights, democracy and citizenship. Data collection was carried out in a public school in the city of Porto Alegre, city in the south of Brazil. The school was chosen because it is a public school known as being involved in student movements, and the school was also occupied by students during the 2016 national mobilization. All high school students from this school who were present on the data collection day were invited to participate. The invitations were held in the classrooms during the morning and afternoon shifts. Students who showed interest in participating were directed in small groups to the institution's computer room. With each new group, the team carried out a research rapport, presenting the objectives, as well as the research topics and the possibility of interrupting their participation at any time if desired. From this, each student could access the online platform (Qualtrics) already previously inserted in the URL of the computers by the research team. The platform's online questionnaire contained nine open ended questions, with a question box. The team accompanied the groups from the beginning to the end of the filling, making themselves available for the participants, for possible doubts or questions throughout the filling period. Both during rapport and on the text on the questionnaire, it was made clear that there were no right or wrong answers to the activity's questions, that the interest of the research was about opinions and perceptions, and that they were free to say what they thought, without worrying.

The participating students signed an Informed Consent Form. This study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Department of Psychology from UFRGS, under code 57635315.6.0000.5334. This approval allowed the young participants to have autonomy regarding the decision to answer the questionnaire, without the need for their legal guardians to sign the ICF. The study followed the regulations of Resolutions no. 466/12 and no. 510/16 of the National Health Council, guaranteeing care in research with human beings. The participant's right to refuse to participate in the study was guaranteed, as well as to withdraw at any time during the collection. Data were collected from 209 students in this school.

### Data Analysis

The analysis of the material was based on the method of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). This type of analysis comprehends the discourse as a socially, historically, culturally and politically situated object of study, that is, not individual. This is equivalent to affirm that

social structures influence how discourses and perceptions are produced, although they do not mechanically determine what a subject will say in each situation. Moreover, the choice for this analysis methodology was based on the assumption that discourses often communicate - even if implicitly - ideological positions and power relations that contribute to social inequalities. Therefore, taking a critical stance when studying discourse is to bring these inequalities to light, seeking to contribute to their eradication (Van Dijk, 2008, 2013). It is in this sense that Fairclough (2000) comprehends Critical Discourse Analysis as more than a method, but as a paradigm, a way of seeing social.

## Results

From this perspective, it was evidenced that the participants' responses demonstrated ideas that contained an understanding of group and community living. At the same time, there were responses that mentioned the idea that citizenship is a position that could be achieved through certain criteria. This perception enhances the hypothesis that perhaps citizenship could be hierarchical, being accessible depending on the subject in question. It was possible to verify a certain ambivalence in the participants' responses, occasionally expressing perceptions that associate the meaning of citizenship as a synonym for tolerance, and occasionally an idea that a citizen can be recognized as such merely through the acquisition of moral attributes. They seemed to understand that action is taking an active stance, but from opposite perspectives - either from the perspective of tolerance of others, or from the notion that citizens are required to work through to achieve this assumed citizenship status. The respondents gave explanations that included the idea that citizenship is practiced through microsystemic actions. Another finding is that the concept of collectivity of these respondents deals with conviviality and tolerance that does not necessarily correspond to the real world and the sense of sharing and association attributed to collective spaces.

Some examples of responses are: "*Knowing how to live together with others, respecting each person's individuality.*"; "*Citizenship is to live together and respectfully*"; "*Following the laws, helping others and maintaining a certain attitude towards society.*"; "*Doing good. How can I judge a politician for stealing if I steal a pen at school? It starts with me*" "*In my opinion, citizenship is when you are born in a certain town.*" ; "*Coexisting with people every day.*"

In their responses, the students demonstrated a notion that care takes place in the subjects' individual practices, as well as in the fulfillment of duties. Respondents also showed an understanding that in order to practice citizenship, subjects must behave in specific ways that benefit all. With this, the idea of citizenship was also pointed out as something that one must struggle to achieve, as the struggle for rights in society. Voting was also frequent in these responses, understood as an act that defines what it means to be a Brazilian citizen. The answers also brought an implicit idea that the fact of belonging to some space, mostly referred to as the geographic space, instantly supports the practice of citizenship. Therefore, the idea of practice is grouped with an idea of identity, and not necessarily linked to civic activities.

## Discussion

The participants seem to oscillate between a perception of citizenship as an attribute of value that requires the appropriation of social norms of conduct, and more evasive perceptions that citizenship is something that is more associated with the identity and

territorialized. It was possible to evidence that, presumably, these perceptions are consistent with an individualistic and meritocratic culture, which is characteristic of Western countries such as Brazil, but which can also serve as evidence of an elaboration gap, directed to a subject that produces direct impact in their lives and contradictorily seem oblivious to the public life. The present study supports from the theoretical position that civic behavior is associated with an attitude of a permanent critical view and a posture of increasing demand in the face of social phenomena that surround subjects in daily life (Pesce & Oliveira, 2012).

The results demonstrate that the concept of citizenship act and engagement may not be theoretically presented and/or promoted in classroom environment. However, the students presented some constructions that demonstrate not incorrect notions regarding the concept, since they hold meanings such as tolerance, respect for others and the law. But it is also possible to highlight the aspect of the morality of the “good citizen”, the one who does good to others, who must be cordial and an example for his peers – otherwise he would not be able to demand similar behavior from politicians. This is the only expression demanding political representatives, but it is more associated with exemplifying the morality of social conduct than being placed in a role of activity directly linked to what it means to be a citizen.

The issue of a morality element brings up the issue that morality is subjective and varies according to aspects from micro to macrosystemic spheres. This means that different understandings of what it means to be a “good” citizen may be at stake, and it is not clear what the real meaning of the adjective is. For example, for one subject, “being good” may mean obeying the laws while for another, a civic practice may be more associated with contesting the same laws. Having said that, we think that because the school cannot represent a formalized space where some key concepts for citizen public life can be taught, these constructions are made based on the preference of the groups in which each young person belongs. It is possible to problematize which are the spaces that young people seek to build their civic identity (the family, for example) and how much the lack of formalization of citizenship learning opens up social gaps so that society loses its potential for social action.

When this possibility is brought to light, the problem is directed to the understanding that the moral is not democratic *a priori*, as it is a personal and partial construct. There were, however, frequently responses that implicitly contained an understanding of compliance with rules, with obedience being at the center of what it means to be a good citizen. And not only that, but that the moral ideal of obedience to the laws, as exemplified, can also serve to raise the hypothesis of how much we are, as a society, producing ideas of citizenship as linked to passivity, to non-questioning, also thinking about an understanding of that citizenship is associated with an identity category more than an active and critical social practice. These are aspects that, according to the literature, can also incline Brazilian culture to regimes of greater social dominance and authoritarianism, as they naturalize social situations as unquestionable (Vilanova et al., 2018). These responses exhibit a somewhat passive understanding of living civically in society.

For Arendt (1958/2007), although it should be seen as an institution that is not essentially political, school preserves and performs a fundamental political function: to promote the cultivation of and care for the common world (Arendt, 1958/2007; César & Duarte 2010). Masschelein (2012, p. 530–531) describes the role of the school in Arendt’s conception quite well when he says that “In many languages [...] the “school” (*escuela, école, scuola, sko-la, schule*, etc.) comes from the Greek *scholè* [...] which means, *a priori*, “free time,” but also: rest, adjournment, discussion, lesson and the school building [...]. Free time, like time for studying, thinking and exercising, divorced from productive life, is

the time when work or economic activities are put aside. [...]. A typical characteristic of this separation [...] is suspension.” (Guilherme & Morgan, 2020, p. 104).

This means that the central goal of education is to provide a safe environment for students, instigating them to participate in the public sphere and in politics. It is a way of presenting the rational, historical, social and political structures of their own contexts so that, as adults, they are able to understand the world and promote changes through civic action. Education, therefore, assumes a socially intermediary role, which can be recognized as also a civic position (to be a formal space for socializing in a more democratic space), of preparation for action, not to be confused with proper action. The importance of this “detachment” is so we realize that, as much as one must recognize its role as political, the idea that all pedagogy is political is repeated (de Carvalho, 2014), the data indicate that this concept may have lost its practical power, representing nothing more than a ready-made speech in the social imaginary. The generational issue also appears as the central focus of the relationship established within the educational environment: the pedagogical issue is not the only thing that must be considered, but also the way in which those who are already inserted in the “common world” make use of their responsibility for inserting the “new-comers” in it. That is, the teachers, the adults, play the role of “story tellers,” of introducing the culture and history of their society to the new generation that is at school – which is why Arendt so admired Homer, Herodotus and Thucydides (Guilherme & Morgan, 2020; p. 109). Guilherme & Morgan (2020, p. 110) comment that “the concept of ‘storyteller’ has important implications for the world. In other words, just as education is the bridge between the private and the public, the educator is the connection between the past and the future, introducing younger generations to society, its culture and its values, showing that generation that ‘this is our world’ (Arendt, 1954, p. 189). The educator prepares the new generation for adult life so that they can, in due course, participate fully in the political life of society, initiating something new in action and speech...”.

In addition, by expanding the concern with the crisis in education to the perspective of natality, Arendt seeks not to defend that we assign the specific disciplinary field of education as the only one responsible for this institution. The concern with education must be public and political (Carvalho, 2014), for everyone who lives in the common world. It is precisely because of discussions on access to quality education, deliberations on curricular guidelines, or countless other issues related to the political character of education, that the concern with it has an ethical, political nature, and must derive from a political community (society).

If this were not the case, we would not be able to observe the technicist nature of Brazilian educational context- being sufficient to verify the triumph of technicist ideas in pedagogical planning and the depreciation of the perspectives of public domain. This is the explanation for thinking about the simplicity of the responses presented in this study. It is important to note that the school where the work was carried out was occupied during the period of the High-schoolers Spring of 2016. In this way, young people organized themselves and made several demands in the very recent past for the collection. Even so, they did not seem to have great clarity about the citizen role they occupied, nor did they mention the actions that many experienced. Not only Arendt, but also Freire (1979) pointed out how important it was for education to be at the service of strengthening the students’ critical capacity, as they believe that education has the potential to corrupt the freedom of subjects, as well as their judgment.

The political responsibility of educators, in addition to initiating students in passing on a “public heritage of practices, languages and knowledge that a political community – or society – chose to preserve” (Carvalho, 2014; p. 821), also concerns the future, as they represent the world for students and through them, they must learn to assume responsibility



in caring for it. The process of introducing students to the common world is complex due to the confrontation of this function with the technicist and homogenized perspective of Brazilian education. Young people need to be protected from an uncritical and mechanical understanding of political concepts. That is why Arendt uses the term “natality,” because education should not be concerned with preserving an existing structure of domination, but with the exercise of care for the world and for those who are just beginning. Each new subject that is born is a new someone, not just a new human specimen. If each new person is at the service of the reproduction and instrumentalization of governability, current political challenges will always be delegated to a future that will never be reached.

The perspective that assumes a natural character of citizenship leans in the opposite direction proposed by Arendt’s idea of citizen development and active construction of a process of care for the common world. The author commences from the premise that citizen acts are practiced through political action, contrary to the state of inertia of everyday life. It means that a political position must always stand active, whether it is explained within traditional political practices, such as voting, or else movements of manifestation through social media, in a claim by a group, or in daily practices of social relations and use of public space. The idea of political action is derived from Arendt’s perception that our society, *a priori*, produces subjects inclined to live in a logic of individualizing work and consumption – subjects named *animal laborans*.

Tradition is a cultural trait that also functions as a mechanism of “social inertia” for subjects to continue producing and ensuring the survival of an already established system. It is through specific actions that logics of domination can be modified. It is for this reason that (Freire, 1979, 1981) argues that education needs, above all, to introduce students to the world of thinking: to break the traditional logic of an original inertia, as this is what constitutes political action. Education must be an active process, or else it will fall into a stagnant and alienated functioning. Critical thinking is a process, an instrument, not a content. It is a way of existing in the common world and that in itself politicizes the subject. It allows to denaturalize the current social logic criticized by Arendt and Freire and allows subjects to broaden their potential as agents of change. The critical thinking instrument is not limited to specific topics of living in society, it must cover all the specifics of human existence.

Citizenship not only requires specific actions, but these actions are also not strictly linked to the idea of duties. To associate the concept of citizenship with the ideals of conduct and duties produces a discourse that is more oriented towards maintaining the status quo, to remain where we are, so that all social conditions remain as they are, from a naturalized and unchanging perspective, than a duty to the common world. It is not enough for us to be citizens just living according to the current norms and rules, or even fulfilling obligations. This would probably be the character created by Arendt and called *animal laborans*. In addition, this also showed another strong feature in the responses collected and that can explain the misunderstanding that replaces the specific comprehension of what it means to practice citizenship: morality. Being a “good” citizen replaces a clear understanding of what it means to be such good citizen.

Criticizing the issue of the misunderstanding about what concerns individual morality and what concerns political morality is not recent, nor is it outdated in our society. In addition to Holanda (1936/2013), who criticizes Brazilian culture as one that cannot separate affection from public relations, Arendt (1958/2007) was also critical of this hybridization, demonstrating that this phenomenon has existed since the creation of what we call “society” today. According to the author, the understanding of this term is based on a view of society as a set of families, extinguishing the dividing line between *polis* and family, which was the basis of all ancient political thought. The reflection of this, for Arendt, is that the

old *polis* was the sphere of genuine equality among citizens, while the family is the context of “the most severe inequality” (Arendt, 1958/2007, p. 38). The emergence of society marks the rise of the importance of home and its private developments, which would not only be a change of emphasis, but a profound resignification. In antiquity, the notion of “private” was associated with “being deprived of.” A subject who, “like the slave, was not permitted to enter the public domain or who, like the barbarian, had chosen not to establish this domain – was not entirely human” (Arendt, 1958/2007, p. 46).

The development of the appreciation for the private spheres was driven by the increase of modern individualism. It is important that we mention that what we call “private” is this sphere of social constructions that depend on constructions subjectivized by small groups, such as family, but also other small groups. The idea is that it does not matter if the members of a nation are equal or unequal, because society demands that all its members behave like a big family, and so they can have only one opinion and interests. And if the rise of society coincided with the decline of the family, it is precisely because the former has absorbed the latter. Regarding the social mixture of public and private spheres, the author’s criticism is explicit: “Given its inherent unworldliness, love can only be falsified and perverted when used for political ends, such as the transformation or salvation of the world” (Arendt, 1958/2007; p. 63). According to Arendt, the idea of the Greek *polis* arose precisely to protect its members from the futility of the individual world.

Following this idea, we also think that political action and participation are conceptualized by the idea of a voluntary act that has the intention or consequence to affect governmental actions, directly or indirectly. Therefore, it aims to mobilize mechanisms that can help individuals communicate their demands, preferences and opinions to the State (Ribeiro et al., 2019). Thus, we cannot fail to emphasize that this understanding could be verified, in a subtle way. There is an implicit character of respect, tolerance of difference, care – but as primary criteria for achieving citizenship. The idea of conviviality also seems to replace an idea of a collectivity of its own.

School could represent a formal space so that students could reflect on more substantial constructs. The present study assumes that the mark of the Brazilian dictatorship was the starting point for a departure from politics within the pedagogical environment, as this was once one of the ways of ensuring a totalitarian regime in our country (Correia, 2007). The reaction against this interlocution, after the dictatorship, caused an absence of any formal space for students to learn about politics in a non-partisan way. In other words, the previous intention to strengthen citizen identities that were passive to the regime probably hampered the possibility of talking about citizenship in a general way in the school environment.

This is due not only to the absence of formal space for the construction of an idea of young citizenship, which is found in different countries (in many of which voting is not mandatory), but also to a recent movement that has taken on a certain magnitude: the bill of law (PL 867/2015) called “School Without Party.” This project was, indisputably, a historical revisitation of the authoritarianism already experienced during the civil-military dictatorship (Guilherme & Picoli, 2018). It also clearly illustrates the phenomenon criticized by Arendt, of putting the private sphere, the preferred morals of a specific group, over the public sphere. The attempt to prohibit specific contents from pedagogical programs ends up being undemocratic and purely moral (Ramos & Stampa, 2016). With a discourse that defends the end of ideologies and a supposed political, ideological and religious neutrality of the State, the bill (and also civil social movement) has an implicit understanding that professionals involved with education need to be controlled. The removal of a discipline focused on civic thinking from the curricula and also the fear of relating this subject to the topics already present in the educational plan end up preventing better results regarding the

understanding of students about their role that goes beyond being a “student,” like studying. This project represents, in a way, a practical way of instrumentalizing education to maintain the validity of governability, as previously mentioned.

As for the young population, it is thought that this portion of citizens has not been encouraged by the school to build proper civic thinking. This process is the result of poorly elaborated constructions. There is also an important split between what is supposed to belong to the adult world and what is the role of young people socially. We are faced with institutions that, being spaces in which structural violence only re-presents itself, are not functioning as spaces for breaking cycles of vulnerability and alienation. Watts & Flanagan (2007) used the term *adulthood* to explain the relationship of youth with democratic society. According to the authors, the same social mechanisms that generate stereotypes for racism and sexism may be at play in the way society views young people – a pejorative view by adults who see young people as alienated, lazy, disinterested in general –, the barrier for us to understand youth as a population that, although heterogeneous, can occupy civic spaces and promote social justice.

## Final Considerations

This study has some intrinsic limitations of the qualitative method. By choosing only one public school in a region of southern Brazil, we cannot generalize these findings to other regions of the country and other groups of young people (higher and lower income groups, for example). In addition, the fact that the questions were structured may have left out more complex reflections that could have been better elaborated through focus groups or in-depth interviews.

We find current barriers inherited from past structural violence, which present themselves implicitly, indirectly, under the discourse of “things as they are.” Whether the violence of the government’s disregard for Brazilian education or the attempt to interdict access to information for young people through projects such as School Without Party. In other words, the blocking of access to basic conditions of public education, the violence that the young population suffers today, is the legacy of a culture that sees young people as the ones who will solve social, economic, and political issues in the future, but that for the time being should not be recognized as a citizen. This violence is reflected in the removal of young people as active members of Brazilian society.

The term *adulthood*, explained above, serves as a very coherent illustration. If young people are alienated from the political sphere, it is because of a culture that distances them from civic activities, by conceiving them as incapable of acting democratically. Furthermore, this movement makes the population reinforce this social image of youth. When we think of a project like Escola sem Partido, there is an implicit understanding that young people are passive to manipulation and indoctrination. A project with this concept strengthens the process of distancing and infantilizing youth. It assumes that young people cannot think critically about what they are taught and that, therefore, they need to be protected from issues that confront certain moralities. Isn’t this protection also indoctrination? If this social perception were a verified fact, we would not have observed the youth mobilizations that took place in the years 2015 and 2016 with school occupations spread throughout Brazil and with the victory of the student movement regarding what it requested in its mobilization.

However, when the idea is to understand the Brazilian population as a whole, the phenomenon is very similar. Perhaps we are not just excluding youth from engagement with the common world, but we are, in fact, as a society, exempting ourselves from civic responsibility and leaving to others the concern that we do not seem to have. The problem becomes more complex when we understand that this alienated culture is passed on to young people generationally. In a way, as a society, we see the civic process from multiple perceptions. This does not mean that there is a single way of thinking about citizen action. However, there are no spaces to discuss these multiple ideas, also collectively. Therefore, it is up to the family environment to enable these discussions, from individualistic perspectives and dependent on specific moralities.

**Authors' Contributions** All authors contributed to the study conception and design, such as material preparation, data collection and analysis performed. The first draft of the manuscript was written by all authors and also all authors commented on previous versions of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript for publication.

**Data Availability** The authors confirm that all data generated or analyzed during this study are included in this published article.

## Declarations

**Ethical Approval** The project of the present study was approved by the UFRGS Research Ethics Committee, under code 57635315.6.0000.5334.

**Conflict of Interest** The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare. All authors certify that they have no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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